

World of Zaylyn #1: Quest For The Sword of Anthrowst
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CHAPTER 1 = VORDIN

Vordin was fifteen and an only child. He had a mother and father who loved him dearly and they lived a happy and peaceful life together in the village of Nilnont. One day that happiness violently ended.

On this day, Vordin had spent most of the morning in his room trying to solve his latest puzzle box which he received the month before. He was wearing a grey tunic with his brown pants and a well-worn pair of brown leather shoes. His hair was a light brown and he wore it long at shoulder length. As usual, his hair was tied back at the base of his neck with a strip of leather.

As Vordin went about his usual activities, he was unaware such horrors existed and that such an ordinary day could bring such terror and so abruptly.

Vordin had been at the edge of the forest on the hilltop, when it had happened. Just below him, at the bottom of this small hill lay his village, Nilnont. He had been passing the time away as he waited for his mother to finish preparing dinner. He had made a nuisance of himself by snatching samples of the whipped potatoes with his finger and had been sent out of the house until the dinner was ready.

It had been a warm and pleasant day, still being the beginning of autumn. Sunset was approaching and Vordin had been watching the horizon. He could see the road which made its way over the grassy hills and then up to Nilnont. He knew that this road also continued up through the forest, eventually winding up and over the mountains into the valley beyond. Dee'ellkka Valley was its name.

The vibrant colors of the sunset were incredibly beautiful. There were wonderful shades of red, orange, pink, and yellow. He had said to himself that he ought to come up to the hill more often to watch the sunset, but he knew that he would probably be too preoccupied with other things to actually do so. Then, as he watched, he had noticed a black mass which appeared to flow over the hills out from the horizon.

He hadn't known what to think of it, his mind puzzling over what he was seeing. As the mass got closer, he had realized that he was not seeing one large mass, but many black shapes.

Something was heading toward Nilnont. Confused, he stood up, his eyes staring.

He watched the shapes approach and then he heard the awful shrieking howls. Whatever these creatures were, Vordin was sure that they had a malicious intent. Shouts came from the village. People started to run about grabbing what weapons they had. Panic welled up inside him. He was in danger. Everyone was in danger.

The howls grew louder and louder as the creatures got closer. They were moving fast. Vordin's mind was racing. A story he had been told came out of memory.

"Like demons they are, created with evil intent. They are filled with hate and malice. They revel in pain and suffering. They will bring death. A hollow tree can be a savior. The tree was once alive. You will be a being within a being. They will not see you. As a child within the womb of its mother cannot be seen directly, so shall you be hidden from sight."

He could remember asking many questions about this and why the mysterious man in black from the story had said these things. The storyteller, Rasindell, had replied that he too had been puzzled when these words had been spoken to him long ago, as this had been a true story. He told him that when he had heard the shrieking howl and saw the black shape, he knew to follow the advice no matter how strange it had been.

Vordin was afraid. There just happened to be a hollow tree on the edge of the forest where he stood. He looked at his village, then the approaching creatures as they neared the edge of the crop fields just outside the village, and finally to the hollow tree. The fear was too great. He wanted his parents. He wanted to run. He wanted to live. There didn't seem like there was any time to act. The creatures seemed so close. There was safety in the tree. It had to be true. He went over to it and frantically searched for a way inside. He found an opening and crawled in.

As he wriggled around trying to situate himself better, he couldn't help but wonder what the creatures looked like. It sent waves of fear and panic throughout his body as he imagined visual images to fit the malicious noises the beasts made.

He could hear people screaming. His face was wet with tears.

"They'll be okay," he told himself, "My parents... They'll escape. I know they will. Somehow they'll be safe." He was too frightened to move a single muscle. *"What if they don't try to escape? What if they stay, hoping that I will come back?"* he asked himself, *"They must be so worried. They'll wait for me and they'll be killed, and it will be my fault. There wasn't enough time... It would be impossible to escape the village... No, they'll hide. They'll be safe... But the story spoke as if it didn't matter if people hid... as if the creatures could somehow see exactly where all living things were and that the only hope was to hide within something that had been living, or once was or something like that. I'm just assuming that these are the same creatures too. My imagination runs wild sometimes. I don't really know what these beasts are or what they look like, so how can I tell? There are some pretty tough people in my village, my father included. They'll fight them off, and all will be well."*

He knew that his feeble thoughts of comfort weren't going to fool himself away from all the things he was dreading. He knew things had to be much worse, and if it were these 'demon' creatures like he thought, he knew that no one in his village would be able to survive, including his parents. He also knew that he could perish very easily along with them if this hollow tree trick didn't work.

Vordin thought about all the times he had been unkind to his parents, every time that he had lied to them, and all the times he hadn't really appreciated all that they had done for him. He cried and cried, knowing that he would never be able to tell them that he was sorry and how much he really loved them. He thought about all the happy times that he had spent with them and how he would never get to see them again. *"They'll be okay,"* he lied to himself, *"Everything will be fine."*

He cried until it felt hard to breathe and his stomach ached. His eyes stung from rubbing his tears away with his dirty hands. Now all that was left for him to do was wait in the darkness of the tree and listen helplessly to all the horrible sounds coming from his village.

These horrid beasts had come to prey on the village of Nilnont. The crop fields were reduced to ash, as the creatures invoked spells of fire breath upon themselves enabling them to expel magical flames from their throats. The villagers' homes were burned and smashed. The animals of the village had been helpless, having no choice but to face the evil onslaught as their

bodies were torn to shreds. The frantic screams of the villagers and the evil howls and shrieks of the creatures filled the night air. The creatures killed without mercy.

These innocent people could hold no hope of salvation from these foul beasts. Some villagers, the lucky ones, were killed before being feasted on, while the unlucky ones were eaten alive as they watched chunks of their own flesh being devoured before them by huge gnashing teeth. The ground was heavily stained with blood. Everyone was slaughtered.

Vordin listened from his hiding place to the horrors that were happening. As the screams quickly ceased, he feared that he had become the sole survivor of his entire village. He desperately hoped that these terrible evil creatures would creep back to wherever they came from when morning arrived. Dawn was far away, as the night was still young. Still, it gave him something to focus on. He would wait for the sun to rise. He told himself that things would be better then, all he had to do was wait. He could do that.

Why these 'demon' creatures would overlook him if he were hidden inside a tree, he didn't really understand. He desperately tried to remember the story he had been told, wondering if it were in fact these same creatures as he had thought.

Slowly, bit-by-bit, the story began to come back to him...

It had been around the time when Rasindell had first begun to learn magic. He had met a woman whom also was studying magic. They would spend hours together practicing their new spells and became quite good friends.

Unknown to Rasindell, she had an admirer. She was not interested in this other man at all, as he was known to practice dark and evil magic.

Unfortunately, this evil wizard had laid claim to her in his own twisted mind. When he discovered the friendship she and Rasindell had, he was furious. He could see that Rasindell and the woman were clearly interested in each other and perhaps even falling in love. The wizard left to hunt the two of them down and exact his revenge, for in his mind she had betrayed him.

This evil wizard discovered them in a rocky yet forested area where they had been practicing their spells. The wizard had come across them during their first kiss and had caught them unaware.

"How dare you!" he had screamed at her.

She tried to explain, yet again, to the delusional man that she was not interested in him and that there was no relationship between them as he imagined. She explained that she was in love with Rasindell and not him.

This just infuriated the evil man further. In his rage, he summoned a Killnarin, using very strong magic to do so. The beast easily slipped into this world using the incredible hate this man possessed as a conduit from its world into Zaylyn.

As the foul beast emerged from what looked like a tear in the very air around them, it growled maliciously. Its body was a deep black and it looked wet and slippery. This beast looked similar to a salamander, but with six clawed legs and a huge mouth of sharp jagged teeth. Its eyes were completely black and it never took its gaze off the woman.

"What have you done?!" she asked the wizard in terror, "It will kill us all!"

"As long as you die, I do not care," was his cold and heartless answer.

Vordin remembered that Rasindell had a very difficult time speaking of this and had never told him the name of the woman or the evil wizard.

The Killnarin pounced onto the woman as a cat would a mouse, killing her instantly with its dagger-like claws. There was nothing he could have done. If he could have given his life to save hers, he would have, but everything had happened so fast. Even in his grief, Rasindell knew that remaining where he was meant his death as well.

Next the Killnarin turned on the wizard that had summoned it. His death was slow and painful. Rasindell had taken this opportunity to run as fast as he could into the forest, trying to escape the terrible beast, as it would surely come after him.

Within the forest, he was stopped by a mysterious man dressed all in black and wearing a hooded cloak. Rasindell could not see his face, as it was cast in shadow beneath his hood. There was something about this figure that had made Rasindell very nervous, although he didn't know exactly why.

"Like demons they are, created with evil intent," said the man in a calm soothing voice, speaking of the Killnarin, "They are filled with hate and malice. They revel in pain and suffering. They bring death. A hollow tree can be a savior. The tree was once alive. You will be a being within a being. They will not see you. As a child within the womb of its mother cannot be seen directly, so shall you be hidden from sight."

Rasindell immediately questioned this mysterious man about what he had told him, fearing that the beast was close behind.

"Their vision is different from ours," he explained, "They can see the life force of others. Therefore, it matters not where you hide, as they can see within and beyond what we see. Your only hope is to mask your life force with that of another. It does not matter whether the tree is alive or dead and hollow. The fact that it once was alive and had a life force of its own is what is important."

"Where am I to find a hollow tree?" Rasindell asked, frantic to try anything at all to save his life, "The chances of finding one are so slim and then of finding one large enough to conceal me within are even less!"

The man directed him over to a large tree. Rasindell was about to protest that this tree was in good health and not at all hollow, when the mysterious figure pushed him gently forward into the tree as if it had been made of air.

When the Killnarin came into the area a few moments later, its large head moved back and forth searching for any sign of Rasindell. Rasindell tried to understand how he could be standing within a solid tree as he was, but couldn't come up with an explanation. The Killnarin couldn't see him; he was sure of it.

The mysterious man in black stepped forward toward the Killnarin. The creature actually seemed to fear him. The Killnarin reared up until it was standing on its back four legs reminding Rasindell of a centaur he had once met. The creature swiped at the air in front of it and snapped its massive jaws toward the man in black, but dared not approach him. The mysterious figure just stood there making his presence known.

The Killnarin finally dropped its upper body back down to the forest floor again, the ground shaking with the impact. It let loose a terrible shrieking howl in defiance. It stomped around as if it were trying to decide what to do, and then a tear in the air appeared as before. The tear looked similar to the distortion heat from a fire makes in the air, if you look at it a certain way. Rasindell had expected yet another Killnarin or some other terrible beast to enter their world through the portal. To Rasindell's surprise, the Killnarin instead left the world of Zaylyn, returning to wherever it had come from.

Once the Killnarin was gone, the mysterious man helped Rasindell out of the tree, and then he leapt up into the sky and disappeared from sight. Rasindell decided to build a home for himself and devote the rest of his life to magic. Having lost his one and only love, he had nothing else.

“Could the mysterious man in the black hooded cloak be The Black Shadow?” Vordin asked himself, *“The Black Shadow is supposed to be an incredibly powerful and evil being. I have heard awful things. Things that one could only imagine in the worst of nightmares. Surely it cannot be the same person. Perhaps I am remembering the story wrong.”*

Inside the hollow tree, it was damp and cold. For once, he was thankful for his short height and thin frame as these qualities allowed him to maneuver into his chosen hiding spot and therefore were responsible for saving his life.

He could feel bugs starting to crawl through his hair. It got to the point where he couldn't tell if it were some of his own hair that had made its way down inside the collar of his shirt or if it were some creepy insect squirming about. The wood was damp and had an earthy smell to it. Many times his hands found themselves sliding over slimy bits of fungus. Vordin wanted to get out of his cramped position and stretch, but he knew that he couldn't take the risk.

He continued to wait. He could smell the burning remains of the village from where he was. Luckily, he was far enough away to not have to worry about his tree catching fire. Vordin waited and waited, and finally the crackling fires became nothing more than smoldering embers.

After dawn, he emerged with great caution. The morning sun's rays were warm and bright. From where he stood at the crest of the hill at the edge of the forest, he could see the grassy hills rolling into the horizon. The road made its way up and over these hills until it reached Nilnont. There was no sign that the creatures had remained or where they might have traveled to afterwards.

He did not want to look at his village. He did not want to see the destruction. He knew it had happened, but if he didn't look at it, he could pretend that everything was fine.

Before this day, Nilnont was a happy and lively place. The small buildings had thatched roofs and the walls were made from stone. Nilnont's buildings had been constructed in this fashion for centuries. When a new building or home was to be built, it became a village project and everyone contributed in some way or another.

Almost every house had a garden of flowers, and it was a beautiful and peaceful place to live. Nilnont was known for its pottery. Some would be handcrafted for every day use and some would be made with artistic designs and paintings for decoration. On the rare occasion that travelers came to stop at Nilnont, they would always marvel at the quality and beauty of the pottery that the village produced.

It had been his village and his home. Finally, he made himself look down to Nilnont. He could see now that it had been reduced to smoldering piles of rubble and debris.

“My parents are somewhere down there. Everything is destroyed. Everything and everyone is gone. Everyone's dead. No one could have survived. My parents are dead,” he tried to explain to himself.

He turned his eyes away from it. He stared at the road, following with his eyes as it continued past Nilnont and up into the forested hills to eventually lead into the mountains.

Vordin had never been to Dee'ellkka Valley, as the trek over the mountains was a long and strenuous one. It was rumored that trolls and dragons inhabited the mountain range, although few had ever seen them.

Vordin reluctantly returned his gaze toward Nilnont again, and then he forced himself to travel down to it. One of the persuasions he told himself was that perhaps he would find some survivors. He would rescue them and be a hero. Deep down, he knew that he would not, but he bravely continued.

He now stood at the edge of his village. There was nothing left of what he had called home. There was an eerie silence which emphasized the fact that he was alone. Everyone was gone. Nothing in the village had survived except for him.

Even though he expected the worst, he wanted to run desperately toward his house, to look for his parents and to see if they were all right. The fear and shock of what had happened and the sight of the devastation in front of him held him back.

At the edge of the village, from where he was standing, he saw the blackened and crumbling walls of many homes and buildings. He saw charcoaled remains of various pieces of wood furniture scattered about in the rubble. The street appeared empty from where he stood, but he knew there would be bodies. It was so very quiet. Usually, he would be able to hear the livestock in their pens at the far side of the village, but there was nothing. The crops were now blackened earth.

The winds changed and the foul stench of burnt flesh reached his nose. He felt numb and emotionless. It was almost as if his body wouldn't accept the devastation in front of him as being real.

After many unsuccessful attempts, he finally was able to force himself to slowly walk down the street. As he walked, he was conscious of every reluctant step and of every tiny detail that he beheld.

He tried desperately to hold his sanity together as he passed the body of a middle-aged man lying face down in the gravel, a large pool of blood beneath him. The crackling embers seemed to taunt him, as if they knew all that had been taken from him and they had remained to gloat.

He felt empty. He thought he should feel at least something, but he just felt hollow and empty. It was as if it were impossible for him to be seeing all of this. It somehow couldn't possibly be real.

He walked past the remnant of a house. Its garden of roses had been trampled along with the white miniature fence that surrounded it. The thatched roof was in ashes. Several of the stone walls had been bashed in, obviously by the incredible strength of these creatures. Vordin could see the destruction inside. Then he noticed the lifeless hand still reaching desperately for the sky beneath the rubble.

He moved quickly past with a lump in his throat as he imagined that it could have been him caught under the rubble like that. Guilty thoughts entered his mind as he passed more and more bodies and severed limbs among the debris and what was left of the houses and buildings.

"Why should I be the one to survive," he thought, "I hid like a coward while everyone else died."

He couldn't help noticing that many of the dead strewn about were young children. *"I should have stayed. Maybe I could have saved some of the children,"* and then disgusted with himself he thought, *"I'm a selfish coward. I was frightened. I panicked. I ran and hid. I should*

have tried to help. I could have brought someone with me. I could have saved at least one child. There was enough room in the tree for that.”

Vordin now approached the side street where his home should be. He hoped that by some miracle it still stood there intact, with his loving parents alive and well inside. He knew that this could never be true.

He could now see the smoldering remains of his home. The walls and roof had been torn down. Everything that had not been burned, had been smashed or ripped to pieces.

“Mother... Father...” he whispered, and such a combination of fear, anguish, and panic welled up inside him so strong that he would have never believed someone could feel that way.

Without thinking, he blindly made his way toward what was left of his home through the debris and mangled corpses. When he reached his goal, he rummaged around frantically in the rubble without purpose. Vordin suddenly recoiled at the sight of a charred severed arm. At the same time, a wave of reality and clarity was shocked into him. He recognized his father’s ring on the burnt and blistered flesh.

“No...” he choked out, “Father... No...”

He looked away with freshly shed tears streaming down his face. That was when he saw the leg of his mother beneath a pile of debris.

“Mother...” his voice said, “I’ll help you. Don’t worry. I’m here now. I’ll help you. I’m here.”

He began uncovering her in a desperate hope that she might still be alive. Upon discovering that her head was missing, he just sat there staring blankly into the ashes. His mind was fighting against itself, not wanting to accept the fact that this was real and had actually happened.

As he sobbed heavily, images of his mother and father kept flashing through his mind along with images and memories of his entire family, his home, the village, and the people that lived there. He sat there alone and distraught for most of the day.

As he mindlessly gazed about him, he happened upon a broken piece of mirror. He held it up and looked at the face which was reflected back to him. He knew it was him. It was his square jaw; the same as his father’s. He could see his dark brown almond-shaped eyes and his full lips; the same that his mother had. The face was his, but it seemed unfamiliar to him now. It was a jumble of features from people he would never see again.

His mourning turned into a helpless frustration. That frustration turned into anger. In his rage, he made a hasty vow that his family’s death would not go unavenged. Then he admitted to himself that for him to pursue vengeance would be impossible and deadly.

He staggered away from the village in the late afternoon. He would have to find shelter and if Rasindell’s old home still stood, it would be the best place for him. Also, he hoped that it would give him some emotional comfort. Being around his village and dead parents only brought him incredible distress. He needed to be somewhere familiar and to be somewhere untouched by this massacre.

Vordin walked along an overgrown path which would eventually lead him deep into the forest and to the old hut. As he walked, his thoughts wandered back to his childhood. He had always been mature for his age and therefore didn’t really fit in with the other children and their games. He usually played alone with toys, crafts, and other small projects. He was more interested in puzzles and games that challenged his mind, rather than the physical games and activities that most of the other children enjoyed.

Vordin had often ventured deep into the forest against his parents' wishes. He had known by heart the way to the old storyteller's hut. Vordin had often crept out to the hut after dark just to hear the wondrous stories he had to tell. Rasindell had become his only friend.

To see the warm welcoming glow coming from Rasindell's wooden hut had always been well worth the journey through the dark and gloomy forest. Rasindell, expecting him as usual, would often step out awkwardly to greet him wearing his light grey tattered robes and leaning on a gnarled and twisted cane. The wizard would wait patiently as Vordin made his way down the forest path and into the clearing where his home was situated.

Vordin remembered how the old man's grey eyes seemed to sparkle with excitement at yet another chance to have someone to share his wondrous tales with. Vordin could remember wishing that he too had eyes of a mystical color instead of his plain brown eyes.

Rasindell's round wrinkled face always wore an inviting smile. The wizard would greet Vordin at the door often and beckon the boy inside with a callused hand. He could remember how the hut would smell of potions, spices, and mystical powders.

Rasindell had been a heroic adventurer in his younger days and then had become an expert wizard as he grew into old age. He had become a lonely old man after his full and exciting life, and Vordin was glad that he had been able to spend the time he did with him.

Rasindell was an old man, and when his time had come to die, Vordin had been there for him. He sat there as the old man spoke his last words. Rasindell had pulled him close and spoke of how he had been cursed long ago. He had said that this curse was one of the reasons that he had started to learn magic, in hope that one day he might stumble on a way to break it. He was cursed to recite the legends of their world, Zaylyn, for all eternity after his death. Rasindell had told him that becoming a storyteller to him and seeing the joy and excitement that he could bring with a few words, that his curse had actually become a blessing to him.

Then Rasindell had died and Vordin returned home. After that, he never returned to the hut. He had never spoken of Rasindell, not even after he had passed away. The wizard had been his secret. Vordin now knew that he should have told someone. He had been a small child. He hadn't known how to react to his friend's death.

The old man had always said to remember the stories for the knowledge hidden in them might one day save his life. This was how Vordin had survived. He hid inside a hollow tree as in Rasindell's stories, and he had lived.

The path he had been following soon became non-existent to the point where he found himself stumbling over fallen logs and had brambles and bushes constantly scratch at his legs and arms. His skin itched and several large scrapes and scratches had begun to bleed.

The light began to fade and it became even more difficult for him to travel. He was lost, but he struggled on in the direction he thought Rasindell's old home lay. He was sure that it had not taken so long to reach the hut as a child. He wondered if the creatures would return.

After detangling his hair from a tree branch, Vordin stopped to rest. The sunlight had been replaced by the pale glow of the moon. He smoothed his hair as best as he could with his hands and re-tied the leather strip holding it.

The air was damp and cold. He was scraped and bruised from trying to maneuver through the thick brush in the dark. He had no idea of where he might be now, and he felt and knew that he was extremely vulnerable. The woodland creatures made eerie sounds, which only put him more on edge. He also expected at any moment to come across one of the horrid beasts that had attacked his village.

He figured that it was best to keep moving. As he continued to scramble through the vegetation once more, he heard the loud crack of a branch breaking. Vordin froze, afraid even to breathe. He heard nothing but the gentle night breeze through the trees for a few moments, and then from behind him came a deep bellowing laugh. Vordin spun around to face his unknown adversary, but there was no one to be seen. He heard footsteps and could not tell from which direction they came. His eyes darted around frantically in the dark, as his heart pounded hard in his chest. Then another deep laugh filled the air around him.

Vordin panicked, knowing the damage these beasts could inflict, and he frantically stumbled his way through the brush and brambles in the dark as quickly as he could. His leg had become caught between two logs, and as he fell, he felt the bone in his leg snap. The pain rushed through his entire body and in his agony he cried out.

He struggled in his helpless state, but to no avail. He heard the malicious laughter again as the footsteps quickened and started to move toward his location.

CHAPTER 2 = THE FAIRY QUEEN

Suddenly a beast appeared out of nowhere to stand in front of him. The incredible pain in his leg began to numb slightly as his body reacted to the shock of the broken limb. All Vordin could do was stare, his dark brown eyes wide in amazement and fear at this foul creature.

It stood upright on short legs ending in clawed feet. Its body was covered in a golden brown fur except for its feet, hands, and face. Its overly long arms hung almost to the ground and the claws could easily tear a person apart. On top of its massive head were long pointed ears. The creature was just standing there looking with bulbous blood red eyes at the crippled adolescent. A long and tubular green tongue lay in a gaping mouth of jagged teeth. Large quantities of drool dribbled from its mouth down into its fur. The wrinkled skin of its short snout wiggled as it sniffed the air with its four nostrils.

Vordin was terrified and suffering horrible pain from his leg. It opened its jaws and a low growl resounded from its throat. The revolting stench of its breath and body made him gag. It snapped its jaws in the air in front of his face and he could feel the hot steamy breath on his face and neck.

Just when he thought the beast would rip its teeth viciously into his flesh, it started laughing hysterically. The laughter rumbled and gurgled deep in its throat and then gradually became a high-pitched giggle. The creature started to emit brilliant colored sparks of light from its body until the beast was transformed entirely into many glowing lights.

Each spark of light trailed a hue of color as it darted about wildly in the air. Vordin now realized that each spark ridiculed him with its laughter. It was obvious that they thought their cruel prank to be absolutely hilarious.

A larger spark grew to about the size of a small apple and hovered in front of his face. This delicate creature now before him had the wings of a beautiful butterfly and the body of a young girl. This small being wore a tiny dress made of pink flower petals and a tiny crown of silver rested on her head. Her light blue hair floated about her on the gentle breeze that her wings created, and she glowed with a beautiful lavender light. Her eyes were a deep purple, and her pale white skin glittered and sparkled. The fairy gazed upon him in curiosity for a moment and her manner seemed to show power, wisdom, and a hint of childish humor. She put a finger to her rosy lips and the laughter ceased.

She then asked in a high-pitched voice, "Did we frighten you?" She giggled slightly and then continued, "You don't seem as if you are very dangerous. Shall I fix your leg?"

The fairy queen closed her eyes and cupped her hands upward above her head. In her concentration, she slowed the beating of her wings to an extremely slow rate, somehow managing to still stay afloat. As Vordin watched, a lavender mist began to drift slowly upward from her hands and then encircled around Vordin's body. The pain from his injury slowly began to fade. He floated free of the logs which had entrapped his broken limb and then he drifted back down to the ground. The mist then concentrated around his leg and he felt the bone right itself in one violent jerk. Soon Vordin was completely healed, including even his tiny cuts and bruises.

He stood and the fairy queen rose up to meet his eye level once more.

"You are one of great luck to have escaped the fate of your village," the fairy queen said to him, "The one responsible for this evil deed is Dranngore. He is the one who rules over the creatures that killed your village. Beware the night, as that is when they enjoy their hunt; under the cover of darkness. Do not be fooled, as this does not mean the daylight will provide you with safety from them. These creatures are not natural beings. They are Killnarin. They have six limbs, as do centaurs. They are hairless with black, oily skin. They have razor sharp claws and teeth. They are strong. They can cast magic on both mind and body. They are 'demon' creatures, summoned with evil intent. They will revel in the pain, suffering, and torment that they will cause, even delaying a kill to prolong it. Their magical source of life extends from Dranngore. Destroy the wizard Dranngore with the Sword of Anthrowst and all shall be well. Farewell human."

Then without hesitation, she darted quickly away with all her fairy subjects following.

So Vordin was left standing in the dark with many unanswered questions. He continued to scramble through the forest and he figured that by now he must have traveled very deep into it. Vordin crawled over and under fallen logs and fought his way through the thick brush until he stumbled into a clearing.

He tripped and landed on dark green grass illuminated by the light of a full pale moon. The grass was cool and lush. As he picked himself up, his gaze fell on a small decrepit log hut.

With great relief, he realized from his childhood memories that this was Rasindell's old home. When Vordin reached the damp rotted door of the hut, he opened it wondering if the roof would collapse or not. Vordin took the risk and stepped into the blackness.

He slowly moved across the floor, sliding his feet across the ground trying to detect anything that might be in his way. Cobwebs clung to his face and as he tore them away, he began to think he had made a very foolish choice. His eyes strained into the darkness as he told himself, "*There could be other creatures who have also taken shelter in this hut. What am I doing? I could be walking into a pair of hungry jaws right this minute!*"

The clouds shifted and moonlight began to filter through several large holes in the roof, illuminating the room enough for Vordin to see that there was no apparent danger.

Then there came a sound above him. As he looked up, an immense spider, about the size of a dinner plate, dropped down to land on his face. Vordin immediately froze. He fought desperately with the instinct to jump around madly in panic trying to fling the thing as far away from him as possible.

He stared in horror at the hairy legs and fangs positioned just above his eyes. He could see the roof, and through the holes, patches of the night sky overhead. He tried to focus on the roof instead of the spider, as the fear was almost completely consuming him.

“Don’t move,” he pleaded with himself, “Don’t move! The thing will sink its fangs into you if you move!”

The thought sent a shiver throughout his body and the panic intensified. He felt it slowly moving its legs gently against his vulnerable skin. His heart was pounding wildly.

“Don’t move,” his mind shouted at him, “Please, please, don’t move! What can I possibly do?! Even my breathing, as shallow as it is right now, might make it attack!”

Then he thought he ought to do something now, before it got a chance to bite him, but the fear was too great. *“Get off me! Get off me!”* he screamed inside his mind.

Vordin then heard the flap of wings and the cry of an owl. The spider remained balanced on the boy’s face, continuing to caress his skin with its many legs as it kept repositioning itself. The owl, now through an opening in the roof, soared through the air with its sharp talons outstretched to snatch the spider from his face.

“Please no! No! No! This thing’s surely going to bite me, and if that doesn’t happen, the owl’s talons will rip my face to shreds!”

The owl was closing in on him fast, and he had to make a decision.

His arm seemed like a separate entity as it slowly and calmly picked up the spider by its mid-section and removed it. The owl continued its dive toward Vordin’s face. He winced, helpless against the attack. The bird came extremely close to him with its talons, but then pulled up at the last moment seeing that its meal had vanished. Vordin felt the rush of air against him and he watched the brown and white owl fly up into the rafters where it perched. Its large yellow eyes began searching hungrily for the spider.

He felt something wriggle between his fingertips. For a moment, he had forgotten that he still held the large spider. He recoiled in terror and disgust, dropping the spider to the ground. It scurried toward a small crevice in the wooden floor to find refuge.

Vordin shuddered and felt a cold chill all over his body. He was amazed that the spider’s fangs hadn’t been imbedded in his skin. He shuddered again and wiped frantically at his face where the spider had been. It felt like it was still there; his face having an itchy, tickled feeling. He couldn’t believe that the ordeal was over now and that he had gotten through it unharmed.

The spider was almost to the crack in the floor now. The owl dove down for another attack. As the spider crawled into the hole, the owl landed beside it and managed to sever a piece off one of the spider’s legs. Then finding that its attempts to pry its meal out of the hole were futile, the owl flew off through the roof and into the surrounding forest.

Vordin slowly made his way over to what he thought would be the fireplace. There had been a small table on which Rasindell had kept a lantern. He hoped that the lantern was still there and intact. Reaching the now dilapidated table, he rummaged through the dust-covered debris and eventually he touched cool metal. He turned the object over and over in his hands until he felt a small clasp on one side.

As he opened the front of the metal box, the room was immediately illuminated by a strong glow coming from inside. How he had overlooked the makeup of this arcane and incredible device as a child, bewildered him. Upon further examination, he discovered that although it had been used as a lantern, it was in fact a flask containing a mysterious glowing potion in an elaborate metal case. There was no heat produced by the flask, and there was a metal handle in the top of the case so it could be handled easily. The purpose of the case was obviously to hide the glow of the potion when light was no longer needed.

Vordin looked around the now dimly lit room finding it cluttered with debris and covered in a film of dust. The windowless, one-roomed cabin had only one door leading to the outside

and he knew that he should barricade it for the night. Beside the fireplace was a small but sturdy trunk. After dragging the heavy object to the entrance, he realized that the decayed wood of the door wouldn't be that difficult to break through but figured that it would have to suffice.

In one corner of the room was a straw mattress, and in the center of the room was a small table with a chair neatly tucked beneath. Beside the fireplace, on the left side, was a large cauldron, and on the right side, close to where he had found the lantern, was a pile of logs meant for the fire.

Vordin closed his eyes and tried to remember how inviting this old hovel had once been when the fire was roaring, making the shadows dance playfully on the walls. Rasindell would tell his tales of adventure and mystery with a smiling wrinkled face. The cauldron would bubble with a spicy stew or with a mysterious concoction. He remembered Rasindell's home as being warm and cozy with almost a friendly life of its own. Now as he examined his surroundings, he found himself in a cold and undesirable place.

He set the mysterious lantern on the table in the center of the room, and he proceeded to examine the trunk. The lid of the trunk opened easily and Vordin lifted out two thick grey blankets which he placed on the floor beside him. Under these blankets was an empty brown leather backpack and beside this was a wooden bowl, a small wooden spoon, a small dagger, a large wooden spoon for the cauldron, and also a small cracked mirror.

He picked up the mirror and took a look at himself. His hair was filthy and hung loosely at his shoulders, his hair tie lost. His eyes showed every bit of the hollowness he felt. He looked sickly, his skin paler than it should have been, and completely exhausted.

He replaced the mirror, and then he looked down at his clothing. His clothing and shoes were covered in patches of dirt and debris from the forest, but he found he no longer cared about his appearance. He removed the backpack and the dagger and then he closed the lid of the trunk.

He carried the blankets over to the straw mattress and laid them over it. Exhausted, he climbed under the top blanket and was soon fast asleep with the tiny dagger beside him and the backpack on the floor. A dream came to him...

Vordin stood on the edge of his village. The warm afternoon sun felt good on his skin. The air smelled sweet with the fragrance of roses. A crow cried out from somewhere above, and as he looked up to the clear blue sky, he caught a glimpse of the bird as it beat its black wings against the wind. He walked down one of the busy dirt roads in the village. An old woman wearing a cheerful smile on her face was sitting on her porch with a clay pot in front of her. Her white hair, ruffled by the breeze, was tied back in a loose knot. Vordin watched as she took a small brush, dipped it into a small jar of dark red paint, and began to paint an intricate design onto the surface of the pot. She had a beautiful bed of bright red roses growing in the front garden with a white miniature fence surrounding it. He had seen her before, but he couldn't remember her name.

"Hello there! Vordin is it? Enjoying the day are you?" said a middle-aged man as he walked past. He had short black hair which had started to grey. His round happy face smiled at him. He had seen this man before too, but he couldn't remember when or who he was.

A small child laughed cheerfully and then several others. A black cat chased a butterfly. Vordin walked past several houses and shops. All of them were busy with life.

Then, he came to his own home. He couldn't remember a time when it had looked more inviting. The light blue flowers in the flowerbed were blooming and brought to him the smell of home. He stepped up to the front door. Something was cooking and the smells coming from the

house were wonderful. His mother would be home and his father would be too in a short while for dinner. He opened the door and stepped into the warm cozy kitchen.

“Vordin, there you are!” his mother exclaimed when he entered the house, “I’ve been calling you for some time now. Dinner’s almost ready. We’re having stew. Would you mind setting the table dear?”

Vordin went to the cupboard and took the dishes from their place and began setting the table. His mother was wearing her light blue dress. It was the one with the pink flowers. She only wore this dress on special occasions. Her white apron was tied around her waist. She gave him a look that was warm and loving. Her reddish-brown hair shone in the firelight.

“Okay, look out now. This is very hot,” she warned him as she set the stew pot on the table. She then gave him a concerned look. “Are you okay honey?” asked his mother, “You look a little pale.” She felt his forehead. Her touch was warm and soft.

The door opened and Vordin’s father entered the house. “How’s my boy? Oh, that smells absolutely wonderful, Hun. I’m just going to wash up a bit and change my clothes,” he said leaving the kitchen and went into the bedroom.

“Come sit down, dear,” she said as she sat at the table and poured glasses of water for all three of them.

Vordin sat in his chair and took a sip of the water. It was deliciously fresh and icy cold. The smell of the stew made his mouth tingle with anticipation of the hot and juicy meat and the hearty vegetables. A large bowl of whipped potatoes was on the table... and he could see where he had swiped a taste earlier. He noticed that there was also a large loaf of warm crusty bread on the table and a plate of butter. A small knife was laid beside the plate and the flames from the fire danced in their reflection along the length of the metal.

Vordin’s father returned, and they began their meal. The food was delicious, better than he could ever remember. He let the flavor of each mouthful linger a few moments before he swallowed. It was as if the creatures had never...

Suddenly, his parents vanished. Their plates were still on the table; their meals half eaten. He swallowed the bit of bread he had been chewing, but it felt like it had lumped in his throat.

The fire in the hearth slowly died out and now the only light in the room was the sunlight coming through the window. He wanted the smiling faces of his mother and father to return. There was a place deep down inside him that knew they wouldn’t and in that spot it felt empty, cold, and hurt.

Vordin got up from the table. There was complete silence in the room. It was an eerie silence. Vordin left the house and stepped outside.

Silence. Nothing stirred. The streets were empty. The wind whistled through the trees and shrubs. The wind was cold and bitter.

He heard the cry of an eagle. Darkness fell over the village as if someone had pulled a black blanket up over it. He heard a scream. He heard a blood-curdling howl. Then there were more screams, panicked cries, and frightened words spoken to loved ones. It was everything he didn’t want to hear.

He couldn’t see anyone around him, but he could feel the presence of many. He could almost feel the hot breath of the beasts upon his skin. Tortured screams and fierce bellowing howls echoed in his ears...

He awoke from a restless sleep. He could see through the roof that the day was already half over. He had slept clear through most of the day, which disturbed him greatly, for with the night came the possibility that the creatures might return.

CHAPTER 3 = LORENTA

His stomach grumbled at him. Vordin got up from the mattress and left the cabin. The air was fresh outside and he breathed in deeply. His body ached and felt stiff. Birds sang happy songs and insects buzzed from bush to bush. This place had a peaceful atmosphere and he was glad for it.

Lying down, he stretched himself out on the cool grass with his hands behind his head and looked up to the blue sky. The last time he had been here, he had been only seven years old. Now, it was eight years later and things here hadn't really changed all that much.

He thought about Rasindell and realized how much he missed his old friend. Now was a time when he wished most that the old man was still here and alive. The night that Rasindell died, Vordin had been so very frightened.

"What's a kid supposed to do?" Vordin thought to himself as he remembered that night, "I had thought about burying him, but that would have been impossible. I couldn't have dug a grave very well and then there was the task of dragging the body to it. I didn't want to have to do that to my friend. I just left him there and went home. That's all I could have done. That's probably how he would have wanted it. If he hadn't been so secretive, things would have been different. I don't think a single person except for me even knew about him and his cabin here in the woods. Why aren't there any bones? Surely after all these years, there would be something. Maybe some animals had carried bits of him off into the woods until there was nothing left. What a horrible thing to imagine, what's wrong with you? Maybe being a wizard, he just magically disappeared. There, now that's a better explanation. Oh stop it, what a stupid thing to be thinking about."

Noticing a bush with clusters of ripe red berries growing on it, he got up and walked over to it.

"What a great idea," he said to himself with sarcasm, "Eat some poisonous berries and die. Then maybe some animals will drag pieces of you away over the years until there's nothing left."

He left the berries on the bush and roamed around the surrounding forest in hope of finding food, as it had been over a day, almost two now, since he had eaten anything.

The daylight had begun to fade. His efforts at finding food were useless. He felt incredibly weak, cold, and extremely exhausted. His stomach ached with hunger and his mouth was dry with thirst. He entered the cabin once more.

The lantern was still glowing brightly from where he had left it on the table. He crawled under the blanket and tried to figure out a course of action. He was still puzzling over what the fairy queen had said to him.

Through the roof, he could see that the sun had set and he became annoyed at how quickly the day had passed him by. Then out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw something stir on the floor.

Vordin noticed that the huge spider was slowly crawling out of the crevice in the wooden floorboards. He had completely forgotten about it when he had laid down to rest the night before and was amazed that he had remained safe during his slumber. The thought of the thing crawling over his skin again sent shivers down his back.

He found the small dagger and held it tightly in his hand wondering how he would catch or kill the thing. Vordin watched the spider very closely as it crawled to the middle of the room. Vordin noticed that the lower half of one of its front legs on its right side had been severed by the owl. It was a wolf spider, greyish in color, and Vordin had seen many of them before. They were normally small, but once he had seen one that was so large that it was near half the size of his fist. This one before him was monstrous. The spider's large round eyes seemed to be watching him as well. He did not want it to scurry off into some unknown location where it could jump out at him unexpectedly.

He thought about maybe crushing the huge spider with the cauldron, but he realized that by the time he reached it, the spider would be long gone and the cauldron would be too heavy and clumsy to accomplish the deed. To attack it with the tiny dagger was absolutely ridiculous. So he decided to throw the blanket over the spider, thus trapping it underneath, and then crushing it under his shoe. He sat up and held the blanket ready.

Just before he was about to execute his plan, mysteriously, the body of the spider was instantly engulfed in magical green flames. The spider's body seemed to melt into a thick black puddle under the flames, and then, while Vordin sat on the mattress in utter amazement, the puddle slowly increased in size. The black mass traveled upward from the puddle and eventually formed into a humanoid shape.

As the emerald flames subsided, Vordin now saw the figure of a beautiful young woman before him. She was a few inches taller than Vordin, and black web-like robes clothed her slender form. Her long dark brown hair fell gently below her shoulders, and she had smooth pale skin. As the woman took a step closer to him with a dainty bare foot, he could see that she moved with great agility and grace. With her beautiful light brown eyes, she gazed at Vordin slightly puzzled. Then after a moment's hesitation, her pale lips broke into a smile.

She had large curious eyes and they studied his every move and feature.

"Hello," she said in a sweet voice, "Thank-you for saving my life." Vordin did not know what to say to this strange being. The woman continued, "I know you didn't intend to do so, but I thank you anyway. I know that Rasindell probably never spoke of me to you. I think he was a bit ashamed of me, although he would never have admitted this. He probably would have used the potion on a creature more beautiful than I, if he had known the power that it held. He enjoyed your visits so much. I think that he was afraid of what your reaction might be if you knew of me and of my true form. I did not want to stress the friendship between you and him, so I agreed to spend time away from the hut during your visits. He left years ago, and I've remained here ever since in hope that he would some day return. Also, I have nowhere else to go and so far no reason to leave."

"But who are you?" Vordin asked intrigued by this creature's strange story.

"I am Rasindell's daughter," she said as if that would be a sufficient explanation. She curiously felt at her face, tracing her fingertips over her deep-set eyes and high cheekbones, and then over her small round nose, her plump lips, and rounded chin. "Sorry, I have not been in this form for such a long time," she explained.

"What potion? What exactly are you?" he asked.

She sat herself upon the floor with her legs crossed beneath her and smoothed out her wispy black robes. Then she replied, "Years ago, Rasindell gave me my human form through an incredible magic potion that he had acquired in his journeys as an adventurer. He had not known at the time what the potion would do and he had been wary of using it for many years. I guess one day he decided to not let the potion go to waste and poured the contents of the flask onto a large spider which had found its way into his home. I was this spider. Perhaps at the time, he thought the potion would kill or mutilate me in some terrible way, but instead I gained the ability to transform into the form of a human. Rasindell told me that I had transformed immediately into a small child. I discovered that I am able to change my form at will, although only at night, and that I had gained the life span of a human as well. Rasindell from that day on had raised me as if I were his very own daughter. Oh, and as you probably noticed, my size in spider form increased by about ten times."

"That truly is an incredible and elaborate story," he exclaimed with suspicion.

"By the expression on your face, I can tell that you don't believe a word I'm saying," the woman said with extreme disappointment. The excitement in her eyes had vanished and it had been replaced by great despair. "I don't know the real reason why he would not tell you about me, but I suspect it was out of fear," she said to him, "If you had told one of the villagers, they might have come here to destroy me. I am different. Humans don't usually like things that are different."

"If this is all true, then why did you attack me?" he questioned.

She replied despondently, "I would have transformed to escape that horrid owl, but there wasn't time. I dropped down onto you in hope that I could save myself by doing so. Besides, I thought that you might have been Rasindell. You're the first person to come here since he left so many years ago. I am glad to see that you have returned here, Vordin. It's nice to see a familiar face after all this time. I'm very sorry if I have frightened you."

"Don't you know that Rasindell is dead? He died many years ago," Vordin said with further doubt about her true identity. Why she would not know about the death of her so-called father was even more disturbing.

She was sitting on the floor between him and the door which was still barricaded by the old trunk. He was sitting on the straw mattress with his feet positioned on the wooden floorboards. He still held the small dagger hidden within the folds of the blankets. It was obvious that she could sense his fear. He knew his only defense was to keep her talking, as he was extremely vulnerable against her and had nowhere to run.

"At first, I thought he did die," she said, "but then a strange event occurred that has puzzled me for years. When you left for the village that night, I came back to the hut and found that the old man had finally died. I sat by the fire, not knowing what to do. You had left without discovering that I even existed, and I found myself truly abandoned. After several hours, Rasindell just got up from his resting place and walked out the door as if nothing had happened. If he wasn't dead, then why did he just leave me like that? Was I that much of a disappointment to him? He always said he loved me as if I were his very own child. I don't understand. It doesn't make any sense."

"Did he really just get up and walk out the door?" he asked in amazement, because she had spoken with such sincerity.

"Yes," she replied, her eyes seeming to beg for any explanation that he could give her.

Vordin put aside his suspicions for a moment as he said, "He did speak to me about a curse."

“A curse?” she interrupted.

“He said he was cursed to recite the legends of Zaylyn for all eternity, or rather blessed to do so as he had said. He probably just got up to fulfill his destiny.”

She took a moment to ponder Vordin’s explanation and then said, “He always told me that one day he would have to leave me, but I always thought he meant in death and not in such a bizarre way.”

“I don’t understand it either,” he admitted.

“I had always hoped you would return. Even though I had never met you then face to face, I had always thought of you as a little brother and part of our strange family.” As she spoke, she broke eye contact with him. She knew he did not see it this way and his presence here did not mean her loneliness had come to an end.

Vordin realized that if her strange story was indeed true, he was the only other person besides Rasindell that she had ever known. When Rasindell died, and his visits to the hut had ceased, she had been left in bitter solitude. Vordin found himself truly feeling for her, for he too was now alone. Still, he decided that she couldn’t be trusted no matter how convincing she became.

“How old are you now?” she asked.

“Fifteen,” he replied.

“It’s really been that long?” she paused a few moments, as if this loss of time had saddened her, and then she continued, “I guess that would make me seventeen, or maybe eighteen then. I’m not quite sure. Your village, its name is Nilnont, right?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. It’s been destroyed. Everyone is dead,” he said in a sullen voice.

Her light brown eyes showed a hint of remorse, as if she understood what he felt and what it was like to lose one’s whole world and everything familiar to it.

“Would you like me to light the fire?” she offered.

“Sure,” he said.

“I can bring you some food if you like as well. Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Sure,” he answered again. He knew that she would have to leave the cabin to do so.

She gracefully moved across the floor and picked up a log by the fireplace. The woman then placed the log in the ashes and stood there waiting. Vordin almost laughed at these ignorant actions. Then to his amazement, the log burst into flames.

“There,” she said obviously pleased with herself and the astonished look on Vordin’s face, “It still works fine. Rasindell hated to light his own fires. I’m not sure how he did it, but all you have to do is toss a log in and it will light.”

Vordin walked cautiously over to the fireplace and warmed himself by it. “You said something about being able to find something to eat?” he reminded her.

“Oh, of course. I’ll be back in awhile then,” she said with a cheerful smile.

She displayed exceptional strength as she easily pushed the heavy trunk aside and left through the door. Vordin watched the fire and the shadows dance on the walls as they had so long ago. He listened to the flames crackle and let the heat warm him. He realized that if he were in danger, he wouldn’t be able to protect himself. Vordin decided that the only thing he was able to do was to wait for dawn, when she would have to revert back to spider form, and for the chance to escape unseen.

A heavy rain began to fall just as the woman was entering through the cabin door. She approached him with her hands outstretched and cradling a large leaf which held a plentiful

amount of wild orange berries. He noticed that she only had a thumb and forefinger on her right hand and realized her missing fingers were the result of the wound caused by the owl's attack.

"Here you are," she said as she handed him the berries.

Vordin accepted her gift and they sat in silence in front of the fire for some time.

"I wonder if these are poisonous? Maybe if I taste one, I'll be able to tell. If they are really bitter, I think that it means they are poison. I don't know. I have no clue of how to tell something like that. But what will she do if I refuse to eat them?" he thought to himself.

"Aren't you going to eat?" she asked him.

Vordin popped one of the berries into his mouth. It was slightly bitter, but it tasted all right. The berries weren't poisonous, because he had eaten these same berries before. Rasindell sometimes had a bowl of them for him to snack on during the stories.

He ate the rest of the berries hungrily and wished that there had been more. He noticed how she kept looking sadly at her hand and tried to keep it hidden from sight within the folds of her clothing. Vordin tossed the empty leaf into the fire, and they watched as it sizzled and smoked.

"What's your name?" he asked, realizing he did not yet know it.

"Lorenta," she answered, pleased he had asked.

"It's pretty," he commented and then asked, "Did Rasindell name you?"

"Yes, and thank-you," she said with a smile.

Again there was a long period of silence. The rain beat a soothing rhythm on the roof overhead, and the fire spread its warmth throughout the cabin despite the few large holes in the roof where the rain came in. Soon Vordin had fallen asleep where he sat.

Another dream came to him this night...

Vordin found himself in a dark and damp cavern. Water dripped from stalactites above. A tunnel could be seen to his left and he made his way into it. The tunnel sloped gradually downward and he had difficulty maintaining his footing. As he descended farther, a soft glow steadily increased making it easier for him to see his way.

Eventually the tunnel opened up into another cavern. A pool of lava bubbled up through a fissure in the cavern floor. The heat was intense.

As Vordin approached the pool, a hideous creature arose from the molten rock. It leapt up into the stale air of the cavern and its leathery wings beat the air as lava rolled down its body to sizzle on the rocks below. Its man-sized body was covered in coarse hair and its massive jaws were filled with foul jagged teeth. Its bat-like face turned toward him and it let out a blood-curdling howl. Its beady blood red eyes were fixated maliciously on him and it clenched its sharp talons.

Vordin backed slowly away from the creature, and then he couldn't move. He was trapped in a giant spider web. No matter how hard he struggled, he could not break loose from its sticky embrace. The creature let out a growl that rumbled throughout the cave.

Lorenta came toward Vordin from out of the shadows. She had an evil smirk across her lips. The creature bellowed a wicked laugh and Lorenta joined it in its mirth.

From Lorenta's black cobweb-like robes came forth a horde of tiny spiders. Vordin's struggles were futile against the web, as they swarmed his vulnerable form. Thousands of tiny fangs pierced his flesh, as they crawled up his legs, inside his clothing, and up to his arms and face. Lorenta watched him writhe in pain, with a sneer and a look of satisfaction on her face. He

opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came forth as the tiny spiders made their way into his mouth and down his throat...

He awoke early the next morning gasping for air. His mouth tingled with the memory of his nightmare. Lorenta was nowhere to be seen. She had wrapped a blanket around him while he had slept.

He unwrapped the blanket, got up from the floor, and went to the table. Vordin closed the door of the lantern and tossed it inside the backpack. After tucking the small dagger into a little side pocket on the backpack, he slung it onto his back where it rested comfortably. His dream had confirmed his decision to leave before Lorenta returned. He didn't want anything to do with her, no matter what crazy story she had for him.

Vordin then opened the door and stepped out into the cool, crisp, morning air. He heard birds singing their songs in the trees as the sun's rays filtered down through the treetops. He walked through the dew-covered grass as he headed in the direction of the mountains. On the other side of the mountain range was Dee'ellkka Valley and this was the path he had decided on. He did not know what he hoped to find there, but at least now he had some sort of destination to travel toward.

He traveled long and hard through the dense forest. By nightfall, he had emerged into the open and walked until he met the trail-like road that would lead him up into the mountains.

Reluctantly, he decided to stop for the night as it would be difficult to travel in the dark, even with his mysterious lantern. Vordin curled up by the side of the road for there was no place to hide himself from view. He shivered in the cool air and wished that he had remembered to take one of the blankets from the cabin with him. He hoped that his grey tunic and brown pants would offer him some kind of camouflage, but he highly doubted that.

Vordin tried to rest his weary body, for the hike along the mountainous trail would take a lot of endurance. Vordin found himself drifting off to sleep after several hours.

He awoke suddenly to the sound of heavy steps along the road. Vordin stayed low to the ground, as he couldn't detect who or what was coming toward him. A fierce howl resounded through the air that struck great fear in him, as he had heard this same noise at the massacre of his village. He was helpless against this vile beast and he knew it. In a few moments the 'demon' creature would be upon him. He couldn't see the beast from his position where the ground dipped slightly and because he was so low to the ground. Wondering how close his death was, he took the tiny dagger from the pocket of the backpack. Vordin held it tightly and noticed how badly his hand trembled.

"So, this is it. Fifteen years of life and now it's to be cut short. Looks as if they won't allow anyone to escape. What possible chance do I have? All that's left, is to accept my fate and try to be brave," he told himself, trying to force some courage into his last moments, although tears had begun to stream down his face and his whole body was weak with fear.

Before the creature could attack him, a black mass fell from the sky and landed a few feet in front of Vordin. This strange person, who had his back turned to Vordin, wore a black cloak with its hood covering his head. The cloak flapped in the breeze as Vordin stared in amazement. He could see that the mysterious man wore a pair of black pants and had a pair of well-worn black leather boots which came to mid calf.

The man turned his head to look down at the boy who was staring in astonishment at him, but did not utter a single word. His face remained unseen, as it was cast in dark shadow beneath

his hood. With a gust of wind, the dark black cloak moved slightly to reveal a sword sheathed in a black scabbard at this man's waist.

The Killnarin shrieked and howled at the sight of this new stranger who had suddenly made his appearance along its path. As this man continued to look at Vordin, in the blackness under his hood, two blood red eyes began to glow until they shone brightly. A low growl emitted from this being's throat as he looked away from Vordin to face the creature.

Vordin did not know what to think of this new situation and wondered if this person were friend or foe. The Killnarin howled defiantly at this man, but did not approach. The man then spun around and seized Vordin in one arm with an inhuman ease and leapt into the air, soaring away from the beast. Vordin watched as it pranced wildly around in anger and frustration below them.

Vordin was being carried high above the countryside as the man held him firmly in his grip. The black cloak flapped in the wind as they sped through the chill night air. He could see the mountain range below that he had been traveling toward and he wondered what intentions his silent captor had for him.

The stars sparkled above them and the full moon was bright. The forest which Vordin had traveled through and where Rasindell's hut lay, looked smaller than it had felt when he had been struggling through it. He followed the road with his eyes and caught a glimpse of Nilnont far behind them. It looked as if there had only been the one creature and Vordin wondered where all the others had gone.

"Perhaps, the beast was a scout of some sort. Maybe to check for survivors or maybe they knew that I had escaped them. But those creatures aren't what I have to worry about right now," thought Vordin, *"What is he planning to do with me? Does he intend to drop me to my death or does he have something worse in mind?"*

Vordin's legs dangled beneath him. They flew against the wind and as it whipped past them, Vordin found it to be icy cold. They were approaching the mountains and the sight was beautiful. There was snow on the mountaintops, but not much. The night shadows gave the snow a purple glow in places. He had lost track of the road, but he knew it was there, winding its way over the mountains and back down into the valley beyond. The mountains were mainly barren rock, but in places, there were trees and other vegetation. Vordin wondered about the trolls and dragons and where their caves and tunnels might be or if they in fact were just myth after all.

As they continued to fly, he noticed they were now flying at an incline to the mountains and finally they alighted on a mountaintop. The man still held him tightly and Vordin could not struggle free.

There was a dark cave set into the side of the mountain and this is where the man put him. Before the boy had any chance of escape, the man, with an unimaginable strength, rolled a large boulder in front of the cave entrance and Vordin found himself in complete darkness.

Remembering the lantern, he felt around in the backpack until he touched the cool metal of the case. After removing the box, he opened the small door and light filled his tiny prison. He could see that he was trapped within a small area between the boulder and the back wall of the alcove. There was no possible way for him to escape.

Fresh mountain air drifted through a small space between the boulder and the cave wall, and through this, he could see the stars shining in the black sky. He hoped that his captor would return to release him and with good intentions, but feared the worst. Vordin lay on the rock floor pondering the bizarre events that had happened in such a short time. Eventually, he slipped into a deep sleep out of exhaustion.

Lightening flashed and lit up the night sky for a few moments. Thunder roared loud and fierce. A heavy rain, much heavier than the night before, began to fall from above.

The tall pine trees, where the mysterious man in black stood now, were dense and made visibility difficult. The Black Shadow looked down at the body of the unknown girl lying on the dark soil. He had lured her out of the village of Dexcsin and into the nearby forest.

She had long beautiful hair, which was of the purest black. She was wearing a thin white gown, and as it became wet, it clung to her shapely form. What blood remained was slowly being washed away by the rain. Her wet, pale face seemed peaceful and it pained him to know she would never awaken.

He averted his gaze, as he could not bear to look at her further. A lump was beginning to form in the back of his throat and he choked it back. He felt guilt, self-hatred, sorrow, pity, frustration, and several other mixed emotions.

He looked up through the treetops to the night sky and let the cold rain wash over his face. He found the sound of the storm soothing and calming. He knew of a place in the forest where he could find shelter. At sunset tomorrow night, he would return for the boy.

CHAPTER 4 = CANDRA AND DENDROX

Meanwhile, as Vordin lay trapped in his rocky prison and the daylight faded, Candra, a twenty-three year old elf, and Dendrox, a twenty-two year old human, had decided to make their camp for the night. They were situated at the tree line, on the other side of the mountain range in Dee'ellkka Valley, where the grassy plain met the forest. There were small patches of grass here and there that had dared to fight for the sun's rays under the shadow of the tall pine trees. Farther into the forest, the smaller vegetation thrived on the light which filtered down from the treetops. Candra noted that although the majority of trees in the forest were pine and cedar, she could also see a few different types among them where the forest was less dense. She wondered if any of them bore edible nuts or if some of the bushes had berries or roots that they could collect.

Candra had wished that they had stopped earlier in the mountains before the rain had started, but she knew well that the edge of the vast forest, where they were now in the valley, would provide better protection than being out in the open. The cool rain washed against her face as she stared into the night sky. Her straight black hair fell a few inches above her shoulders and was wet along with her clothes. To keep her hair from clinging to her face, she tucked it behind her elfin ears.

The rainstorm eventually drizzled out. The smell of wet earth and pine filled the cool autumn air. A cool breeze, fresh and revitalizing, brought with it the pleasant smell of wild flowers.

She was cold and tired, and the warmth of a fire was what she had been looking forward to since late that afternoon. Now everything was too wet to get a fire started. Her feet, in her well-worn brown leather boots, ached from their long journey through the mountain pass.

"Finally, I might have drowned if the rain had continued like that," Candra said jokingly about the rain after it had stopped.

"Not a bad spot for the night," Dendrox commented about their campsite.

They had a clear view of the road from the trees in which they had made their shadowed camp, and if the need came, they could easily move farther into the forest for concealment against an encounter.

Candra could see the mountain range to the west and the dirt road which made its way down the mountain, across the grassy plain, past their position, and into the dense forest. She had been so thrilled at the sight of thick dark green grass on either side of the road when they had gotten to the base of the mountain, that she had taken off her boots and let her sore feet enjoy the cool rain soaked grass for several minutes.

Dendrox, the shy human boy from her childhood, now a young man, went about his preparations for the night and she thought to herself that she had better get started on hers as well before it got too dark to see.

A short bow was slung over her shoulder. With a sigh, the elf placed it on the ground in front of her. The quiver, which was situated on her back with its strap crossing diagonally over her chest, was next to be removed. Candra was thin and wore form-fitting clothes of a dark green color, the same as her eyes. She found, although not a necessity, that wearing close fitting clothes was an asset to her profession as a thief. Her cotton shirt was sleeveless with a v-shaped neckline and the bottoms of her pants she often tucked into the tops of her boots. At her waist, she wore a belt made of brown leather with a plain square metal buckle. She undid her belt and let it drop to the ground along with the two black leather pouches which were attached to the belt on either side of her hips.

"That feels much better. Now to get these boots off my aching feet," Candra commented pulling the boots off.

Dendrox had dark blue eyes and wore his straight dark brown hair at ear length. He had a pair of black pants as well as a navy blue vest over a plain black shirt with long sleeves. On his belt he wore a collection of throwing daggers.

"Yeah, that hike was pretty tiresome. Better to have traveled it in one day like we did though," Dendrox added as he removed his brown leather backpack. He removed its contents: two dark brown blankets and an empty water skin. He passed one of the blankets to Candra.

"Thanks," she said to Dendrox, "Hey, remind me to get some new boots when we get to town."

"Okay, sure," he agreed.

Candra spread out her blanket on the ground and Dendrox did the same. They were both thankful that the trees had sheltered the ground partially from the earlier rainfall, making the area less damp. Dendrox tossed the empty water skin back into the backpack and then removed the black leather pouch, which rested at the small of his back, and laid it beside the pack on the ground. He almost never parted with his daggers, even to sleep.

"So what do you think happened at that village we passed?" she asked.

"Don't know. Looked pretty bad though," he answered.

"I think we should have stopped there," Candra told him, "We could have gotten a few supplies. Maybe a few survivors could have told us what happened. Aren't you curious? I should have insisted on exploring the village instead of letting you drag me up the mountain trail like that."

"Come on, you saw it," was his reply, "There wasn't anyone still alive. Whatever happened there was awful and I didn't want to stick around to find out what. We're over the mountains now. We're in the valley and hopefully far enough away from danger. Just forget about it, at least for now, we're going to need our sleep tonight."

Soon they both were sitting uncomfortably on their separate blankets trying to rest their weary bodies.

The tall trees cast their shadows over the barren road. The moon above didn't add much to their visibility, the clouds dulling its light. Sight was not one of the senses they would be relying on much tonight and listening to every little sound would make sleep almost impossible, even though they would be taking turns with watch duty.

She knew the ground absorbed body heat and that having the blanket between her and it was the best thing to do. Packing more than one blanket each into Dendrox's backpack would be awkward and take up the room they needed to store any loot they came across, but still, she wished she had another one to drape over her. Her clothing didn't offer her much warmth on nights like these.

"How much farther to the town of Vackiindmire?" the elf asked.

"We'll probably reach it by tomorrow night, Candra. I can hardly wait," Dendrox said with exhaustion.

As she rubbed at her aching muscles, she said, "Yeah, same here."

He said with a sigh, "Just think... a hot bath, a hearty meal, and a good night's sleep in a warm comfortable bed."

"When we get there, I call first on that bath. I'm a lady after all," Candra said with a sly grin.

"Yeah right, we'll see about that one," he chuckled.

She wasn't sure if he were talking about the first bath or the part about being a 'lady', so she just said, "Good-night, Dendrox."

He gave her an annoyed look as he said, "Hey, I thought you were taking first watch."

"Oh you're such a pain," she said with a smile, "I was just seeing if I could get away with it."

"Hey Candra, while you're up, check to see how much gold we have left," he said as he stretched out on his blanket.

"Well, I'm not up," she said unwilling to move, "and besides, I already know that we'll have to do a little pocket searching when we get there. You can scout out the rich folk while I'm soaking in that hot bath."

"Yeah right. I can see it now. Some guy with a fat pouch smells this horrible stench and looks down to see my grinning face staring up at him, with my grimy hand where his gold should be," he said with a hint of sarcasm.

"Ha ha," Candra teased, "Just get some rest."

She lay watching the stars, imagining the huge feast she would be eating after her bath. Woodland creatures scurried through the brush and she tried to stay alert to every sound in order to detect any sign of danger.

The first snore made her jump, as always, with her hand to her bow in a swift reflex. She groaned slightly and sat up checking the forest and its shadows for any movement and listening for any sounds other than his snoring.

"*With all that noise, it will either attract danger or more likely scare it away,*" she thought to herself with a chuckle.

Candra rummaged through one of her pouches and retrieved her last bit of dried meat. "*We desperately need to get to a town. We've already gone through Dendrox's water skin coming over the mountains, and like me, he only has a small amount of food in that pouch of his. I think it might be the last of the cheese he has in there. Yes, he's saving it for tomorrow and he'd*

be really mad if I took a bite or two of it considering that it's probably all he has left. As tempting as it is, I better not," she thought to herself looking at her tiny portion of dried meat. "Well my pouches are empty now of both food and gold. I think he has a couple gold coins hidden away in his pouch, but that won't get us very far. It definitely won't be enough to rent a room for the night. This is ridiculous! We shouldn't have headed out so ill prepared. Sure, we expected to just grab whatever we needed along the road when we needed it, but that idea kind of fell through considering that the last and only village that we passed in the area was utterly destroyed!" she complained as she slowly chewed the meat and hoped that Dendrox was right about reaching Vackiindmire by nightfall the next day.

Her part of the watch was completely uneventful, and when it came time for his watch, she nudged him gently.

"Oh go away," he grumbled, half asleep.

"It's your turn," she said, poking him again impatiently.

"Already?" Dendrox complained.

"Yes already," she said, now annoyed and frustrated, "I can hardly keep my eyes open. Wake up and quit stalling!"

"Okay, okay, I'm up. Go to sleep," he said with a yawn.

"Oh no you don't! Get up," Candra insisted again.

He grunted and said, "I am. I am."

In an angry tone of voice she said to him, "Remember what happened last time you fell back to sleep on your watch?"

"I never," he protested.

"Oh yes you did. The time we stole those damn scissors. The ones with ivory and gold?" she reminded him.

Dendrox paused a moment in thought before he exclaimed, "Oh yeah, I remember those."

Not convinced with his answer, she continued, "I said to leave them, but oh no, you had to have them. Turns out they were magical or something, and we ended up running all over the countryside trying to get away from all those people hired to retrieve the damn things."

"Oh yeah. Whatever happened to those scissors?" Dendrox asked.

"How the hell should I know? You're the one who got rid of them," she said, this time extremely annoyed with him.

"I did?" he asked with a confused look on his face.

"Well they haven't been able to track us since, so you must have," she sighed, "I guess it's best if you don't remember. Now wake up. I'm going to sleep or at least I'm going to try."

"Oh you're such a pain," he bothered, "It's not going to matter much if we both doze off for a bit. The worst thing that'll happen is some animal will start gnawing at your toes."

"You know, you're a real moron when you first wake up. You say incredibly stupid things," she grumbled. Even though she was exhausted and annoyed, she couldn't help but smile at him.

He smiled also and then said, "Yeah, yeah, go to sleep."

"If I wake up and you're snoring away, I'll skin you alive," she threatened jokingly.

"Good-night already," Dendrox sighed.

Finally, she was asleep. "*Like I snore,*" he thought to himself.

Candra had been his best friend ever since he was a kid. She had always had a fiery spirit, was almost too self-dependant, and was very intimidating even when she wasn't trying to be. The fact that she stood six feet tall, was extremely head strong, and a deadly shot with a bow,

didn't help much to make people feel at ease around her either. She loved a good prank and was an extremely good thief. She was the best friend he ever had. Over the years, they had developed unspoken boundaries between themselves and both knew which ones not to cross and how far some of them could be pushed.

"She should listen to herself snore. It sounds like some dying beast. She'd never admit that she does though. Her snore is definitely worse than mine, if I even snore at all in the first place," thought Dendrox.

He brushed off as much debris as he could from his black pants and then he straightened his vest over his shirt as best as he could. He then began fidgeting with one of his throwing daggers waiting for dawn to break.

He looked over at Candra and at her straight black hair lying limply just above her shoulder. He could see at least three leaves and a couple of twigs tangled in it. *"Maybe it is best if she has that bath first, although I wouldn't ever be able to stop her from having one first anyway,"* he sighed. *"Alright, I definitely needed to get more rest than I did,"* he admitted. *"If we keep a low profile in Vackiindmire, we'll probably be able to take the horse drawn carriage that travels between it and the town of Shirikint. Candra would like that. Too bad I wasn't able to take that map with me. Well, okay, let's see what I can remember from it."*

Dendrox cleared and smoothed out a patch of dirt with his hand. He was thankful that the clouds had dispersed allowing the moon and stars to shine brightly enough for him to see by.

His eyes felt heavy and he yawned sleepily. *"At least this will help me stay awake for awhile. Alright, so this here is the valley."* Dendrox drew an oval shape in the soil with his dagger.

"Now on the west side are the mountains we just came over. These rocks will represent the mountains." He picked up a few small rocks and placed them on the dirt patch on the edge of the shape he had just drawn.

"On the eastern side and south edge are high cliffs which act as a barrier between the valley and the sea. These cliffs eventually meet up with the western mountains. The northern edge is the only place where it's open to the sea." He picked up a couple small twigs and placed them on the east and south sides of the oval.

"The forest is quiet large and is situated somewhat in the center of the valley, well just a bit farther south than what would be the center." Dendrox grabbed a handful of grass from nearby and placed a bit of it on his map to be the forest.

"The road goes down from the mountains, through this grassy area at its base, and then continues through the forest. This road would start here, near the southern part of the forest." He positioned his dagger near the bottom of his grass pile.

"We are camped here, on the very edge of the forest, a little distance north from the road, but still keeping it in view. Above the forest, far to the north, are grassy fields and on the eastern side is a lake. A river flows out of this lake traveling south through the forest and then I have no idea where it goes." He took his dagger and made wavy lines in the soil to represent the sea, lake, and river.

"Okay, now below the forest, to the south, is a smaller area of grassy fields before ending at the southern cliffs. In this area, close to the southern cliffs, is the town of Vackiindmire and where we want to go. Oh, and also there is a village, called Dexcsin, and that would be just below the forest, but closer to the mountains than Vackiindmire." He placed a couple of rocks to represent the town and village.

“This road we’re about to take, the one that continues out of the mountains, it goes roughly straight through the forest going east for a little more than half way. Then that road will meet up with the main road that runs north up to the town of Shirkint and south to Vackiindmire. There should be a little side road that leads to the small village of Dexcsin just as we come out of the forest on our way to Vackiindmire, but we don’t need to worry about that though.” Dendrox drew the road with his dagger in the dirt.

“Still have a lot of time to waste, so I might as well fill in the rest of the map.” He yawned and tried to keep his eyes open.

“I think above the forest, at the southern edge of the lake is the village of Leekkar, a road branching off the main road to lead to it,” he told himself making a line for the road, *“Then if you continue again north along the main road, it branches again and this time to the west back toward the mountains. The village of Torrnell is here.”* He placed a couple of rocks for the villages as he had done with the southern two places.

“All the way north, at the end of the main road, is the town of Shirkint and beyond that is the sea. I think there is a little side road just before that town which leads to the lakeside and a small boat dock there. I think there’s a dock at the village of Leekkar as well. I don’t think it’s even called a lake when it’s joined up like that to the sea. Not really important.”

“The forest must have been cleared away especially to make the roads, which will make for quick passage through the forest. We should make it to Vackiindmire by nightfall tomorrow, if we keep a steady pace.”

“Anyway, I have a pretty good idea of what the valley looks like,” thought Dendrox looking at his completed map, *“I can get us to where we’re going. Maybe the maps at Vackiindmire aren’t guarded so well against sticky fingers. Perhaps we should forget about trying to steal one and just buy a map. Of course we’ll have to steal the money to do so, but that shouldn’t be too difficult.”*

“So come morning, we just follow this road into the forest all the way east until it ends and forks north and south. Then follow the road south for awhile until we start coming out of the forest. Then ignore the side road which heads back west leading to the village of Dexcsin and just travel a little more south until we arrive at the town of Vackiindmire.”

“Okay, that kept me awake for a little while, now what? I really hate watch duty. I don’t see the point. If anything happened, we’d wake up in time. Well, maybe not, but still. I just hate being forced to sit here listening to my sleepy brain ramble on about nonsense.”

The night was a quiet one, with just the occasional rustle of leaves and small night creatures scampering about. Then there was the sharp sound of a twig breaking under a heavy foot. His heart started pounding rapidly in his chest as the adrenalin raced through his body. His eyes frantically searched in the direction that the sound had come from, but saw nothing. He clutched a dagger in his hand. He was quite skilled at dagger throwing, but knew that the darkness would be working against him if an opponent presented himself.

He listened hard for any further sounds of movement for quite some time. Hearing nothing more, he dismissed it as being nothing of importance. He thanked himself for not alerting Candra. He knew that he probably would have never heard the end of it for being spooked by such a trivial thing.

There was another snap of a twig. This time it was closer, but he could not detect any movement within the shadows of the forest. He was getting nervous and the thought of being ridiculed for being a coward by Candra quickly receded to the back of his mind.

“Candra,” he whispered frantically.

Her emerald green eyes bolted open with a quick alertness. At seeing the distress in his dark blue eyes, she reached for the bow beside her. She clutched it in her hand, a little disorientated at first, and then took an arrow from the quiver saying, "What is it?"

"A noise from the trees," he said as quietly as he could.

"Where?" she whispered. She moved from the ground up into a crouched position, with bow and arrow in hand, and quickly slung the quiver onto her back.

"There," he said as he gestured toward the trees with his dagger.

"I can't see anything. I can't detect any movement either. Are you sure?" she questioned.

Another snap of a twig sounded. It was closer now and again there was no sign of movement. Candra quickly pulled back the arrow in her bow and held it ready in the direction of the sound.

"Do you think it might be an ambush?" he asked, peering into the forest around them.

"No," she said in a toneless voice, concentrating on the direction the noise had come.

She was well trained in things like predicting the enemy's possible plan of attack, but still he doubted her. He thought to himself, his words dripping with sarcasm, *"It had seemed like a logical possibility to consider, but I couldn't question her reasoning, now could I? I wouldn't dare suggest that she may be wrong and should reconsider; I know better than to do that. Candra is way too stubborn to change an idea once it is set in her mind. In most situations she is usually right, having her unspoken reasons why she had made a decision. If you were smart, you'd go along with it and not argue. She says that there's no ambush, so that means concentrate in this direction, but I'm still going to keep an eye out just in case."*

He was proud to have her by his side, even though she was often annoying and practically intolerable. He knew she would say the exact thing about him as well. They had a strong bond with each other and that could never be broken no matter how much they quarreled.

"What's taking so long? Where is he, it, she, or whatever the thing is?" Dendrox whispered.

"Be patient," she said in that calm toneless voice again and never let her gaze stray.

Dendrox could see that her fingers were straining to hold the bow ready. He knew she would not break her concentration and hold, no matter what the cost. She was not one to let herself show or accept defeat and failure.

In a low almost inaudible voice she said, "Whoever it is, he's waiting for us to lower our guard. I have to get a better grip. Take the guard for a few seconds."

"Wasn't that what I was doing all this time?" he thought to himself.

It was her way of showing affection for him. She would protect him at all costs to herself. He knew to appreciate this, even though he was well capable of taking care of himself. She was not trying to show incompetence on his part, as most people would probably take it. He knew that he would sacrifice himself for her just as much as she would for him. In fact the reason why they always had trouble maintaining a relationship with someone else, was probably because they were so overprotective of each other. No one could impress 'the best friend' enough to gain approval and could never compete against their friendship. They had a special kind of love for each other.

"Okay, I'm ready again," she said as she stood in her solid stance, with her bow and arrow ready but undrawn. Her fingers ached from holding her bow ready for so long. *"Maybe it wasn't anything at all,"* Candra thought and then she whispered, "If there was someone, they surely would have made their move by now." She looked over to Dendrox and his shorter height

of five and a half feet. His hair was a complete mess. She decided, "Whoever it was probably saw that he was no match for us and left."

Dendrox searched his mind for some sort of explanation and then said, "What about someone invisible?"

"What?" she chuckled.

"No, I'm serious. I saw this guy do it once. He was showing off this magic spell he had just learnt. It took him several tries, almost to the point where I thought he was completely nuts, but he did it. It didn't last very long though," he told her.

"You really think so?" she asked as she considered this strange possibility.

"Could be," Dendrox said, "That would explain why we didn't see any movement and why it took him so long to approach."

"If so, he's long gone by now. Check our things. I'll keep watch while you do, just in case," she said in her authoritative voice.

Dendrox nodded and began his search through their belongings as Candra continued to watch for any movement in the surrounding vegetation. "It's not like they'll end up with much," he said to her.

"Just do it," she told him.

"Looks like we'll both have to change our plans. Now there's absolutely no chance of a hot bath, meal, or comfortable bed, no matter how cheap it might be. We've been cleaned out, right under our noses," he reported, "My pouch is gone, along with the last scrap of food which I so carefully had saved for my breakfast, and our last two gold coins."

Candra shrugged at the situation and said, "A couple of thieves getting robbed. How ironic." She tried to hide it, but Dendrox could see the frustration on her face.

He admitted, "Whoever it was, outsmarted us by far and well deserves his prize, but it doesn't make things any easier for us. It's still my watch, so I guess you should get back to sleep."

Dendrox was puzzled that there hadn't been any tracks made by the intruder. He wondered if it were possible for a spell to also hide footprints with magic. There had been no shadow cast by the intruder either, and this he was sure of as he had been watching for fear of an ambush.

They both returned to their blankets. Dendrox wriggled around trying to find a comfortable spot on his blanket that wasn't there. Candra settled back down onto her blanket, a tense look upon her face.

He attempted to lighten the situation by saying, "Oh, and by the way, you do snore."

"I do not," she protested, and he could see the faint glimpse of a smile creep across her pale lips.

CHAPTER 5 = THE ROAD