

Chapter 1

Erathal, Elvish City
13 Neglur, 1086 MT

Lieutenant Artimus Atyrmirid of the Royal Ranger Division stood in the home of the latest reported missing person. Brushing aside a stray strand of his lush dirty blond hair, he focused his attention on what he hoped would change the course of his investigation. Including this most recent kidnapping, there had been seven young elvish girls, ages fourteen to twenty-two, who had mysteriously disappeared. In the twenty years since crime had begun, nineteen of which Artimus had been an investigator, there had never been a case like this one.

What made these kidnappings so strange was the fact that there was no logical pattern. Seven days ago, a fourteen year old elf had been kidnapped in the slums of Erathal. A day after that, a twenty year old woman was taken from her rich father's villa. The following day, a sixteen year old, lower class girl, then an eighteen year old poor girl, then a seventeen year old merchant's daughter, and yesterday had been another rich child. No one could figure out what these girls could have in common other than their gender, and the kidnapper never left any clues behind.

Last night, the criminal had slipped up. The kidnapper had made things personal for Artimus and his fellow rangers; he had kidnapped a twenty-two year old, ranger-to-be. In doing so, this infamous kidnapper had left his first clue: black hair. This, Artimus suspected, would ultimately be the kidnapper's undoing.

The experienced inspector smiled as he looked at the strands of hair that lay atop a broken table. Unlike the other victims, this trainee, Valkyrie had been her name, had put up a visual struggle. In the struggle, she must have noticed his peculiar, black hair and purposely torn some out for Artimus to find. Clever.

"Cadet, do you know anyone with black hair?"

The young elf eyed his lieutenant suspiciously, but took only a moment to respond.

"No sir." Came his sheepish answer.

"Neither do I," continued the two-century old ranger. "And I can say with certainty that there are very few elves who have black hair." He finished with a sigh, perhaps of relief, but he definitely didn't feel relieved.

Even knowing that the suspect had black hair did not mean that this case was over. Every black-haired elf would have to be interrogated, and then, if none of them were guilty, every other creature in the vicinity would have to be questioned.

But the lab mages had determined that the suspect was elvish. Or had the conclusion been made prematurely?

"Cadet, I need you to fetch a lab mage immediately." Artimus ordered without looking at the less experienced ranger.

"Sir?"

"I need to know whether or not this is elvish hair. Get me a mage!"

The young ranger hesitated for a moment, but was out the door before Artimus continued. It was hard to find anyone as experienced in this field as the Lieutenant, a fact that he was not happy to admit. If it meant better investigations, Artimus would have gladly given his rank to someone more qualified. Unfortunately, even King Ulagret III agreed that Artimus was the best at what he did.

Despite this, Artimus missed the old days, when his only job had been hunting to provide for the city. On the day Ulagret Jr. had been killed, everything had changed, and Artimus was the first elf to change his title. With the use of his tracking techniques, he had been able to find the killer and bring him to justice. Since then, he had gained the honorary title of Chief Inspector of the Rangers; his rank remained Lieutenant.

"Excuse me sir," came the voice of a new elf, this one a young female. "Mr. Ricker would like to speak with you."

Artimus turned to see the younger ranger, whose body language showed that she had given up on stalling the disgruntled father. With a sigh, he nodded.

"Let him back in. After all, who am I to keep him out of his house?" Clearly, Artimus was not happy to be interrupted.

Nearly the same second as the young ranger departed, Mr. Ricker burst into the room, anger clear upon his face. If Artimus were to speak his mind, he would ask why the old politician had not hired some sort of security, especially after the kidnappings began. Furthermore, he wondered how this overinflated pig had remained asleep while his daughter had clearly put up a fight. Perhaps he was the kidnapper.

"Where is my daughter?" asked the enraged father as soon as he was within arm's length of the Chief Investigator.

"Borius, you know that it does not work like that. I am not a psychic." Artimus intentionally used the senator's first name, knowing that it would throw off his feeling of control. No civilian -no matter what position he held, he was still a civilian in this investigation- would question Artimus while he was at work.

"I-" Borius began his rhythm clearly off. He stumbled for a moment, his face going through a range of emotions from confusion to anger.

Unfortunately, rage won the battle.

"*You will FIND my daughter immediately, or you will be cast into the woods!*" That wasn't the response Artimus had expected.

Fortunately, the experienced investigator was quick on his feet, and he was always prepared for a verbal battle, even with a politician.

"*You, senator, will leave this house immediately or I will personally testify that you are interfering in an active investigation. Do I need to remind you how serious an offense that is?*"

This time he struck a nerve.

The senator's face went from rage to sadness, and then to a controlled look of disgust. He knew that Artimus was right.

"My apologies," said the senator, his voice almost acidic. "Contact me if you have any leads."

"As always," said Artimus with a nod.

Senator Ricker remained fixed in place while Artimus crouched where he had found the strands of hair. He could hear the senator exit the room, his footsteps over-emphasized in a display of anger. Continuing the search Artimus scanned the floor once more, looking closely over every inch to ensure that nothing had been overlooked. Any small clue, perhaps a scuffmark from a shoe, or, if he were lucky enough, a droplet of blood, could add to his case and make this criminal that much easier to find.

Artimus surveyed the room once more at a macro-level, looking over to the wooden desk and the cracked vanity mirror and across to the bed, which appeared surprisingly undisturbed. He looked up at the window, which had been left wide open after the kidnapping and then shifted his gaze back under the table where he had found the hair. If there was just some other clue that might help him locate this kidnapper, perhaps he could really crack this case open.

Almost ready to give up the search, something finally caught his eye. It was in the corner of the room. Out of place among the expensive, tile floors of the senator's mansion, there was a black dust. Just beside a small, wooden chair that had been upturned, he spotted it: a specific black dust, which could only be found in one place.

The kidnapper was living in Dwarven mines.

This discovery could prove more help in his investigation than the hair, and perhaps even more useful than a blood sample. Finding out exactly where this dust came from would allow Artimus to go straight to the kidnapper.

Up until this investigation, the criminal had left behind no traces, but like all other criminals, he was bound to get sloppy. With six successful kidnappings, it made sense that the culprit would become arrogant by the seventh. It was either this expected arrogance or the fact that he had kidnapped a ranger-in-training, that the culprit had left this evidence. Whichever it was, Artimus did not care. Evidence was evidence, and he planned on using this evidence to find his criminal by nightfall.

Without further thought on the matter, the senior investigator took a small sample of the dust, grabbed the strands of hair, and left the girl's room.

He was now in the central room of the house, where other investigators searched for any clues and of course where Senator Ricker was waiting. The room was large, perhaps the largest that Artimus had ever seen. A mahogany table, large enough to seat twelve elves, made up the

center of the room. Above the table was a gaudy chandelier, made entirely of gold. Even the purple candles within it appeared extravagant, small gems pressed into the center of all six to show just how expensive they were.

A large fireplace was at the rear of the home, a single log burning inside to supplement the light from the chandelier. On either side of this fireplace were vibrant colored plants, each cared for so precisely that they looked identical to one another. Finally, the floor was covered in a red carpet, by the looks of it one that was more expensive than Artimus's entire house.

Upon seeing the senior investigator, Mr. Ricker stopped harassing a younger ranger and approached his superior.

"Did you find any more clues?"

It was clear that the senator was distraught by his daughter's disappearance, but something about the way he pried annoyed Artimus beyond anything else the young investigator could imagine.

With as much calm as he could muster, Artimus gave a reassuring smile. "As a matter of fact, I have gathered new information. When the mage arrives, I will have it verified. Until then, I must ask you to sit tight."

The senator was visibly annoyed by this evasive statement, but after being put in his place just a few minutes ago, he merely nodded. Artimus was in charge of this investigation, and under the authority of the King he could give out whatever information he felt the need to. If he didn't want to share the information, that was also his prerogative.

This fact was one reason that Artimus liked his job. Like any other sentient creature, power was something that he found handy. Better he, a qualified hunter, have the power than some arrogant bureaucrat like the Senator. This authority had been helpful in the past, but he could not help thinking how much more helpful it would be if he had his complete staff. If only his officers showed up when they were supposed to, he might actually get investigations done more quickly.

Just as this thought came to mind, the door flew open and Mage Savannah Sylvanas came stumbling in, followed closely by the cadet that Artimus had sent to get her. As usual, Savannah was late.

"I'm sorry sir," came the expected response as she quickly made her way towards Artimus, ignoring the other rangers and the senator. Like most in her profession, her manners were lacking. In many cases, she would completely ignore her peers, leaving her with a largely unfavorable reputation.

Of course, where her manners ended, her beauty began, and most men believed this lack of protocol was made up for by her stunning features.

Her radiant, porcelain white skin contrasted beautifully with light, brown hair. With majestic green eyes peering deeply into the soul and filling any man's heart with desire, she demanded attention. Gazing upon them, most could notice a certain glow, a magical radiance caused by her stored up magical reserves.

Her body was proportioned perfectly, toned but not too muscular, curves fitting in exactly where they should be. She was the figure of an angel, with flawless dimensions. Every woman longed to look as stunning as she, and every man longed to have her.

To make matters worse, Savannah had never worn the Ranger uniform, and being a lab mage she was not required to do so. Artimus only wished she could wear something less distracting, but in his experience she had only one type of outfit.

Her long, flowing hair rested around her ears, showing off glowing, silver earrings. About her neck she wore a petite choker, with a green, magic stone set in the center. Her upper torso was covered by a simple, green tube top, stopping only inches below her breasts. She wore nothing else to cover her upper torso, leaving most of her middle uncovered, including her lithe stomach. Around her waist was something a bit more modest, but enticing nonetheless.

The green silk wrapped tightly around her, accentuating every curve. This enchanting dress held firmly around her upper thighs but hung down loosely to her smooth calves. In each step her hips swayed with an irresistible charm, one that would raise any man's pulse.

Naturally, Artimus was not immune to this allure. Despite this, it was his duty to make her understand the importance of being prompt. He only wished he could gather the words.

"Well, yes. It is, uh, good that, umm." He cleared his throat. "I'm glad to see you have finally arrived."

"Of course, sir. I am sorry that I-" Savannah began before getting interrupted by the Lieutenant.

"No. I mean. Of course. No need to waste time. Don't be late again." Artimus stammered. He had the distinct feeling that anyone not distracted by Savannah's features was laughing at him.

"So," Savannah began, fighting back a grin and failing.

She knew the effect she had on people.

"Is there anything new to look at?"

Artimus held up both hands, and offered the samples he had gathered to the mage. "I know the ash came from a Dwarven mine, but I don't know about the hair. Is it elvish?"

He wasn't sure how her magic worked, but like any other in her field would do, she merely took the ash in one hand and the hair in the other. Somehow, by closing her eyes and focusing concentrated mana into her hands, she was able to identify exactly what they were. Other than that, Artimus did not know the mechanics. All he knew was that any accomplished magician was able to pick it up as easily as he could string a bow.

"Interesting," whispered Savannah, her left eye twitching as the magic dissipated from her hand. She did not pause for an explanation, but continued to feed magic into her right hand. After only a few moments, this magic faded as well, and the Lab mage opened her eyes.

"The hair is elvish in origin, but it is different somehow. I don't know how, but the hair has some slight variances from yours or mine, yet it is definitely elvish. And knowing where the ash came from, this is quite unsettling. The ash did indeed come from Dwarven mines; the Jyrimoore mining shaft to be exact. If you are not familiar with famous cases, note that-"

Artimus held up his hand, a certain dread taking over his face. "I know that name as well as anyone else. We leave for the mines immediately, and pray that it is just a strange coincidence. Cadets Gharis, Sylvan and Verandas, you are with me. Savannah, you are coming as well. Corporal Cylbus, you are in charge here."

Without having to wait for a response, Artimus walked briskly out the door, his officers following closely behind.

Chapter 2

Runeturk Mountains, outside Erathal
13 Neglur, 1086

Artimus dismounted his horse, sending a hand motion which indicated that his underlings should do the same. The afternoon sun was shining bright, and with a quick glance at his riders he was able to detect their exhaustion. Most had not eaten since before the investigation had begun that morning, and over the past week many had also been short on sleep. Normally, he would have called for a lunch break at this point, but they had already arrived at the entrance to the Jyrimoore Tunnel. At this point it would serve little purpose.

"Cadets, you have ten minutes to rest out here. Eat if you must, and make sure your mounts are content. I will be inspecting the perimeter."

"And what about me?" asked Savannah as she slid off her horse in front of Artimus, her movements inspiring thoughts in his head that he would never share with another soul. Staying professional was something he needed, but at times he wished he could drop that professionalism and act on some of his baser instincts.

"You can come with me, or you can break. It's up to you." As Artimus began to walk towards the collapsed entrance, he paused. "On second thought, I wouldn't mind asking you a few questions if you are willing."

Savannah smiled, the happiness showing through her eyes as well as her beautiful, white teeth, sending a warm feeling to Artimus.

"I would be happy to answer some questions." She said softly.

Without waiting, she quickly went to Artimus's side and walked along next to him. "What would you like to know?"

Artimus said nothing at first, waiting until they were at the stones that blocked the entrance and safely out of earshot of his cadets.

"Well, this is the first case we have worked together on, but I wanted to tell you that so far you have proven to be the best mage I have had the privilege to work with."

He really meant that. Most of the mages he had the experience of working with were more talk than action, always claiming to have such great powers but never delivering more than the most trivial assistance. Though she was repeatedly late, Savannah had been offering suggestions since day one of this case, showing a rare initiative without the constant air of arrogance that was so common.

"Thank you." Another smile, and Artimus felt another unprofessional sensation.

"Well, it's true. I was just wondering what kind of magic you practiced before you joined the Rangers." Artimus did his best to avoid her eyes, knowing that the pull was too strong. Instead, he looked straight at her nose, allowing him to ignore her other features.

"Wellll." she said with a smile, rocking back on her heels as she clasped her hands behind her waist.

Artimus avoided her smile as best he could. He had never felt this way about another person before, but there was something special about Savannah. Unable to put his finger on what it was, he felt childish, and completely foolish, but since working with her he had felt a strange connection. It was difficult not acting on it.

"I used to be a druid." Savannah began explaining. "Actually, I still practice druidic magic, but only when I have free time. Since joining the rangers, I have not been involved in an actual conflict, so I've not needed to use it beyond basic everyday tasks."

She strolled on beside him as she spoke, her hands held together behind her back, a spring in her step as she looked towards the sky innocently.

"I would love to see you use some of that magic. Maybe some time when we're both off-" Artimus cleared his throat. "I mean, uhh. If you don't mind giving a demonstration. I don't want to interfere with your personal life."

Savannah laughed, an action that sounded to Artimus like a choir of angels. "You wouldn't be interfering with anything. I will show you as soon as we finish this case, so long as you do something for me."

"And what would that-" Artimus stopped mid-sentence and knelt. "There are tracks here."

He began tracing the steps, trying to find which direction they started in. He stayed low to the ground, slowly walking back towards the forest and Erathal to the south. Then, as he moved closer to where the other rangers were taking their short break, they vanished, as if the culprit had flown to this point and then walked to the abandoned mines.

Savannah remained silent as Artimus stood back up and approached the shaft again. The entire entrance was covered, but the tracks led directly to it. Artimus went around the entrance, trying to find any tracks on the hills beyond. There was nothing.

"This is quite irregular," said Artimus, with a sigh. His sky blue eyes were downcast in thought, and he ran his finger along the edge of the bow that hung over his shoulder. "The tracks end here, but this entrance is sealed."

Savannah shrugged. "So he sealed it after going inside."

Artimus shook his head. "Highly unlikely, and physically impossible. The rocks resemble a typical cave in. Most likely, if we remove the first layer, there will just be another and after that, another. Anyways, to get these rocks to be stable like this could only be the result of chance. If I move some rocks around, it may cause another collapse and allow us entry, but there would be no way to seal it in this fashion again; not from the inside anyways."

"I could move these rocks and put them all back in the same exact position." said Savannah with a wink. "Magic is quite handy."

Artimus arched an eyebrow. "I'm sure you can," he began, his tone showing some disbelief, "but you are an accomplished mage. Our friend here is a criminal, and even in criminals of his caliber, there have been none to possess such advanced magic. Only a handful of all criminals know *any* magic."

"So what? There's a first for everything."

Artimus sighed, a response, he noticed, that he had begun to use quite frequently. "Indeed. There is really no sense in debating this, but I pray you are wrong. Otherwise, I hope you are ready for a challenging fight. Still, I feel I should fetch the cadets before we enter."

"Alright, I'll just move these rocks while you get them."

Artimus turned and began walking back to his men. "Fine, but do not enter without me," he said before disappearing behind the trees.

As he walked, he decided to check for any tracks that he might have missed. Unfortunately, he found only Savannah's and his own, a troubling fact. This criminal was great at masking his trail, he almost never left evidence, and he was, potentially, a powerful magician. If not for the fact that he outnumbered this man five to one, he would be truly worried.

"Sir," began one of his cadets as he arrived on scene. "We are all ready to begin when you are."

"Good," said Artimus, "because I believe we've found his lair. Sylvan, I believe it is your turn to keep an eye on our steeds. Gharis, Verandas, I need you both to follow me."

Though Sylvan looked unhappy, he remained where he was. Both Gharis and Verandas grabbed their essential gear and followed their lieutenant back to the mining shaft, where Savannah had already cleared the entrance. Artimus was fascinated to see the rocks hanging suspended next to the open entrance and surprised that Savannah could actually open the entrance so easily.

"Alright then. Gharis, follow me. Savannah, you follow Gharis, and Verandas, keep to the rear. It looks pretty tight down there, so stick to this formation until further notice."

"Yes sir," replied both the cadets simultaneously. They were only cadets, but Artimus knew how hard the entrance exam to become a Ranger was. After all, he had played a major part

in designing many of the preliminary tests. Passing them meant that they were smart, capable trackers, and skilled fighters. Despite his confidence in these men and himself, he still had an uneasy feeling as he led Savannah and his cadets down the incline.

He felt a little unsteady as his shoes struggled to keep traction on the slope. Sand shifted beneath his feet, and he felt a few loose pebbles sliding around. As they reached the bottom, he steadied himself and drew his longbow, notching an arrow. Both of the cadets followed suit. "Savannah, seal the entrance."

The beautiful druid winked, and the rocks slid back into place. They fit in perfectly, just as they had when the Rangers arrived. But as the entrance was sealed, their only source of light was lost as well. Fortunately, Artimus had expected this and believed he had a solution.

"Savannah, I need you to create some fire." He whispered as the light disappeared.

"I can't make fire. I'm a druid, not a pyromancer." Artimus frowned. He could have sworn that a druid had once told him about using fire. At least there was always standard procedure he could follow.

"All right. Cadets! Put away your bows and light your torches. Draw out your swords as your weapon."

As usual, the cadets responded with a "Yes sir" and did exactly as Artimus had instructed. Light filled the entrance as they ignited their torches, revealing a long stretch of shaft, which quickly led to darkness. Artimus noted that the debris left at the entrance appeared to be a natural collapse. Finally, he noticed that the footprints he had found near the entrance had reappeared; but something was wrong.

"This is quite odd," whispered Artimus as he knelt down for a closer look. "There is only one set of footprints, and absolutely no drag marks."

"And?" asked Savannah matter-of-factly. "He could carry the victims if he is strong enough, or he could have used a spell to make them lighter."

"Cadets," said Artimus in his most authoritative voice. "Why is this discovery peculiar?"

Gharis was the first to answer. "Sir. Because when you say one set you literally mean one set, total. That one set, if I am not mistaken sir, leads into the tunnel. This would suggest that

whoever is down here just came down for the first time, and has never left. Also, the tracks seem to be fresh; no more than an hour."

"Very good Gharis. Those are my thoughts exactly," said Artimus with pride, a slight smile appearing on his face. These cadets were coming along nicely, and being their mentor; he could not help but feel some pride.

"So what does all this mean?" asked Savannah incredulously.

"It means we are being set up," piped in Verandas.

"Indeed," verified Artimus. "We must proceed with extreme caution, but I see no need for backup. Does anyone object?" The silence that followed was a sufficient answer. "Good, then we proceed quietly. From here on out do not speak unless it's an emergency or if I address you."

Artimus looked to the three of his subordinates, who all nodded in response. Slowly, the Lieutenant led the other rangers forward, holding his bow with an arrow at the ready. The terrain was pretty simple to navigate, but the ceilings of mines were known to be unstable. That is why Artimus kept his vision upward. If this criminal was as smart as he appeared, he could probably find a structurally weak point and set that as his trap. If Artimus picked up any movement, he would yell for his men to immediately fall back.

So far, the path had been clear, but Artimus approached this search as he did all other hunts. At any moment, he knew danger could emerge. Whatever form the trap would take - Artimus was positive that there was a trap- the Rangers would be ready, and Artimus was confident that they would, as always, catch the criminal.

"Sir," whispered Gharis from behind him, no urgency present in his voice. "I think you should see this."

Artimus turned, keeping his bow at ready and his eyes trained on the ceiling. He audibly gasped as he looked at the wall that Gharis stood before. A greenish ore protruded from the wall, covering most the cave wall for as far as the torchlight extended. This metallic green vein reached out in every direction, extending further down the tunnel and even reaching out along parts of the cave floor. Why would the dwarves have abandoned these mines?

The lead investigator surveyed the wall with his eyes, following along the intricate veins of the priceless ore that was before them. His own sword was crafted of the finest mythril and

enchanted to a level of superior sharpness and strength, but never before had he seen the rare metal that was before his eyes. And it was no small vein either; it was a vast web, perhaps running down for the rest of the cave until it opened up into a cavern full of this precious ore.

"What is it?" asked Savannah, running her hand along the ore.

"Adamantium." responded Artimus, leaving his mouth agape as he tried to convince himself that he was not hallucinating. No one spoke for nearly a full minute until Savannah broke the silence.

"Do I need to pry out the details?" she asked with a grin. "What is so special about this stuff?"

"My apologies," replied the Ranger with sincerity. "Adamantium is the strongest metal in existence. It's slightly heavier than mythril, but remains lighter than steel. It's harder than diamonds and more than twice as strong as pure mythril. To mine it, you have to completely cut around it, because no tools can break it. Any elvish blacksmith would pay a fortune for a single vein.

"Makes me wonder why the dwarves abandoned these mines in the first place." finished Artimus, lowering his bow slightly as he pondered. Dwarves rarely abandoned a mining operation, even if conditions were hazardous. The tunnel was dug though, and it led to this adamantium. Why would they create a mining network, find adamantium, and not proceed to mine it?

"Maybe they didn't search this far." offered Savannah. "Official reports say that the dwarves abandoned these mines because they did not find anything of value."

"That just complicates this case even further." said Artimus grimly. "If this tunnel was dug after the dwarves left, then who dug it?"

A new voice answered the question, coming from beyond the torchlight. The voice was young, no more than perhaps twenty by Artimus's estimation, but it was filled with authority and carried a demonic tone. Both Artimus and his cadets held their weapons at ready as they looked towards the source.

"I dug it," said the voice proudly. "These are my tunnels. Leave immediately or all of you will die." The voice sent chills from Artimus's feet, running up his legs and rolling around in his

gut before fluttering out in all directions and spiraling back around. Each word made his hair stand on end, the words caustic and almost painful.

"Identify yourself," responded Artimus immediately, ignoring the man's threat and his own discomfort. "Enter the light and give yourself up. Otherwise, I will show you why I won the last three Archery Competitions. I guarantee that your voice has given me your location and I can strike your throat with ease. We don't want violence though, so please come into the light."

"Alright," responded the voice, this time coming from behind the Rangers. As all four of Artimus's party turned, the voice laughed, coming from every direction. "But as you can see, I can project my voice where I please." As he continued, his voice shifted back to its original location, in the direction they had not yet explored.

"Listen," countered Artimus quickly. "We have no intention of intruding, nor are we looking for conflict. We are merely investigating a series of crimes. Would you be willing to answer a few questions?"

"Crime you say? Who says that crime was committed? Better yet, how can you be the judge of what is and is not crime?"

"I am no judge," answered Artimus carefully. "I am only a protector of what is good."

"Good? Now that, my elvish brother, is a matter of perception." As these words hit Artimus's ears, the figure slowly stepped into the light, revealing his appearance. Once again, the veteran investigator found himself in disbelief.

The ghastly figure before him appeared elvish, but his dimensions and features contradicted this assumption. In fact, the only true similarity was the pointy ears that were upon his head, but Artimus could feel something more. Even with his deathly pale skin, his night black hair, his extraordinary height, and his void-like eyes, this suspect had to be elvish. All the Rangers gathered knew; this man was the first Hájje, a dark elf.

The Hájje spoke in a mocking tone as he paced just within the torches' lighting. "Seven matriarchs have been gathered so far. They are all mine and now bear my children, but I need more. Four more will disappear from your village and that will be all. For the record, my name is Yezurkstal, Patriarch of all Hájje. Leave me and my people alone."

Artimus was shocked by the Hájje's suddenly loose tongue, but he was here for a reason. "I'm afraid I cannot comply until the seven girls are released." He held his bow steady, aimed straight for this criminal's head with intent to kill if needed.

Yezurkstal grinned, a most sinister and unsettling sight. He appeared to be pondering something.

"I like you Mr. Investigator, so I will let you and the broad live. Your two light-bearers are mine though."

As these words left his mouth, the hájje assumed an attacking stance. Two streams of black magic shot from his hands and impacted both Gharis and Verandas in their chests. A swirling mass of necrotic power impacted the men and caused them to fall backwards. Both men doubled over as this necrotic energy coated their bodies, causing them to scream in agony. The torches rolled from their hands, the light flickering and causing Artimus to lose his target.

Both cadets were enveloped in dark energy, the tangible magic coating them in a sort of cocoon as it spread out from their centers. They seemed to phase in and out of corporeal form, their bodies shifting around violently.

Fortunately, Artimus had already released his arrow before his men had even hit the ground. His bow was already slung upon his back and he held his mythril blade in hand, the point facing towards his foe as he shifted his weight back and into a defensive stance.

Artimus could hear both Gharis and Verandas convulsing on the cave floor, their swords clanging against the walls. This Hájje had proven to be more than just a criminal; he was a demon, a dark chapter in the history of Evorath, a tumor. The senior investigator could feel the pain of his cadets, probably the sting of his pride at being bested by a criminal. If he did not act quickly, he feared that he would meet the same fate as his two cadets.

"Savannah! Run back and leave the cave. Ride to town with Sylvan and bring reinforcements." Anticipating protest, he quickly added, "That's a direct order. I will follow you shortly. Just leave the exit unsealed."

"Fine," said Savannah definitively. Hearing the rapid footsteps that followed, he believed she had done as expected.

The hájje was laughing, a demonic sound reverberating from the walls of the caves. His arrow had obviously had no effect on the creature, so staying to fight was not an option. Turning his gaze down to the two cadets, he shuddered.

Judging by the necrotic magic that was flowing through both his cadets, Artimus was not willing to risk physical contact. So with his enemy out of sight, he backed into a wall and held his defensive stance. He watched as both cadets began to lose all color in their skin. Their hair turned a jet black as a ghostly white overtook their tan skin pigment. The last thing he saw before turning to flee were Gharis's black eyes.

They were being mutated.

Yezurkstal had no need for mates.

He was creating more Hájje.

Chapter 3

Erathal Forest
13 Neglur, 1086

Life within the wilds of Erathal was never quiet. From the tiny termites that ate away at a rotting tree stump, to squirrels gathering up acorns, or a panther stalking its prey, movement was a constant within the forest. Even after the sun set and many animals settled down, owls would hunt, and lynx would travel, keeping the forest ever-flowing with life. It was an endless cycle that would continue on for all eternity, life moving throughout the thickest parts of the forest no matter the time of day. Of course, the early morning activity of this great forest was the most impressive of all.

Every type of creature stirred as the sun trickled down through the thick branches of the tallest trees. An unsuspecting snake rushed through the foliage, only to be snatched up and eaten by a brown-tailed mongoose. Unicorns grazed near the edge of a small pond, unaware of the lion

pride that lurked nearby, ready to pounce and spoil their peaceful morning drink at any moment. A large rat scurried for cover, only to be scooped up and quickly devoured by a young roc.

Many people believed that this life was chaos, but for the centaur warrior who stood observing these events, it was perfect order. As his village elders had taught him, there was a heavenly order laid down through the journey of life. On any given day, a predator could find its prey only to be consumed shortly thereafter by yet a greater predator. This was the way of the forest, and interfering meant rebelling against Evorath herself.

It had always troubled Irontail, the muscle-bound young centaur, that he was forbidden from saving a deer from its feline predators, or any other prey from its respective predator, but that was not the centaur way. As a village warrior, an honor bestowed on only the most powerful males, he needed to uphold their principles lest he cause his tribe great dishonor. Among all of centaur tribes, honor was considered the most important quality. A centaur without honor would be banished, left alone to fend for himself in the wilderness in a life of isolation and loneliness.

Like all other centaur, Irontail was wholly devoted to his tribe, which was why he had taken this job in the first place. This loyalty would keep him bound in his place until his target was within sight. With all four legs planted in fallen leaves and moss covered rocks, Irontail waited for his objective to arrive, trying in vain to ignore the constant arrival and departure of life. Natural order was ultimately the best way for the forest; or so he reminded himself as he tightened his grip on the small tree trunk he used as a club.

Unfortunately, he had been waiting here much longer than he had expected, and the spiral of death was really starting to bother him. If his charge was more prompt, he could be on his way back to Dummer village, but as things were, he was losing his patience.

Of course, it was not unexpected for satyr, these base creatures being known their tardiness and general lack of manners. From Irontail's perspective, they were all just a bunch of bipedal goats who had somehow learned how to speak. He just couldn't grasp what they could possibly have to offer to his people, or to anyone for that matter.

Finally, nearly two hours after they were supposed to arrive, Irontail caught site of the courier. They slowly made their way through the light undergrowth and towards the meeting spot. Irontail counted three of them, and judging by their formation he believed that the middle satyr was the representative he was waiting for. Now would be the difficult part.

"Hail and well met," exclaimed Irontail as the convoy stopped just a couple meters before him. "I thank Evorath for your safe arrival."

The middle satyr took the lead, brushing Irontail's greeting off with a wave of his hand.

"Enuff of ore pleasant trees. Ree-laxx. Lee-ead thee way." The satyr put a special emphasis on each syllable of his words, a habit, Irontail heard, that was quite common among their kind. It was just one of many annoying habits these creatures possessed that made them so unbearable.

The young centaur took immediate notice of the small jugs that each satyr had about their waist. Judging by their posture, he guessed that they had already consumed half of the contents. This was another habit that these base creatures stuck to without fail. Drinking was their solution to everything and oftentimes the leaders of a satyr tribe were chosen solely on their ability to consume more alcohol than any other member of the tribe. Knowing this made Irontail wonder why his elder wanted to keep the peace with any satyr.

Still, just as it was not his place to save prey from its predator, it was also forbidden for him to question an elder. With a fake smile, Irontail turned and led them through the forest. Like many journeys before, Irontail would put up with this undesirable task for the good of the tribe. He only hoped that the long journey would not drive him insane.

As they walked through the dense growth of the forest, he tried his best to ignore the drunken conversation coming from behind him. The members of the courier were all intoxicated, and it seemed that there was more laughter than there was actual conversation. With all the discipline he had within himself, Irontail held his tongue and kept his anger in check.

These creatures had no value as far as Irontail was concerned. They spoke of meaningless activities, of times they drank massive amounts of liquor and their drunken orgies that had resulted from these escapades. They broke into random fits of laughter every time one of them tripped on a root, or slipped on a leaf, and a few times they almost ran headlong into a tree. Their complete lack of discipline made Irontail's stomach churn.

Kilometers of trekking through the dense forest, paired with hours of this meaningless banter, brought him to the edge of his tolerance. Irontail was beginning to lose his patience when he finally caught sight of his relief.

"Welcome," came a familiar voice from just behind an ancient Erath, the largest species of tree in the known world. These colossal trees were native only to Erathal (which is why they kept their name) and reached sizes more than twice that of any oak. This particular Erath, which reached a height over one hundred and fifty meters and a diameter of nearly thirty, was the only way that Irontail could find his village.

The magic that was at work within his tribe was known only to the elders, but somehow this tree was the focal point. Only by knowing that this tree was the key, or by being allowed entrance by an elder, could anyone see Irontail's village. This, coupled with the half-dozen warriors and handful of druids who stood guard, kept the village safe from anyone who wished to harm it.

The three satyr looked in amazement as the clearing before them became visible. Foliage revealed itself to contain over a dozen windowless dwellings made of vines, beautiful blooms growing across their walls. Half a dozen small huts, made only of fallen trees and built into the side of large Erath also appeared. Finally, at the center of the small, tribal village, there was a large mound of plants.

Somehow, this mound seemed to be a conscious organism, thorny vines flowing around beautiful blossoms and moving succinctly. At the same time, the mound was stationary, a solid object surrounded by many moving ones, like a beautiful flower being swarmed by hundreds of bumblebees. Regardless of its consciousness, this sacred mound remained the most beautiful thing that Irontail had ever seen. Despite their drunkenness, even the visiting satyr seemed to admire its mysterious charm for a moment before bursting out in laughter again.

Cobolthand, the centaur who had welcomed them, moved from behind the tree, effectively blocking the mystical mound from sight.

"Well met," began the small druid. "On behalf of all of our tribe, we extend full hospitality to you and your courier."

As the wizened centaur spoke, he ignored Irontail completely, speaking only to the satyr delegates. Fortunately, Irontail was not at all saddened by this. In fact, he took the opportunity to step back and allow the smaller, older, but still more powerful centaur do the talking.

"Before we enter the sacred meeting hall," continued Cobolthand, motioning towards the great mound, "I offer you a feast. If you would be so ki-"

The satyr diplomat held up his right hand, swaying a bit as he did so.

"Tha 'tis not need ed. We ould like ta' ma' eat wi-ith your el ders an' your chief tin now."

Irontail could hardly contain himself. His tribe was offering these base creatures a welcoming feast and here they were completely throwing away their hospitality. If not for the quick glance from his elder, Irontail may have returned the disrespect in the form of physical violence.

"Very well," responded Cobolthand. "The Council is right this way. Irontail, report to Copperfoot for a new assignment."

The satyr courier paid Irontail no heed, not any acknowledgment or sign of gratitude. They merely followed Cobolthand slowly, swaying in their drunken somber and occasionally tripping over their own feet. As far as Irontail could tell, not one of these horrible excuses for a caretaker of the forest showed any sign of actual brain activity.

It perplexed him as he stood there, watching these base creatures, wondering why the elders would ever summon them. How could these drunken fools help his tribe? More importantly, how could they help serve Evorath?

As if on cue, Irontail felt a large hand fall upon his shoulder.

"I know what you are thinking young warrior, but you must not doubt the elders. The elders are wise."

Copperfoot removed his hand from the younger centaur's shoulder, bringing his broad body around to look Irontail in the eyes. Between his colossal shoulders and sinewy biceps, he appeared large enough to crush a boulder with his bare hands. From the stories that had been passed on to the younger centaur, Irontail had no doubt that he could do that and much more should the need arise.

"The elders are wise," parroted Irontail. He wished to question this, to know why the elders would invite such crude creatures to their village. When had they ever helped? What could they do to benefit the village? Most importantly, how would these tiny, drunken fools do anything positive?

“Come with me,” continued Copperfoot without any further consideration for the younger warrior.

Unwilling to voice his concerns, Irontail followed his elder to a small hut on the other side of the village. Unlike the mystical structure that the courier had been invited to, this was a rather simple hut. Crafted from the wood of a dead willow, this shoddy structure leaned against one of the larger Erath.

No roof covered the makeshift shelter, but the branches of the Erath offered a quasi-barrier against the elements. At its base, the undergrowth seemed to merge with the warped wood, vines, along with mushrooms and the roots of the tree itself all collaborated to give the hut an unexpected stability. Though not nearly as fantastic as the Great Mound, any foreigner would find this simple hut to be quite an intriguing sight.

Irontail took the initiative to push upon a seemingly solid log. With a light touch, the log pivoted to reveal an opening large enough for a centaur. As was proper etiquette in any centaur tribe, elders were to enter a structure before their pupils.

Apparently, despite his best efforts to appear relaxed, Irontail could not shake the annoyance he felt towards the satyr. Stopping before the opening, Copperfoot put his hand upon the younger centaur's shoulder once again.

"Do not fret," he said reassuringly. "I will explain the situation once we are inside. For a warrior, you sure think too much."

With these words, the older centaur entered the hut, leaving the young warrior to think for a moment more.

Was it possible to think too much? Something about this made Irontail's insides turn. Wasn't thinking for oneself integral to serving the tribe? If no one thought, then how could anyone know what the tribe needed? Thinking too much...?

Irontail gave up on the internal struggle, planning to return to the matter next time he was stuck on guard duty. In the meantime, he followed his elder into the hut, allowing the door to shut quietly behind him. One thing he knew for sure was that action was more important than thought, and now was the time for action.

As he entered the deceptively large hut, his eyes had to adjust to the increased light. There was only a single round table in the room, and on that table sat a bright druidic candle, the source of the increased lighting. The inside of this hut was much larger than it appeared from without, leaving more than enough room for even the largest centaur to fit inside and maneuver with relative comfort.

The walls were bare, nothing decorating the plain, wooden logs. There were small gaps in the makeshift ceiling, letting a few inconsequential rays of light shine through. Just like every other shelter in the village, there was no floor, but centaur had no problem standing on grass.

Only one thing had changed in the room since Irontail had last been summoned here, and that was the people gathered around the table. Much to Irontail's surprise, some of these people held very important roles in the tribe. Other than himself, everyone in the room was a member of the Village Council.

So as he approached the table, Irontail could not help wonder why three of his highest ranking elders would have summoned him, a lowly warrior, to the strategy hut. Without the slightest clue to why his presence here was required, the young warrior kept to himself. Confused to the point of doubting his elders, the brave warrior listened intently as Copperfoot began.