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# FOR THE RANK OF MASTER

by  
[Hollie Snider](#)  
(*chapters 1-3*)

"He that can smile at death, as we know him; who can flourish in the midst of diseases that kill off whole peoples. Oh, if such a one was to come from God and not the Devil, what a force for good might he not be in this world of ours."

– Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

## Prologue – Nemesis

Elidor's long-nailed hand tightened around the slayer's muscular neck. Slowly, the elven wizard lifted his human adversary to eye level. He squeezed the man's

throat, enjoying his captive's helpless terror, and gave him a cold, callous smile. The metallic scent of fear filled the air, along with other more human odors as fright momentarily took control. Elidor glared at the man in disgusted contempt, raising him higher off the floor.

Choking and gagging in Elidor's grasp, the slayer's gray eyes bulged with the effort to breathe. His handsome face turned purple, features becoming grossly distorted. Desperately, hand shaking, he unsheathed a knife.

The wizard saw the weapon and laughed. "And what are you planning to do with that?"

In answer, the slayer plunged the blade into Elidor's chest. Finely honed steel sliced easily through flesh, muscle and sinew before finally scraping against bone. The slayer twisted the

knife and viciously pulled it free, nearly dropping the weapon. Colorless algid fluid spurted from the wound, oozing over the slayer's hand before dripping sluggishly to the floor.

Elidor grunted in shock, his grasp loosening. Surprised incredulity flashed in his eyes and he touched the injury gingerly. Clear, muciferous blood coated his fingertips.

The slayer squirmed free and backed hastily away. Instinctively, he shook off the icy slime clinging to his hand and raised it to his throat. Massaging the tender flesh, he sucked in great gasps of air, coughing and spluttering with the effort to hurriedly fill his oxygen-starved lungs. Brandishing the dripping knife, he stood with his back to the wall.

Elidor looked from his fingers to the slayer panting across the room. He advanced on the man. "Did you really expect to hurt me with that?" Elidor contemplated the human's presence in his lair.

"Why were you sent against me? You are obviously no true slayer." Nearly nose to nose with him, the wizard scrutinized his opponent, studying the human. "Who would send an inept against me?" he pondered. Black eyes peered into gray, searching for answers, finding none.

Suddenly, in one swift, bold stroke, the slayer brought the blade up, slicing through Elidor's left cheek and eye. Blood and other fluids flowed as the organ ruptured. The wizard jerked his head back in astonishment as the blackish mess slid down his pale, high-boned cheek. Heavy, graveolent drops slipped from his chin, splashing against the stone floor. The rank odor quickly filled the small space between hunter and hunted.

The wizard glared at his opponent with his remaining eye. Then, from deep within his narrow chest came a soft rumbling. Laughter erupted from the pamirre's mouth, echoing off the granite walls and growing ever louder.

The slayer cringed with horror at the sight before him.

Slurping and gurgling, Elidor's ruined eye pulled together. The gash in his cheek narrowed then disappeared as the wizard's body healed itself. In the span of a single breath, the thin pink line of a scar faded to nothing. Only drying body fluids told of the injury. The slayer's mouth worked futilely, soundlessly.

Elidor blinked. "A pamirre slayer, slain by a pamirre. Ironic, isn't it?"

Elidor stared at his nemesis, eyes glowing faintly crimson. "You stood no chance against me, slayer. Surely you knew that before you even arrived." He studied the human. "Perchance you should have worked up to such a formidable quarry. Pamirres are, after all, hard to kill." Elidor reached out and closed his hand on the man's throat once more, lifting him to his feet and pulling him forward. "Humans, however, are not."

Sharp fingernails tore through the flesh of the slayer's neck. Blood sprayed as both carotid artery and jugular vein were punctured. Drops of the ruby liquid splattered Elidor's face and clothes and

he opened his mouth, savoring the crimson rain. Licking the blood from his lips, Elidor casually flung the man back as if he were nothing more than a rag doll.

The slayer struck the wall and slid slowly to the cold stone floor, throat torn out. Blood bubbled with the man's pathetic wheezing efforts to breathe. Elidor walked over and watched with morbid amusement. The slayer stared up at the pampirre, disbelief and pain in his dying eyes. He gave one final, shuddering exhalation and went limp, head lolling heavily to one side.

The pampirre felt bloodlust well up within him as he looked at the lifeless body, into the open unseeing eyes. "Such a pity." He dropped the remains of the slayer's throat next to his body. The goblet of flesh hit the icy stone with a plop, splattering a puddle of rapidly congealing blood.

A sharp gasp came from behind the pampirric wizard and he turned to face the intrusive sound. He smiled at the unexpected sight before him, revealing unnaturally white teeth.

An ebony-haired elven female stood in the doorway, pale skirts still swirling about her feet. She stood with her mouth open in shock and eyes wide in horrified astonishment. "What have you done?"

"Ah, Aloria, my dear." He walked slowly toward her. "I have merely rid myself of a nuisance."

"Aubrian was no nuisance." She looked at the slayer's face, still handsome even in death.

"That, my sweet, is a matter of opinion." Elidor paused next to his worktable. Carefully and methodically, he wiped his elegant hands on a rag. He scraped the drying blood from beneath them, never taking his gaze from Aloria.

"He was my father's friend," she said through angry tears.

"Ah, well, that explains his presence here. Kelan sent him." Elidor's eyes narrowed in suspicion and he quickly crossed the remaining distance. "What do you know of it?"

She stepped back in fear. "N . . . nothing, my lord."

The wizard waited for a more acceptable answer. None came and he lunged, grabbing her shoulder before she could retreat further. "You led the slayer here at Kelan's request, didn't you? Probably quite willingly, too." Pulling her close, he traced the outline of her jaw with one finger. Aloria squeezed her eyes shut, disgusted by the sight of congealing blood still under his nails. She drew a deep shuddering breath and held it.

"How could you do that to me? How could you lead him here with what we mean to each other?"

"That was before . . . this." Eyes still closed, Aloria turned her head away in revulsion.

Elidor stared with rapt attention at the hypnotic pulse just beneath her skin. The hot, coppery scent of living blood filled his senses. He felt the familiar, bittersweet ache in his jaw as his fangs

lengthened with anticipation. Elidor pressed his mouth to the smooth skin of her neck and paused, incisors dimpling the flesh. She stiffened under his touch, afraid to move but urgently wanting to. Her pulse quickened with trepidation.

Elidor pulled his head back and looked at her. "No, I cannot accept the risk. I will not lose you. Not all who are bitten will turn," he whispered to her.

"Aloria, look at me," Elidor requested.

She kept her eyes tightly shut, head turned away. "No."

"Aloria, for the sake of the gods, if you ever cared for me, look at me," he pleaded. "Then I will let you go."

With obvious effort, she met his gaze. Unaware of the pampirre's hypnotic powers, Aloria looked into the seemingly bottomless pools of Elidor's black eyes and lost herself in their depths. Slowly, the room spun before disappearing from her vision. Staring into Elidor's eyes was all that mattered and his gaze held her rapt attention. Nothing existed beyond Elidor's shining black eyes. Nothing.

Good, he thought. "Aloria, are you listening to me?" His silky, sensuous voice rippled over her skin, caressing her and raising gooseflesh. Shivers raced up her spine.

"Yes, my lord."

"From this moment on, you will do only as I say. You will heed only my commands."

"Yes, my lord," she said mechanically.

"You feel no desire to return home. You will want to stay with me for the rest of your life."

"Yes, my lord."

Elidor released her.

She blinked rapidly, confused. "What happened?"

"Nothing. Weren't you about to leave? I said I'd let you go, remember?"

"Yes, I remember." She took a step toward the door, then turned back to him. Aloria gripped her skirts and shuffled her feet uncertainly. "I . . . I wish to stay with you, my lord." Her bewilderment at her own statement was evident on her face. "What is going on?"

Elidor felt his hypnotic binding weaken. He spread his hands and bowed in seeming generosity. Then, before the mesmeric hold broke completely, he took Aloria's hand and led her toward a bird perch in the corner of his spellroom.

"Jugh awt mhuth kiog bnth, Aloria," said Elidor.

The incantation washed over her and she transformed in a flash of shadow. Aloria screamed as her joints broke apart and reformed into wings. Scaly skin erupted through her flesh, covering her legs. An awful crackling, rending sound filled the spellroom as her face changed into that of a bird. Aloria's clothes fell away as black feathers sprouted, enveloping her body. She gave a final shriek, and then the elven princess ceased to be.

"This day just keeps getting better." He smiled, pleased with the results. Come.

At Elidor's silent command, an awkward creature emerged from a shadowed corner, ambling forward on legs too short for its squat body and knuckles dragging as it walked. Three ochre-colored eyes glowed in its misshapen head. Air rasped and wheezed through a squashed nose as it breathed. The lower jaw jutted forward and rubbery lips that didn't quite meet revealed broken and rotting teeth. Saliva dripped from its mouth in long strands, running down its barrel chest before finally dribbling to the floor. Purplish-blue veins spider webbed their way across the translucent white skin of its body, pulsing irregularly. Swaying slightly on clubbed feet, it patiently awaited Elidor's direction.

The wizard watched the hideous being with approval. My greatest creation, he thought. "Take care of that." He gestured toward the dead man. "And guard this room."

The summoned creature moved toward the dead slayer eagerly, rocking precariously on short, jointless legs and nearly losing its balance with the enthusiasm. Slurping and sucking sounds filled the air. A bone cracked sharply, the sound ricocheting off the walls.

"I want to pay a visit to Kelan and see how his village is faring," he glanced back at the raven, "and see what he has to say about his missing daughter."

The bird squawked in angry protest and ruffled its feathers. Yellow eyes glittered in the torchlight as the raven watched the wizard, her gaze brittle.

"Perchance I'll pay a visit to Arden as well. If Kelan sent Aubrian here, Arden probably had a hand in the effort to rid Darkanth of me as well." Elidor glanced toward his scrying pool. The water swirled slowly in the black marble font.

"But first, I believe I'll see what that hælán Tehan is up to."

With fingers curled around the edges of the font, Elidor watched events in the magickal water with great interest. Torches sputtered in their sconces, struggling to stay lit despite the cold breeze blowing through the cavern. Their flickering light reflected off the clear water and onto the reddish granite walls, giving them a shimmering appearance.

"Yes," he hissed. "Prepare, my little hælán. Let's see if you can hear the wounds I cause." The wizard laughed, an ugly action which pulled the pallid skin taut against his bony face. "You have no idea what you're truly facing," he said in low, rumbling tones.

Still chuckling, Elidor turned away from the scrying pool. He moved toward a line of shelves against the far wall, black robes swirling like liquid shadow.

As he passed the slate-topped worktable, the wizard purposely dragged his nails against the surface. The large bird cawed and flapped her wings madly in protest. She glared at him before settling.

Elidor went to the raven, kicking the remains of a leg bone out of his way in the process. "Clean up your mess," he said to a seemingly empty corner wreathed in shadow. A wheezing grunt answered the wizard. He extended his arm and the bird hopped obediently onto it.

"Calm yourself, my pet." He stroked the feathers of the bird's breast and looked into the baleful yellow eye trained on him. "Don't tell me you regret your decision." The bird sidled up his arm and settled herself on his shoulder. "No, I didn't think so."

At an unspoken command, Aloria fluttered back to her perch and Elidor continued to his shelves. He studied the multitude of jars, vials, pouches and flasks, occasionally pulling one down to examine the contents. Finally, he had a total of seven containers on the table next to a large, adamantine brazier.

On a stand in front of the table rested his heavy spell book. Lovingly, Elidor caressed the worn leather before opening the tome. The sewn binding yielded silently, mute testimony to the wizard's care, but the ancient, yellowed pages still crackled as he turned them.

## Part I

"Cold darkness quickly settles in. Now ever-watchful, ever-fearful. A blink of light, a flash of hope. Around the next bend, all pitch black. An illusion." – The Tome of Daemons

"The forces that affect our lives, the influences that mold and shape us, are often like whispers in a distant room, teasingly indistinct, apprehended only with difficulty." – Charles Dickens

## Chapter 1

Wind soughed softly through the trees, fluttering the hælán's chestnut hair and caressing his cheek. Sounds of the forest surrounded him. Tehan bent his head in reverence as he knelt by the forest altar. "Diance, Goddess of Nature and Light," Tehan prayed, "grant the use of survival spells upon me. I am to enter the Hyth Kisk, my testing of rank and I beg your guidance and blessing."

Tehan placed his offering upon the stone altar. Sunlight filtered through the trees, dappling the ground and reflecting off the clear gemstone in a brilliant array of color.

Will my life ever amount to anything more than testing for higher rank? Tehan thought of his friends, an unlikely group of human, half-elf, dwarf and serkian. He smiled at the memories of adventures shared in cycles past. Then duty to the Goldeneye tribe, duty to his father actually, called and the friends went their separate ways. Will my life ever be that way again, when I had more friends, more time?

Tehan stood and walked a short distance away, intending to leave. Before he stepped on the worn footpath, the nearby bushes rustled loudly. Tehan looked up to find a female elf emerging from the woods.

Just over half a man height tall, she stood, hands on her hips. She wore leather and cloth garments dyed several shades of blue, green and brown. Silvery hair spilled over her shoulders, reaching nearly to her waist. Violet eyes, set in a sculptured face, watched Tehan carefully. Tattooed

vines and flowers wound their way up her legs, disappearing under clothing only to reappear on her arms and neck. A well-made bow was slung over her back, along with a quiver of arrows.

"More gems," she said, her voice reminiscent of flowing water. She walked forward noiselessly, and picked up the diamond, hefting it expertly. "Why doesn't anyone ever bring anything useful?" she asked, annoyed. "Fish hooks would be a nice change, or perchance some leather scraps. Armor and boots don't repair themselves after all." She pocketed the jewel as Tehan watched.

"You're stealing from the altar," he protested. "Those offerings are for the gods."

"Aye, I know. And I'll make sure Diance gets this, just as I always do. Though I'm not sure what she's going to do with another useless bauble."

"It's not a useless bauble. It's worth quite a bit of gold."

"Aye, I'm sure it is, but what does a goddess need with money?" The female watched Tehan, awaiting an answer. When none came, she turned and melted soundlessly into the forest without displacing even a single leaf.

How did she do that? he wondered. "Hey! Hey, you can't do that." Tehan started to pursue her, then a strange feeling washed over him. The hælán stood on the footpath, bewildered and no longer compelled to give chase.

From somewhere in the woods, the healer heard a single word carried on the breeze. "Granted," whispered a bodiless feminine voice.

He bowed his head and thanked Diance for her blessing. Whistling, he made his way toward his home village of Elvaria, unaware of his audience.

\* \* \*

Grandmaster Arden sat across from Tehan, folded hands resting on the age-smoothed table. "Are you ready to face the Hyth Kisk, my son?" He looked at Tehan, concern on his senescent features.

"Of course I'm ready," he said. Tehan shifted in his seat. "I feel as if I could take on all of Darkanth."

"But there is something bothering you. I can hear you thinking from here."

Tehan stood and walked to the window of the small hut. Outside, water still dripped from tree leaves after the recent rain, the sound muffled by the damp soil. Hidden in the thick foliage, birds sang and twittered. Tehan sniffed the air, savoring the clean scent.

"No, nothing I can't handle myself." Tehan placed his hands on the sill, leaning out slightly.

"Really?" Arden raised a suspicious eyebrow. "Why don't I believe you?"

Tehan gave a world-weary sigh then turned to face his father. Crossing his arms, he said, "I was in the forest today, praying at the altar as you instructed me. I left my offering, but a female elf came out of the woods and stole it."

"Stole it? I think you're probably mistaken."

"No, she took the gemstone off the altar and pocketed it right before my eyes. She claimed Diance would get it, but I have trouble believing that."

"Did you chase her down?"

"I started too, but something stopped me," Tehan admitted.

"Really? What?"

Tehan returned to his seat. He traced the lines in the table with one finger. "I don't know exactly. I just had the strangest feeling I shouldn't go after her." He looked up at his father. "What do you think?"

"I think you'd better keep in mind not all things are as they appear," answered Arden cryptically. "Now, we should get over to the Testing Hut. Kasare and the others are waiting to entrance you."

"Why must the testing for rank be in my mind?" complained Tehan.

"It is the way things have always been done," said Arden. "You know that. Physical injuries are easily healed or compensated for. We must be sure your mind is strong."

Tehan nodded as he rose from his seat.

\* \* \*

"Begin." Arden's voice echoed ominously in Tehan's mind. Cautiously, the hælán pushed open the wooden door and entered the keep. Darkness enveloped him as the door swung silently shut and a dank, musty smell tickled his nostrils. Fighting the urge to sneeze, Tehan whispered a single word, "Kilarke." Held in his right hand, his stave shined pure silver, piercing the oppressive shadows.

Turning slowly, Tehan used the glowing staff to dimly illuminate the small room. Save for a set of striated stone stairs leading up, the chamber appeared empty. Summoning courage, he forced his feet to move toward the steep stairwell. Doeskin boots muffled his footsteps, but to Tehan, they sounded loud. He placed a hand on his chest in a vain attempt to quiet his rapidly beating heart.

After what felt like an eternity, Tehan reached the base of the staircase. He paused to rest before beginning his ascent. Though it was no more than four or five man heights across, Tehan had expended a great deal of energy to cross the room. His nerves stretched to the breaking point and his ears ached from straining to hear even the slightest of sounds.

Resting his free hand on the wall he thought, Why am I so tired? So . . . tired. Need to rest, to . . . sleep. He struggled to keep his heavy eyelids from closing. It's a . . . sleep spell. "Tehan, snap out of it," he ordered himself sharply. The edged bark of his own voice startled him. Tehan shook his

head, attempting to clear his sleep-fogged mind. Still groggy, he cast a counter spell to alleviate the remaining effects.

Just as Tehan placed one foot on the steps ahead of him, a ceraceous voice whispered, "You'll never survive, not against the Protector, not without help." The silken words felt like a frigid breeze on the back of his neck, and he shivered in spite of the warmth in the room. His breathing came in shallow, rapid gasps, and he felt as if a thousand pairs of eyes stared at him, burning holes into his back.

The deafening silence pressed on Tehan's sensitive eardrums and his thundering heartbeat echoed in his brain. He didn't move any more than necessary as he turned, afraid of what an unnecessary movement might bring. Tehan squeezed his eyes shut as he turned, terrified of what he might see. The muscles in his jaw twitched from the tension, and his lips pressed tightly together, forming a thin white line.

Cautiously, Tehan opened his eyes to see only an empty room. Unaware he'd been holding it, he let out his breath in a sigh of relief. "It must have been my imagination," he whispered to himself. As a precaution however, Tehan cast a finding spell designed to locate objects, living or not. He watched as the shaft of blue light snaked out of his open palm and methodically searched every part of the room, illuminating a small barren table but nothing else.

Relieved, Tehan turned back to the stairway. Using his staff to test the stairs ahead of him for snares and pitfalls, he slowly ascended. His keen hearing picked up the faint sounds of crying and he paused, listening. The nearly inaudible noise came from somewhere ahead of him. Tehan resumed his climb, stopping once again upon reaching the landing.

Here, a hallway ran to his left and right. Shadows and cobwebs draped the open beams like funereal cloths while a thin layer of undisturbed dust coated the floor. Muted squeaks and scurrying sounds told of unseen rats.

The crying, now a pronounced series of sobs, emanated from all around. Tehan held up the glowing staff to illuminate both corridors. Unfortunately, the silvery light faded long before reaching the end of either passageway. Unable to discern the source of the sound, Tehan decided to walk the length of each hallway cautiously. He chose the right passage first, but after a short distance, could no longer hear any hint of the crying.

Tehan turned around and crept warily down the left hallway, ignoring the stairs he'd just climbed. As he moved forward, the sound of weeping began again, growing louder with each carefully placed step. He followed the sound to the end of the hall, the pale glow from his staff the only light.

Directly in front of him stood an adamantine inlaid door. As the hælán held his staff up to better illuminate the door, two torches flared to life. Tehan stumbled back in surprise. He glanced around the hall, wondering what else might materialize out of the darkness. Nothing appeared. The two torches merely flickered in their sconces on either side of the door, casting grossly elongated, dancing shadows on the walls.

Summoning his courage with a quick exhalation, Tehan released his staff. It stood unaided, revolving slowly. The hælán wove his delicate hands in the intricate, arcane patterns belonging to white magick.

Light from the torches came toward him in golden ribbons, joining with the pale purplish radiance given off by his moving hands. The luminous strands intertwined and became one, then widened to form a thin, translucent sheet. This new material draped itself over Tehan's body, conforming to his contours. It glowed faintly for a moment, then faded. Satisfied the protection spell was complete, Tehan grasped his staff once more and pushed gently on the door.

"Come in, my friend," said a rich, bass voice.

Alarmed at the unexpected words, Tehan moved back a few steps until his back was against the cool comfort of the opposite wall. He assumed a defensive crouch, staff held ready, scarcely daring to breathe as his eyes rapidly scanned the dim hall. What in all of Hela's realm was that?

A white mist flowed from beneath the heavy door in front of him. It coalesced into a muscular, barrel-chested being, nearly a man height tall. Yellowish-green pus oozed from the multitude of sores covering its translucent white skin. Its heart beat visibly, if erratically, beneath the creature's hyaline hide.

Its misshapen visage twisted into a sneer as three glowing ocher eyes focused intently, hungrily, on Tehan. "Ah, I see my dinner has arrived," said the beast in a sepulchral voice. Saliva dribbled from its misshapen mouth and the thing wheezed asthmatically. It lurched toward the hælán on thick legs too short for its body. The coarse-haired knuckles of the brute's hands scraped across the floor.

Tehan swung his staff in a wide arc, aiming for the creature's head. He missed. "It's either me or you," Tehan swung again, gritting his teeth, "and I'd prefer it to be you." This time the staff connected with the being, then passed through with little resistance.

It gave the hælán a malicious grin, revealing broken, rotten teeth. "I'm a Protector. You can't hurt me. Not with that little twig." It pointed a knotty finger at Tehan's staff.

"Then how about magick?" Tehan slammed the end of his staff to the floor and held it there, ignoring the fierce vibrations running its length. The metallic ring echoed throughout the passage. "Foilayn a mek alir," he growled. A rippling brazen sheet of energy spread from the tip of the stave in an ever-widening pool, stopping only when it covered the area between the creature and Tehan, forming a magickal moat.

Tehan lifted his staff from the floor. Resuming his defensive posture, the hælán waited, ready. The brute placed one club foot on the brazen sheet and yelped as arcane forces swept through its body. Growling in determination, the Protector advanced, ignoring the pain from each exact step.

"Molyne fatr pasm." It spoke the words slowly, evil lips curling into a mocking smile.

Tehan closed his eyes against the sudden dizziness running through his body. He put a hand to his forehead in a vain effort to quell the vertigo, and took a small step forward, nearly placing his foot on the energy sheet of his own creation. Then the stomach-wrenching feeling passed, and he opened his eyes once more. His mind registered the change immediately. No longer was he standing with his back to the wall. A teleportation spell! Tehan looked up just in time to see a bolt of lightning crackling toward him.

Snapping and popping, it struck the hælán in the chest, picking him up and slamming him back into the door. His protection spell absorbed most of the blast, preventing the bolt from killing him. Stunned, he slid down. Stars exploded in front of his eyes, vivid bursts of color against his blurred vision. Fighting the urge to pass into unconsciousness, Tehan struggled to his feet.

The hælán leaned against the door, unable to clear his groggy mind. He watched as the disproportionate hulk lumbered toward him. Tehan offered a prayer to Diance, asking for her divine help. The creature slowly faded, returning to its original misty form. Then it vanished. As did the energy sheet.

Tehan breathed a quick sigh of relief, then faced the adamantine inlaid door once more, his staff turning slowly beside him. Tehan turned, studying the empty hall behind him. Everything had returned to its condition before the appearance of the Protector. Diance be praised, thought Tehan.

"Enter," commanded the sonorous voice.

Unable to refuse the order, Tehan moved toward the door. This is all part of the test, he thought. But it is so. . . . No, it has to be part of Hyth Kisk. No matter how hard he tried to convince himself, Tehan's mind refused to accept the scenes as mere illusions; they were too real.

Placing only his fingertips on the door, Tehan pushed lightly. To his surprise, the door swung smoothly open on well-oiled hinges. Moving as quietly as possible, Tehan entered the room. He looked around and, seeing nothing, took a few more steps. The door swung shut behind him with an echoing bang. The elf flinched and whirled around, chestnut hair fanning out behind him.

With effort, he quieted his labored breathing and strained to listen. At first, he heard nothing. Then sounds of quiet sobs reached his sensitive ears. Tehan scanned the room quickly, searching for the source.

The cramped room contained an empty ceiling-high bookcase running the length of one wall, a cabriole-legged table, pushed up against the opposite wall, and four matching chairs. On the table lay an open book, and three candles burned in a golden candelabra behind it.

In the far corner, between the table and the bookcase, was a form the size of a child. Tehan walked cautiously over, leaning his staff against the nearby chair. What is a child doing in the testing? He knelt near the shivering body.

"What's wrong?" he asked gently.

"I . . . I've lost my father," said a small voice. She snuffled loudly. "I don't know where he went." The girl turned to look at the hælán, brushing away long white-blond hair. Wet lashes rimmed blue eyes set in a grubby, tear-stained face. She sniffed again, watching Tehan all the while.

"Come on. I'll help you find him."

"I don't know where he went." The girl covered her face with filthy hands. "We'll never find him," she continued, words muffled. She peeked at him through slightly spread fingers. Tehan held out a hand to her, offering to help the child rise.

Suddenly, she lunged at him, fingers curling into claws. Her nails gleamed wickedly in the dim, flickering light. Opening her mouth wider than should have been possible, she screeched at him. The discordant sound seemed to echo ceaselessly through the room, increasing in volume.

Resisting the urge to cover his ears, Tehan pushed himself back. One arm flailed, grasping for purchase and finding none. The other connected with a chair, giving him some measure of balance before being ripped away by the child-thing. Tehan lost the little stability he'd gained, falling heavily to the floor. In a desperate moment, the creature flung herself at him, landing partially on his legs. She clawed at him, trying to pull herself up, to reach his exposed face and throat. Tehan thrashed under the vicious onslaught, kicking and punching in an attempt to free himself.

Raising both hands in a useless endeavor to fend off his assailant, Tehan watched in horror as the previously innocent child transformed before his eyes. Her once pretty, if grimy, face twisted itself into a mask of unadulterated evil. Platinum hair melted into silver while unreflecting black seeped across her eyeballs, creating the look of dead, empty sockets. Fangs took the place of yellowed teeth. Chubby, rosy cheeks sunk into cavernous hollows and red lips pulled back, thinning until they disappeared. Sharp bone ridges pressed outward against the papery flesh, threatening to tear it and her face became nothing more than a grinning rictus.

Momentarily stunned by the sight, the hælán hesitated and the child-thing swiped at his face. Four bloody grooves appeared on Tehan's cheek surrounded by quickly swelling proud flesh. The thing shrieked maniacally at the success and attacked with renewed voracity. Scant inches from Tehan's face, the child-monster's fanged mouth gnashed hungrily. Bony fingers

dug into his shoulders, nails piercing the flesh as she struggled to pull ever closer.

Perspiration beaded Tehan's brow and his muscles quivered from the effort to keep the thing at bay. He groaned inwardly from the exertion. Since when do hæláns have to be this physically fit? Pain flamed in his cheek as drops of the child-monster's spittle landed in the wounds and he struggled not to waul.

Afraid of diverting his attention from the attacker, Tehan couldn't even pray for divine intervention. I'm in this alone, he suddenly realized. Fear threatened to take over. Summoning his courage and what little remained of his strength, Tehan bared his teeth at the child-monster

and shoved. Caught off-guard by the unforeseen assault, the child-thing shrieked as it flew back. The hælán scrambled hastily to his feet before opportunity vanished. He grabbed his staff from where he'd foolishly left it. Tehan's cheek throbbed and warmth ran from the grooves. Gingerly, he wiped it with his forearm, not wanting to lift a hand from his staff. His arm came away sticky with blood.

With silver hair streaming in a nonexistent wind, the thing opened its mouth and screeched again. Tehan winced at the earsplitting noise and ground his teeth in an effort to quell the vibrations felt there. As he watched, the beast's arms elongated, followed by its fingers. All joints melted away, leaving tentacled appendages. The creature waved them at the hælán, testing his defenses. A forked tongue flicked from between curved fangs, dripping clear yellowish fluid. The liquid hissed and spit where it landed, quickly dissolving the stone.

Great. Just what I need. An acid-drooling, shape-shifting child-monster. I've got to find another line of work.

The tentacles whipped wildly, slapping and smacking against walls, furniture and floors. A chair shattered under the onslaught and the table groaned ominously. Then, the tentacles streaked toward Tehan, slither-scraping against the stone floor.

The hælán swung savagely and connected with almost bone-jarring force. He barely managed to knock the slithering appendage aside. Tehan felt a small amount of satisfaction as a smoking mark appeared. It howled in pain, the sound echoing off the walls in the small room and the stench of burning ink filled the air.

Distracted by the minute victory, Tehan failed to notice the other tentacle. It wrapped firmly around one leg and he was jerked off his feet, breath forced from his lungs upon landing. The creature dragged the hælán across the floor. In a matter of seconds, Tehan lie at the creature's feet, knee burning from the force exerted on the joint. The thing's tentacle constricted, squeezing and crushing flesh and bone.

Tehan ground his teeth against the pain and readied his staff for a final assault. He held it like a club, intending to smash the creature's skull. Praying fervently that none of the dripping acid would land on him, Tehan awkwardly swung the staff at the thing's head. It managed to dodge the futile effort, spraying acid in the process. Several drops landed on his hand. His skin bubbled and foamed and he sucked air attempting to quell the intense pain as red blisters rose then burst. The staff tumbled from the hælán's uninjured hand and rolled just out of reach.

Weaponless, Tehan swung at the child-monster with bare hands. His jabs never connected. The child-thing had vanished, leaving the healer alone and in pain.

Where did it go? He sat up and looked around. No sign of the creature, save for a few pitted stones, existed. Diance be praised.

Groggily, he got to his feet and retrieved his staff. Leaning against a chair for balance, Tehan breathed deeply. He drew himself to his full height and pushed away from the support and

limped heavily toward the door. No time to heal myself, he thought. No time. Mentally, he repeated those two words in perfect cadence with his limp.

A slight scratch sounded behind him and a fireball flared, speeding toward Tehan's unprotected back. It crackled and snapped as it left the darkest corner of the room. Tehan's heard the flaming ball and his elven reflexes allowed him to react quickly. He dodged in time, feeling the searing heat from the fireball as it passed by him. It hit the stone wall and extinguished with an air-sucking whoosh.

Tehan stifled a sharp cry of pain as he landed on his injured leg, knee popping under the force. Biting his lip and drawing blood, the hælán stood, balancing on his good leg. The sharp ache in his lip dulled the incessant throbbing in his leg and Tehan looked wildly about, searching for the source of the attack.

Another fireball sped toward him, much faster and larger than the first. He had no time to react. He felt the incredible power behind it even before the blazing orb struck. The magickal strength squirmed over him, raising the hair on his arms and the back of his neck. The fiery sphere struck the hælán full in the chest and exploded upon impact, wrapping him in a shroud of orange flame. Though weakened severely after the lightning bolt and the previous fireball, Tehan's protection spell still dispersed some of the magickal energy before fading. But not enough.

His long, white robes caught fire, burning with a fierce intensity. His skin blistered and turned black. Pain wracked his body. Undamaged, his staff fell from his smoldering hand and struck the floor with the ring of metal. Tehan heard the sizzling and popping of his own skin as he fell to the floor. I apologize, Diance. I have failed you. Oily, black smoke drifted lazily toward the ceiling as the hælán's eyes closed.

\* \* \*

Tehan awoke to a prickling pain racing throughout his body. Struggling, he sat up and looked around, surprised to still be alive.

At least, I think I'm alive, he thought.

A light, nearly colorless blue sky stretched overhead and sand, bleached white from the merciless rays of the sun, reached out to the horizon in all directions. Sweat poured off his body as the hælán labored to stand. Panting in the stifling heat, Tehan examined himself with torturous effort.

His once gleaming white robes were now torn and dingy gray. The charred edges fell away in ashes at the slightest touch. His leather boots, now cracked and brittle, provided little protection from the burning sands. He noticed, however, the injuries sustained from the fireball had healed, leaving only raised, velvety scars on his hands and arms. The healer's leg ached dully and raised purple welts dotted the abused flesh. Tehan touched his scratched cheek. Thick yellow pus and blood coated his fingertips.

"Where am I?"

"You are in the realm of the forsaken," lied a smooth, almost satiny voice.

The sound slipped over the healer, enveloping him. Tehan turned, stumbling in the shifting sands, and found himself facing a pale man with blue-black hair. Impeccably clean black robes fell in orderly folds around his thin frame. Pointed ears gave away his elven heritage and red lips stretched into a polite smile while a long-nailed hand loosely grasped a gnarled hemlock staff. "Though why you were brought here, when you worship Diance and she answers you, one can only speculate."

Tehan looked at the elven male suspiciously before demanding, "Who are you? How did I get here?"

"Who I am is not important. All you need know is, I am trapped here, like you."

Tehan looked at him through narrowed eyes. His voice sounds familiar. Have I heard it before? The hælán tried to remember. "How do we get out?"

"By working to help each other. It's the only way."

An odd feeling came over Tehan at the elven wizard's words. Work together, he thought. Work with a Black Robe? But it's the only way to get back to my realm of existence. Can I get back to my realm?

How do you know it's the only way? argued the other half of the hælán's brain. That's what he says. Can you ever trust the words of a Black Robe?

Tehan shook his head to quiet the silent argument in his mind. "How do I know you speak truth?"

The wizard paused to study Tehan, eyebrows arching questioningly. "How do you know I do not?"

"Why would I want to work with a black robe?"

"There is no black robe here," Elidor said innocently. "The heat must be affecting your eyesight. It can do that on occasion." He gave the healer a placating smile.

Disbelieving, Tehan rubbed his eyes. When he looked again, Elidor wore robes of gleaming white. "How did—"

"I did nothing," interrupted Elidor, looking Tehan in the eye.

"I . . . I don't know." Tehan looked around, trying to recall something, but not sure what.

Elidor smiled inwardly. The pitiful fool.

"He can be a powerful ally," came a deep, yet distinctly feminine voice, heard only by Elidor. "His future, and yours, are joined."

"Come. We must be on our way." Confidently, the wizard took the lead.

Tehan followed Elidor, his feelings of uneasiness growing stronger with each step. At first, the hælán had paid close attention to the unchanging surroundings, hoping to find something, anything, to tell him they were progressing. But nothing differed in the environment. Endless white sand stretching out to meet a nearly colorless sky far on the horizon. On every horizon. Soon losing all sense of time and direction, his attention wandered.

The ragged hem of his robe had long since been torn away to make movement in the soft, shifting sands easier and cooler. With each footfall, Tehan sank several inches into the desert sands, the hard particles trickling into his boots, abrading his skin. It did little good to empty his boots. They merely filled again.

Sweat plastered Tehan's long, chestnut hair to his skull while the sun burned any exposed skin. Biting insects landed on bare skin at every opportunity, absorbing precious liquids from his body. How do these insects survive without water? His tongue felt like a lump of cotton, swollen and dry. Tehan tried to coax moisture from it by licking his cracked lips, but his tongue only stuck to them.

Several times, the hælán attempted to cast a spell to bring ground water to the surface, but only met with failure. He desperately wanted to lie down and die, to end this terrible suffering. Exhausted, he could cast no more spells, and the test no longer mattered. All that did was ending the agony. Yet something wouldn't let the hælán quit. So, tired and dehydrated, yet stubbornly clutching his staff, Tehan went on.

Up ahead, Elidor walked easily, almost floating above the burning desert. He showed no ill effects from either the shifting sands or the blistering sun. No sweat poured down his face, no irritating bits of sand fell into his boots or clung to his velvety robes. Even the wizard's pale skin did not burn as Tehan's golden skin had.

Elidor felt Tehan's growing uneasiness and reluctance to follow. He slowed to the hælán's pace and walked beside him.

After a little while, Tehan spoke, croaking weakly. "Are you sure we've progressed?"

"One can never be sure of anything here," replied the wizard smoothly, without trace of exhaustion.

How comforting, thought Tehan, struggling onward despite his injured leg.

"You're welcome to lean on me. After all, we belong to the same Order, you and I, and I need you as much as you need me."

After watching Elidor's easy progress, Tehan found the comment hard to believe. "If you truly were a white robe, you would know we are taught to lean only on ourselves for support." Standing up a little taller, Tehan valiantly resumed his efforts through the ever-shifting sands. With an amused smile on his pale features, Elidor followed.

"I don't think the teachings meant for you to kill yourself if help is available."

Tehan glared at him. "You don't act like any white robe belonging to my Order. If you were, you would know one interprets the teachings once and lives by them, unswervingly and faithfully. They are not open to discussion."

Tehan had no way of knowing how much farther they walked before his legs refused to go on. Wavering, he managed to stay upright for only a few seconds after stopping. Then his knees buckled and he collapsed. Even the hælán's precious silver staff no longer had the power to stand of its own accord.

Elidor saw Tehan fall and moved to help him. "No," whispered the wizard. "I will not allow you to die."

Tehan's head lolled heavily to one side as Elidor hauled the hælán to his feet. The icy coldness of Elidor's hands on Tehan's burned, blistered skin brought him around to delirious consciousness.

Elidor said, "Look, up ahead. Can you see it? It's the edge of the realm. Just a little further, and we've made it."

With difficulty, Tehan picked up his staff and allowed the wizard to lead him, taking step after clumsy, stumbling step. A vague whispering in Tehan's mind told him to resist, that something wasn't right, but he had not strength left to do so. It can't be this easy to leave the realm of the forsaken, can it? His thought faded into oblivion as quickly as it had come.

Tehan paid no heed to the bone-chilling cold radiating from the elven wizard, other than feeble acknowledgment of it being a welcome relief from the scorching heat.

Hælán and wizard passed through a wall of cerise fog and into a cool, dark cavern. Tehan could see nothing at first, his eyes being used to the glare of the desert. He sniffed the air, inhaling the scent of damp soil mixed with the mustiness of calcium and limestone deposits. Under the strong smell of the cavern, the hælán caught the faint spicy odor of spell components along with the sickening stench of decay. "Where am I?"

"You're out of the realm of the forsaken. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"That doesn't answer my question," said Tehan. This isn't right, he thought. Why isn't it right? Why can't I think of it?

"Very well, since you wish to know the specifics. You are back on Darkanth, in Kyritia to be exact."

Tehan, however, sensed the evil around him. Like a heavy, wet blanket, the negative feeling smothered him. Instinctively, he backed up, bumping hard into a black granite font. He yelped in pain as his hand slipped into the basin, and the unhallowed water further burned his abused flesh.

Slowly, Tehan's vision returned, and he could discern dim outlines of objects. Carefully, looking around, the hælán studied his surroundings. Seeing the ingredients required to work the dark magicks, the blood magicks, Tehan knew where he was. Black crept over the white of Elidor's robes, swirling and spiraling. The luxurious fabric surrounded Elidor's thin frame, wrapping him in night.

Watching in horrified fascination, Tehan suspected the wizard's intentions. "I'll never wear the black robes."

Elidor looked at the hælán and growled. "You don't have to change sides to be of use to me."

"I'll never help you. Not as long as I live." He readied his staff and waited for the wizard to attack.

"I am not here to fight you," Elidor said smoothly. "I don't even really want to harm you." He walked toward Tehan, the swirling hem of his robes giving the illusion of levitation. "I just want to help you realize the powers and rewards the Order of the Dark Hæláns can offer you. And you would wield immense influence as you would be the first of the Dark Hæláns in many, many cycles. Certainly the benefits are more than your Order can offer." Elidor moved forward, arms open in a placating manner.

"That depends on your perspective," Tehan growled. He swung at the wizard. The staff passed through Elidor's body. His image wavered and rippled before reforming into the illusion of solidity.

"You're nothing more than a legerdemain. I've seen this trick before and I'm not fooled by it. Why are you so afraid to face me in the flesh?"

"A . . . afraid? Of you? Me? Oh that is funny, little hælán. That is funny." Elidor laughed insanely. Then, ending as quickly as he'd begun, Elidor asked, "Why should I be afraid of you?"

"If you're not, then why aren't you here?"

"We shall see who's afraid, little healer. Yes, we shall see." Elidor's image faded as he spoke and Tehan found himself standing in a sylvan glade, silver staff gleaming.

Looking around, Tehan breathed a sigh of relief. He tapped the end of his staff three times on the ground while repeating the words, "Cout mehg nyalka iutyil."

A small, clear spring bubbled up from the soil. Leaving his staff standing of its own accord, Tehan knelt by the pool. He splashed the water on his face and head, letting it trickle down his neck and back, cooling the painful sunburn. Searing pain shot through the side of his face as water ran over the festering wounds and he gasped. When the prickling sting diminished to a dull throb, Tehan carefully washed away the worst of the sand and grime, then cupped the cool water in his hands. But even as he drank, Tehan could feel the forest changing around him.

The warm breeze became a cold, biting wind. Green grass withered and turned brown before his eyes. The gaily colored flowers grew old and died, their sweet fragrances, cinnamon, apple and tea rose faded, whisked away by the wind's frosty breath.

Tehan turned his attention back to the spring, now nothing more than a murky, stagnant puddle. The small amount of water in his cupped hands burned. Quickly, he parted them, letting the putrid fluid drain back, then wiped his hands as best he could on the remains of his robes. His stomach roiled suddenly, forcing up the putrefactive contents and Tehan vomited violently.

The foul stench rising from the pool stung Tehan's eyes, forcing him to stand and turn away. Wiping the tears away with the sore back of one hand, Tehan grasped his stave and looked around.

Gone were the brilliant greens, reds and yellows of the leaves, leaving behind only the gnarled trunks and bare branches. Jagged, twisted limbs clawed at the rapidly darkening sky, as if trying to rise above the death surrounding them. Remains of the once bobbing, dipping flowers crunched under Tehan's feet as he walked. Ominous-looking clouds rolled in, pregnant with rain and thunder crashed overhead. Scarlet lightning split the heavens, slicing through the blackness and wind howled through the dead forest, sounding like lost souls. The clouds burst and rain poured down, cutting Tehan's visibility to barely a man height ahead of him. Then, as quickly as it began, the storm abated, leaving only the biting wind and lightning behind.

Tehan shivered violently in his dripping robes but continued to walk, leaning heavily on his staff. At the edge of the glade, he found a little-used path and decided to follow it rather than fight through the dense forest toward Elvaria.

As he walked, Tehan realized the forest was quiet now, too quiet. Even his own footfalls made no sound. Suddenly, a mournful cry erupted from somewhere close behind the hælán, causing the back of his neck to tingle. A similar call answered the wail, followed by another and yet another. He turned to look behind him, and saw nothing. Then the noise shifted behind him again, but no matter how often he changed positions, the moaning always stayed at his back.

What in all of Kyritia is that, he wondered, heart pounding. He forced himself to calm down and listen as the puling continued. "Coyos," he said to himself finally. "It's nothing more than a pack of coyos." Tehan walked once more, following the twisting, turning trail deeper into the dead forest.

His eyes caught a movement ahead on the trail and he stopped, watching. A sleek shape drifted through the shadows, slipping from one pool of darkness to the next. Thick black clouds

obscured most of the light from the two moons, silvery Beathadah and blood red Nekros. The minuscule amount of pinkish light leaking through the clouds didn't allow Tehan a clear view of his surroundings. He widened his eyes in an attempt to gather more of the inadequate moonshine, but still failed to see what lay ahead. Moving slowly, Tehan continued along the trail. If there's some foul creature lying in wait for me, it'll attack whether I stand still or move on, he reasoned.

Then Beathadah broke free of the clinging clouds, the full brilliance of the orb shining down on the hælán, and the creature. Moonshine glinted off verdant scales and ivory teeth, off strands of dripping saliva and long claws held above the ground. Deep black eyes absorbed the silver light, reflecting none. Lips retreated from the teeth of the blunt maw, curling into a snarl. The sleek body rested on four well-muscled legs, and its short, thick tail lashed in anticipation.

Slowly, the creature rose onto its hind legs, standing half a man height above the hælán. Tehan looked up at the beast in awe. They're not supposed to be that big.

Its forelegs spread, as if inviting the hælán to hug it, and reached for Tehan. The coyo's wicked claws, held upward away from the ground when walking, fell forward, ready to rend its prey.

It advanced.

## Chapter 2

Arden's exclamation resounded in the small room. "He's done what?" Tehan's father glared at the old seer.

"I said, Elidor's crossed through the barrier and entered Tehan's Hyth Kisk," replied Kasare, turning to look at the Grandmaster. "And he's taken the garb of a white robe."

Quiet for a few moments, Arden thought about this new turn of events. Narrowing his eyes, he gave Kasare a hard look. Arden took in the wispy, gray hair, the hunched back and the weather-beaten face. "Physically or mentally?"

A confused look appeared on the older elf's tired face. "Physically or mentally what?"

"How did the wizard enter?"

Kasare paused for a long moment. "Physically," he finally answered.

Arden paced the sparsely decorated room, an action of frustrated impotence and directionless animosity. I don't know with whom to be more angry, Elidor for succeeding where others have failed or with the Guardians for failing to curtail this Black Robe's efforts.

"That feat is supposed to be impossible to accomplish," said Arden, continuing to pace with hands clasped firmly behind his back.

"It would seem nothing is impossible for this Black Robe." Kasare turned back to the small pool of water held in a gray marble font.

Arden stopped behind Kasare, staring until the elf turned around. As the Grandmaster spoke, his steely gaze seemed to burn holes into the seer's body. "You and the rest of the Guardians were supposed to ensure crossing the barrier remained impossible." When Kasare failed to answer, Arden continued. "Now what am I to do? Elidor has discovered a way to enter the Hyth Kisk. How are we, rather you, going to stop others from following where he leads?"

"There is only one solution I can see," said Kasare. "We must put an end to Elidor." Kasare's green eyes met and held the hard gaze of the Grandmaster. "And pray no others learn of his accomplishment."

"Dispose of a black-robe," Arden said ruefully. "You say it so easily, Kasare, as if it's a task one does every day." The old Guardian said nothing. "And how do you propose to rid Kyritia, much less Darkanth, of Elidor? How does one kill a wizard? Especially one rumored to be protected by Hela?"

"Provided your son survives the encounter—"

Arden interrupted the old elf. "What do you mean provided my son survives the encounter? What aren't you telling me, Old One? Have you foreseen Elidor's intentions?"

"No," he said, turning back to the pool. "But we must assume the worst." Kasare paused, gazing deeply into the still water. "If your son survives, let him go after Elidor. Let Tehan slay the black-robe as a task of worthiness."

"What! That's madness. Tehan survives only to be sent to his death?" Arden exclaimed. A thought came to Arden then and he studied Kasare pensively. "Or would Elidor even kill him? He went to great lengths to enter Tehan's test. Why?"

"I don't know," admitted Kasare, not meeting Arden's gaze. "I don't pretend to know what Elidor's schemes are. That's why he needs to be stopped." The seer looked up. "And since Elidor appears to have taken an interest in Tehan, he should be the one to go."

"Your logic makes no sense. Why would I send the object of Elidor's desire to him? Alone."

"He would not have to go alone. Choose others to journey with him."

Arden brightened with Kasare's suggestion. "Yes, I could send two or three of the more experienced hælans with him."

"No," said Kasare sharply. Sharper than he'd intended. "No, if Tehan is to use this as a task of worthiness, he cannot receive help from those in his own order. The victory, or failure, would not be truly his."

"It wouldn't be truly his if others journeyed with him anyway," argued Arden.

"Any doubts of his success would not be questioned openly if his friends went instead."

Arden knew Kasare spoke truth. Tehan was not experienced enough to go alone, but sending others from the tribe would arouse suspicions of Tehan's skills. "Why should I agree to such insanity?" Arden gripped the back of a chair to steady himself. "Why should I agree to be the executioner of my son and his companions? I should send the Guardians after Elidor. They're the ones who failed in their duty." The Grandmaster stood and paced again.

Kasare winced at the harsh words and tried harder to convince Arden. "Little is known of Elidor, other than his arrogance. He may reveal a weakness to your son, one which can be exploited," explained Kasare calmly. "You must have faith in Tehan. He is becoming a powerful hælán and may someday surpass even you in ability." He stared intensely at the Grandmaster, watching. "However, he needs to prove his power, not only to you and the Council, but to himself." The seer paused, noting the indecision on Arden's face.

"I could invoke the power of the Guardians to make you agree," he said softly, neatly delivering the verbal kill. "Not even a Grandmaster can go against the Council. We decide who restores the Balance, you know that. And the Council will choose Tehan, even if you choose not to send him." Kasare's unsaid words echoed in the room. We've done it before.

Arden thought for a few moments, absently stroking his chin. What is so significant about Tehan? Why is this quest so important to you, Old One? He still toyed with the idea of trying to send the Guardians. Their vote could be overridden if all the other Grandmasters agreed. But that would take time, which he didn't have. "What would I tell Tehan to make him agree?" he said, more to himself. And why would I want to? Arden sighed heavily, defeated, then strode over to the scrying pool. Because I don't have any choice. "Where is he now?"

"Elidor has taken him to the Flamelands."

"Tehan's where?" Before Kasare could answer, Arden continued. "So, Elidor can manipulate environments as well," he said grimly, more a statement than a question. Arden lowered his head, elbows resting on the font's edge and fingers locked together behind his neck. "The Flamelands. Of all places, why the Flamelands?"

Several long moments passed before Arden looked up again. The Grandmaster stared at the gray-robed elf beside him. "What could I possibly say to my son that would encourage him to willingly go forth to his own death?" Inefficacy colored his words.

"Your son shows great promise," Kasare reminded Arden. "Perchance Tehan will not be walking to his death. This feat is not impossible."

"I remember you saying such words decades ago." Arden drew a ragged breath as he thought of his other two sons; the brothers Tehan had never known, would never have a chance to know. "You said similar words before sending Jaylen to his death," the Grandmaster continued.

Jaylen with the long blond hair and mirthful brown eyes, high cheekbones and fine, aquiline nose. He had looked so regal, so aristocratic in his white hælans' robes as he'd set off, a little too eagerly, to battle a much younger Elidor. Alone. Jaylen had returned a few weeks later, slung over his horse. The young elf's wrists and ankles had been bound together to insure against his sliding off the spirited beast. Jaylen had been stripped of his elegant robes, clad instead in the attire of the common peasant; an insult to one of his status.

Purplish-red blood dripped from the multiple avulsions and severe lacerations on his arms and legs. The life-giving liquid sluiced along his arms, ending in a thin, broken stream as it dripped off his the remains of his hands; Jaylen's long, delicate fingers had been severed, leaving only the palm. Thirsty soil quickly soaked up the still-warm fluid. More blood, oozing from several deep gashes on his skull, plastered Jaylen's fine blond hair to his head. Glistening white bone shone through the two deepest wounds.

Arden shook his head violently in an effort to clear the picture from his mind before the memory went any further. But the remembrance would not be so easily banished. Only after a few deep breaths and a conscious effort to think of pleasant images did the horrid picture finally melt into the shadowy pools of his mind. He still wondered why the blood hadn't dried, what had kept it running.

No sooner had Arden banished the image of Jaylen when thoughts of Benek entered.

There had, of course, been others beside the two eldest sons of the Grandmaster, but those deaths were not as well remembered. None of the bodies of the seven other young hælans were as appalling or gruesome. The corpses were perfectly composed, each coming home in the bed of a wagon rather than tied to the back of a horse. No blood oozed from any of the seven other bodies. Rather, they had looked as if merely sleeping, ready to awaken at any moment.

Jaylen's death had been undoubtedly bloody, but Arden could face the body of his eldest, albeit reluctantly. Benek's death, however, had made Arden and the other attendants look away in horror and disgust.

The pale gray horse bearing the body had trotted into Elvaria, stopping in the center of the elven village. Arden, along with the Guardians, had been near the heart of Elvaria, discussing Elidor. Grandmaster Arden heard the ringing of hooves against cobblestones and turned to face the horse.

He had seen the body of his son draped over the back of the pale, dapple gray steed. Similar to Jaylen, Benek had been bound wrists to ankles in order to keep the body from slipping off the horse. Benek's long almond-colored hair hung down, hiding his face.

One of the Guardians had stepped forward and, grabbing a handful of hair, lifted the boy's head. The Guardian dropped it again, almost immediately, but not before Arden had a chance to see his son's face.

Benek's skin was ashen gray, taut against the bones of his narrow face. His eyes, covered in the gray-blue cataract shroud of death, were shriveled deeply into their sockets. Even in the short span of time before Benek's head thumped solidly against the horse's saddle, Arden saw a shiny green carrion scarab crawl from between his son's unnaturally dark lips, parted forever in a silent scream.

The color had drained from the Grandmaster's face at the sight of Elidor's calling card. He turned away in disgust, as did the fourteen Guardians. When Arden thought he could face the sight again, he turned back to the horse and its grisly load, ordering the Guardians to do the same. An Initiate of the Council of the Guardians had been elected to free the corpse.

With no knife available, trying to untie the heavy ropes without touching the cold, clammy skin proved to be a hard task for the young elven male. Finally, the ropes had fallen to the ground and the Initiate straightened up. He grabbed hold of the hælán's robes and pulled Benek off, spooking the animal in the process. The horse shied and sidestepped out from under the body. Benek's remains fell faster than anticipated and the young Guardian had been nearly pulled off his feet.

Benek's body landed heavily on the cobblestones. Struggling, the Initiate rolled the body over. Blood spattered robes fell open and Benek's hands were now clasped together on his gray, naked chest. Underneath the hands, Arden had seen letters burned into the flesh.

He'd ordered the Initiate to move his son's hands. The young Guardian pulled the death-stiffened hands apart and a purplish, pulpy mass fell to the ground.

"What is that?" Kasare had demanded.

The young Guardian poked at the object with his staff and congealed blood spurted, landing in a quivering lump. Paling, the elven male had looked up at the Grandmaster before answering. "I believe it's his heart."

Arden had spoken up then. "How . . . how did he . . . remove it?" Arden swallowed hard. "No, I don't wish to know," he'd said, looking at the unopened, burned chest. Silently, Arden had read the elven word scorched onto his son's chest.

"Ghuati." Beware.

Arden shook his head viciously to clear the thoughts from his mind and the room came back into focus.

"You realize," said Kasare in a restrained voice, "that in the end, your protests, or those of Tehan, won't matter. He is going on this quest. It is the will of the Council of the Guardians."

Arden glared at Kasare. Then, knowing any further protests would be in vain, he looked into the scrying pool. Unable to "see," Arden quietly asked, "What's happening now?"

"What's happening, Kasare," demanded Arden. "What has Elidor done with my son?"

"I . . . I don't know yet, Grandmaster. The vision has gone dark and I can't--"

Arden held his hand up to halt the desperate rambling. "I don't want to hear excuses, Kasare. If you can't track Tehan's progress anymore, then end the Hyth Kisk."

"Wait! I've found him." Kasare looked into the brightly lit pool, surprised.

"Where is he?" Arden asked, joining Kasare in front of the gray marble font.

"He's . . . he's--"

"Where is he?" roared Arden.

"He's in the Aconite Forest," Kasare whispered, "facing a monstrous coyo."

"This has gone far enough. Bring him out, now!"

### Chapter 3

Tehan awoke slowly, vaguely aware of the narrow boardlike cot beneath him. Stiff limbs protested as he sat up and looked around. Golden fingers of sunlight filtered through the shuttered window and crept under the door of the hut.

Next to his cot stood a small table, an unlit tallow candle in the center. A wooden chair was partially pulled away from the table, as if someone had been sitting in it, then rose and carelessly pushed it back.

Groaning, Tehan forced his aching muscles to move and he rose, one hand on the edge of the table for balance. After a few moments, he moved stiffly across the small room and opened the door.

Storm-bright sunshine, harsh against the gray-black thunderheads and nearly crystalline in its intensity streamed through the village. Tehan stood in its pleasant warmth, letting it force the lingering aches and pains to relinquish their hold. He sent a silent prayer to Diance, thanking her for the benign sunlight then went in search of his father.

"Tehan," called a feminine voice. He turned and found himself facing his stepmother. "Tehan, go put some decent robes on," ordered Yaera. "You can't go walking around Elvaria looking like that. Why, you're not even wearing boots." Self-consciously, she scanned the area around them. "I hope no one saw you."

Tehan looked down at the remains of his robes. Delicately, he fingered the charred edges with a scarred hand. The blackened fabric fell away leaving a raveling hem barely long enough to be considered decent.

"A gift from the test."

"I thought it was a mental test, that you never physically entered," she said.

"It was. At least, that's what I was understood."

"And what happened to your face? You're sunburnt." She reached up with a dainty hand and turned his head slightly. "Where did you get these scratches? It looks like you rolled in a sweetbriar patch. Those will never heal cleanly." She gingerly touched one of the swollen, still-seeping wounds. "You'll keep those scars." Yaera gave him a disapproving look. Tehan wisely kept his mouth shut, avoiding the brewing argument.

Yaera glanced down and emitted a horrified gasp. She grabbed one of his hands and scrutinized it, ignoring Tehan's wince of pain. "And your hands. What happened to them? If I didn't know better, I'd swear you used them to ward off a fireball."

"I did."

She looked up at her stepson. "I thought this was supposed to be a mental test," she repeated.

"As did I."

"Then what happened to you?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out." Tehan started walking toward the council building.

"Where are you going?" Yaera sounded alarmed.

"To find out what happened." Tehan turned and held up his hands. "I just said that."

"Can't you at least change your clothes first? It won't do for others to see the Grandmaster's son in this," she waved her hands, searching for the right word, "condition."

Tehan grimaced inwardly at his stepmother's superficiality. "All right, I'll go change first. My questions can wait if it will spare my father embarrassment."

Smiling, Yaera slipped her arm through his and escorted him to their family hut. "And you need to eat."

Tehan looked at his stepmother as they walked, noting the lines of worry disfiguring her otherwise lovely face. Too bad it's not for me.

Nearly nine hundred cycles old, Yaera appeared centuries younger. No gray streaked her amber hair and no wrinkles, other than fine laugh lines, dared to mar her near-perfect complexion. A faint scar ran the length of her right cheek, sustained when one of Tehan's spells went awry in his

younger, more inexperienced days. He winced at the memory. The hælán saw the concerned look in her deep-set, golden eyes. A frown touched her pink lips, perfect roses in her porcelain face.

Tehan moved stiffly into his room to change. He sat on the soft mattress, contemplating lying down. Through the closed door, he heard the muffled sounds of Yaera bustling about.

Stifling a groan, Tehan stood and removed his ruined clothes. He poured water from the ewer into his wash basin and soaked a washing cloth in it. Wringing it out, Tehan gingerly wiped ash and soot from his sunburned skin, cautiously avoiding his cheek. He pulled clean robes off the wooden peg. Slipping them over his head, Tehan winced as the soft material caught on his rough, cracked skin. He reached for a jar of strong-smelling salve on his bedside table. Opening it, he wrinkled his nose at the sharp scent and scooped out a generous amount. Rubbing his hands vigorously together, the hælán worked the stiff cream into his hands, then rubbed most of his face. His eyes watered from the fumes and he sniffed, looking for a cloth to wipe his nose. Finding none, he picked up his previously discarded clothing. Tehan draped the burned robes over the end of his bedframe and moved into the common room.

Yaera stood at the counter cutting vegetables. Broth boiled gently in a large kettle hanging over the cookfire. The hælán pulled a chair away from the table, careful not to let the legs scrape. Yaera turned to add the pieces to the pot. "Tehan, you've changed your clothes. Good." She gave him a smile of approval as vegetable chunks splashed into the broth. "I have some stew already made. It's from last night, but it's still good." Yaera spooned some from a smaller pot kept warm by the fire. She handed Tehan the beaten metal plate and a wooden spoon. Then she set a basket of bread on the table along with a wooden cup of fruit nectar.

"Would you like some more?" asked Yaera.

Tehan looked around the cluttered kitchen, confused. Who is she speaking to? There's no one else here.

Just then, a blue-robed figure sat up in one of the chairs. The table had hidden her bent figure from Tehan's view.

"Gailia?" asked Tehan moving to his chair.

"Oh," said Yaera, looking at her stepson. "I forgot to tell you she was here."

Tehan sat. "What are you doing in Elvaria?" He studied the renegade magus. Ah, Gailia. You haven't changed in three cycles. Tehan noticed his heart beating a little faster as he watched the magus. The hælán took a deep breath and let it out slowly, concentrating on slowing his rapid heartbeat. He looked at Gailia's face, having trouble meeting her haunted blue eyes. Instead, he studied her face. With those high cheekbones and fine blonde hair, I'd swear she had elven blood if I didn't know better.

"I'm here because your father summoned me. Kyreol is here too."

Tehan looked around the room. "Where is he?"

"Outside," answered Yaera. "He'll be back in soon. Now eat."

Tehan ate as if starving. "Why would my father summon you?" he asked around a mouthful of stew. Tehan swallowed. "What need of you does he have?" He drained his cup of fruit nectar and Yaera wordlessly refilled it.

Gailia shrugged her shoulders. "The summons mentioned no clear reason. I was merely instructed to come here and explanations would be made."

Tehan finished his second plateful of stew. "Are Darak and Anton here also?" he asked as he spooned more onto his plate.

Gailia nodded. "Somewhere in the village, I suspect. I saw them earlier. Apparently they received the same vague summons I did."

The door opened just then and Tehan looked up from his plate.

Kyreol Amaranthe, the blond half-elf, walked in. He swung his broadsword around off his back and sat wordlessly at the head of the table, a leader's place. Not that I would expect anything less of him, Tehan thought. He's always been a leader. With shoulders wider than the chair's back, the warrior rested uncomfortably against it. The hilt of his sword rested near his cheek and his arms were crossed across the scabbard, resting lightly. His dark blond hair had been pulled back and tied at the nape of his neck with a leather thong. The hælán smiled as his golden eyes met the warrior's deep blue ones. The forced smile wrinkled his tanned, sun-aged face. It did not reach his eyes.

Yaera placed a cup of nectar in front of him.

Kyreol thanked her with a nod of his head and took a small sip. "What is going on?" he asked quietly. He set the cup down harder than he intended. Some of the liquid sloshed onto the table, belying his calm demeanor.

Yaera quickly wiped up the spill then retreated. She resumed chopping vegetables and adding them to the simmering stock.

"We don't know yet," answered Gailia. "Tehan knows less than we do. He didn't even know his father had sent for the four of us."

Kyreol shifted in his seat and the chair groaned in protest. "I have a really bad feeling about this."

He was about to say more when a knock sounded at the door, interrupting the warrior.

"You finish eating," instructed Yaera. She wiped her hands on a clean rag and opened the door, using her body to block Tehan from outside view.

"Arden set me to find Tehan," said the messenger. "When he wasn't in the testing hut, they thought he might be here."

"He is. Come in." Yaera opened the door wider in invitation.

Seeing Tehan seated at the table, the messenger hurried over. "I have a message from your father. He wishes to speak with you right away, about your Hyth Kisk." The elven woman looked at Gailia. "You are to come also."

"What about Darak and Anton?" asked Tehan.

"They are already in the meeting hut."

Warrior, hælán and magus stood to leave. Tehan glanced at Gailia. "When are you going to add the rest of your robes?" he joked, referring to her uncharacteristically short attire. The hem of her cerulean robes fell several handspans above her knee-length leather boots, revealing where her modesty began.

Gailia noticed his interest and smiled. She cleared her throat, drawing the hælán's attention away from her legs. "Why should I wear traditional ankle-length robes? They just trip me up and I am not going to be killed because tradition got in the way."

Yaera gave Gailia a disapproving look as the three left.

Following the messenger, the group hurried to a wooden building near the heart of the small village.