

THE JARL'S SHADOW

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Dedication

No man is an island, and never should he think that he himself is alone. Even in my lowest points, there have been those who were there with me. I would like to recognize some of them.

Angela Kable – My Dearest Friend. We reached out to each other for healing and became a team against insurmountable odds. I thank you sincerely for your wisdom and your teaching.

Dianne Paquet – You are the strongest woman I have ever known. Thank you for creating within me a love for reading. You showed me that the limits of our imagination are only bound by our perception of reality.

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The Jarl's Shadow

THE JARL'S SHADOW

Prelude

The Steward of Threa was floating in space. She had melded her construct and her consciousness directly into the sensor array of Northstar Observatory.

Myrnran Gaia had lost track of how long she had been in this state. Her recent activities on the surface of the experimentation platform of Threa had sparked emotions within her. These were feelings of a sort she had not known, even from before, when she was human.

As she looked down upon her world, she felt nearly overwhelmed with the tremendous responsibility she had undertaken.

For half a million years, she had been merely an observer, a collector of information. It was only in the most unusual of times did she ever venture to the surface to make her presence known.

Emotions welled up in her as she stared down over the green and mountainous expanse of New Pangea.

With a mental flex, her vision narrowed. She found herself looking down upon what was now known as the Valley of the Balance. From her perspective, she could see the twelve-mile-long chasm that Naseem of the Nephilim had opened, flooding the ancient tunnel system just under the surface. It looked like a long aquatic incision upon the gray expanse of the long-dead valley.

Only two weeks had passed since the epic battle between the Army of the Balance, and the Children of Halal had been thwarted by a combination of guile, communal effort, and diplomacy.

Already around the edges of the gorge, she could see hints of green. Life was returning to a land long-dead and cursed by an ancient evil.

The Steward knew that such things were not happenstance. Jon Raynecksson, The Warden of the Lands, had collaborated with the abundant wildlife and the very spirits of the land to ensure that life would not only return to that barren place but that it would thrive and prevail.

Myrnran sighed inwardly. Eventually, she knew she would have to stop her foolish emotional tirade and get on with her duties.

She continued to look down on the valley, and on a whim, zeroed in on the Army of the Balance's location. Both her and Jon's people had done a noble and heroic thing: ended a conflict before it ever indeed escalated.

"Steward, I am sorry to interrupt, but I wish to remind you that you have melded into the Northstar mainframe for over fourteen days. The Greys are concerned that such prolonged contact may begin to have adverse effects on your construct."

Myrnran Gaia frowned. Alpha, the Artificial Intelligence computer for the Northstar Observatory, tended to be quite invasive at times. Alpha had been giving her the same message for the last fourteen days, all of which she had ignored. She did not want to be confined to her construct yet again.

Out here, she truly felt alive. Out here, her emotions could manifest themselves as colors, shooting stars, and all manner of phenomena. Inside of her bioelectric construct, she felt isolated from her world.

"Steward, I am afraid I must insist. Either you will detach yourself from the mainframe, or I will detach you by force to ensure your safety. A forced detachment from what I understand would be very uncomfortable, even for you."

Myrnran gritted her teeth angrily. *"Alpha, if you attempt to detach me by force, I will turn your avatar into a scrap heap."*

She heard the metallic laughter of Alpha in her mind. *"Why hello Steward, so good to hear from you. If you wish to turn me into a scrap heap, that is acceptable. I will construct another avatar. My primary concern is for your safety."*

The Steward of Threa rolled her optics. Fine. It seemed there were still beings in this reality that she had no choice but to answer to.

With a concentrated effort, Myrnran Gaia returned to her construct. As she opened her optics, her team of Greys was standing around her command chair. None of them was taller than a meter, with skinny bodies, dangling limbs, and enormous heads.

The Steward shook her head from side to side, and the interface helm lifted off of her head. Slowly she stood up and shrugged her shoulders while stretching. It was not something she needed to do but merely a reaction leftover from when she was human.

She looked down at the Greys. "Don't you have something to do, or does this observatory no longer require the need of your services?"

At this, the Greys scurried off in multiple directions and as far away from the Steward as possible.

The Steward of Threa was in no mood to be trifled with as she stepped down off the raised dais her command chair rested on and proceeded over to the viewing window that gave an overview of Threa.

"Alpha to my command," she snapped.

Myrnran could hear the familiar humming, and out of a hallway on the other side of the bridge, the Avatar of Alpha appeared.

She turned, regarding the floating orb approaching her. Alpha had never been one for accessories, so its avatar was little more than a floating silver sphere with a giant eyeball that rotated around its circumference.

“It’s good to see you, Steward. I was beginning to think you may never awaken,” quipped the floating eye.

Myrnran narrowed her eyes. “You and the Greys are more than capable of handling the routine functions of this observatory,” she replied shortly.

Alpha’s eye dilated as it focused on her. “Routine functions are all taken care of. However, the non-routine functions, such as updating The Steward’s Log, are beyond our capabilities. We only have limited knowledge of what recently occurred on the surface, and we have found that such reports require a more human touch instead of mere logical data encoding.”

Myrnran huffed at Alpha’s response. She had lost all of her humanity on her two hundredth birthday when her fragile human body could no longer sustain life. She had decided to transfer her consciousness to a synthetic construct rather than take the next step towards spiritual ascension. What choice did she have? Either die hoping that her work would continue? Or, she could continue as an upgraded version of herself.

Since that time, there had been many upgrades until her consciousness module was so similar to a human body that it would be difficult for all but the most learned experts to discern she was synthetic.

Gaia looked towards the observation window and caught a glimpse of her reflection. Except for her ivory skin, she looked much like any other human would.

Only when other beings came close enough to look at her eyes did they begin to realize there was something not quite normal about her.

Walking up to the viewscreen, she looked at her eyes reflecting at her. Slightly enlarged and bright blue with gold lines crisscrossing them. As always, she had been told it was nearly impossible to hide the myriad of sensors that her optics housed.

Myrnran frowned and shrugged. It was only recently that anyone had gotten close enough to her to see her construct, let alone how her eyes appeared.

The thought brought her back to the task at hand.

“Alpha, prepare an entry in the Stewards Personal Log. Let me know when you are ready to proceed.”

The silvery orb drifted over to her and hummed briefly. “Ready to proceed, Steward.”

Myrnran cleared her throat and then chuckled. Another lingering human trait.

“This is Myrnran Gaia, Steward in Full Authority over the experimentation platform of Threa. Recent events on the surface of the planet compel me to render an account for historical accuracy.”

Myrnran walked back over to her command chair and sat down. With a wave of her hand, she brought up a virtual image of her notebook. Thumbing through several pages, she continued.

“I had been covertly observing a particular family in the colony of Numitgart on the continent of New Pangea. My purpose for this observation was to identify a series of genetic markers that I had been searching for. These genetic markers were placed within the first fifteen fertile eggs my fellow stewards and I supplied for genetic alteration. We then placed these altered eggs in fifteen of the most highly developed indigenous life form on the planet, now known as Earth. Since I was rather particular to my fertile egg, I placed a specific tracking signature on its DNA so that if my progeny were ever to appear, I would know about it.

Due to an almost cosmic turn of events, not only did my genetic marker show up in this colony, but so did five others. That is a topic for further observation and research. My chief interest was in my progeny.”

Myrnran became quiet. Even now, she felt a strange stirring as she continued. “My progeny is one, Jon

Raynecksson. He and his family are direct descendants of a colony rescued from what is now known as Greenland. The transplant was deemed both optimal and necessary due to remote location and poor land management.”

Myrnran turned another page. “Jon Raynecksson is so anatomically and mentally similar to my human form that he could have been either a sibling or a child when I was still capable of such human privileges.”

Again, Myrnran stopped. She found herself wistfully remembering her first encounter with Jon Raynecksson on the surface. It had been then that she had gifted him with the book of Great Knowledge given to her by Bestla back in a time when humans walked as gods in their own right among the stars. It had also been when she had instructed Schrock, a Messenger Raven, and one of Jon’s oldest friends to follow the young Ostman.

“It was evident through observation and the injection of control experiments that Jon was possessed of a vastly superior intellect as well as being an excellent physical human specimen. So much so, that he was on numerous occasions able to manifest the most difficult of reality changes and cause them to occur with no great effort. Thus, I came upon the idea for Jon to embark upon a secondary quest, which would coincide with his Warden’s Journey. A task required by his culture before being designated as Warden of the Lands.

I happened to interject an Arrival into a hunting expedition that Jon and several family members were on. By pirating a Benefactor transfer signal, I returned to a time in Earth’s ancient past and transplanted a Sabretooth of large proportions and high intelligence directly in front of Jon’s hunting expedition.

This Sabretooth was no common animal and had already exhibited an unnaturally high perceptive and reasoning ability as well as a limited telepathic

resonance. If he were left on Earth to procreate, his offspring would indeed have upset the Balance of natural evolution on Earth.

Rayneck the Red, Jon's Father, agreed to allow Jon to escort the beast, which he had named Splar, to a vast grassland beyond the Northern Reach. Seeing the opportunity, I directly intervened by making my presence known to Jon. I appointed him to the secondary mission of finding what else was in that location. Unfortunately, due to my limitations, I was unable to see this area before being granted full authority.

During the early part of his Journey, Jon encountered an unknown life form known as the Grognav. An extensive examination of a Grognav cadaver determined that they were a genetically altered and artificially grown species, at least at the beginning of their existence.

As Jon investigated further into the Northlands, A dying mother Polar bear pleaded for Jon to rescue her cub. Upon Jon and Splar meeting the cub, I detected a bio-rhythmic resonance and determined that this was a cub I had done a genetic alteration to at its birth. The cub had shown several signs of mutation, and I wanted its evolution tracked.

At that time, I received more information about what Jon might encounter as he advanced further into the uncharted northlands and decided to revisit him just after he rescued the Polar Bear cub, which he named Isbjorna.

During my visit with Jon, Splar, and Isbjorna, I made several upgrades to the communications technology I had provided to each of them previously. I also enhanced Jon's wave translator so that his comprehensive ability was elevated. I felt this was

necessary due to the level of difficulty regarding some change manifestations recorded in the book I gave him.”

Myrnran stood up from her chair and began pacing with her hands clasped behind her.

“It was also at this time I decided to interject another Arrival into Jon’s path. I decided to do this because I discovered an ancient Sumerian civilization out past the Northern range. It was long abandoned, and at the time, I did not know about the civilization or its demise. Observing events on Earth remotely, I found what I considered to be the foremost expert on Sumeria and ancient Earth cultures in general. One Kensai Balthazar was a Captain in the United States Air Force. She was a scientific liaison attached to a special operations unit working in the Fertile Crescent. I transplanted Captain Kensai Balthazar just before her air transport vessel crashed after being hit by a missile. Besides being Earth’s chief authority in ancient Middle Eastern cultures, she was also a very accomplished and decorated soldier, so I viewed her as another able companion for my progeny. Through only a slight manipulation of events, I caused Captain Balthazar’s vessel to crash on the surface of Threa not far from where Jon and his companions were traveling.”

Myrnran went back over to her virtual notebook and consulted a page.

“The appearance of Rafi of the Nephilim was a complete surprise, and through no actions of my own, he befriended Jon and his companions. Rafi was a mystery to me. During a situation where he nearly drowned, I took the opportunity to perform a brain scan and DNA analysis, which opened up a series of questions for my Benefactor superior, Xclatru Ral. Rafi was a sort of soldier designed to be superior to humans.

He was much larger than a human with highly superior strength. Further investigation revealed that

Anak, a Benefactor geneticist, had created Rafi and thousands of his brethren. Their purpose was to battle the armies of The Lightbringer, a being I later found out was none other than Halal, a former Steward of Earth before my posting and a brilliant if mentally unhinged geneticist.

It did not take a great deal of thought to start putting things together; genetically created soldiers from two different armies on the surface of Threa and an ancient Sumerian civilization that vanished without a trace.

The defining moment of clarity came when Jon and Kensai destroyed a battle droid in an old watchtower located on the ancient city's perimeter.

The disabled machine sent out a distress signal, and its destination was a lone mountain just to the north of the abandoned city. As my investigations progressed, it was evident that there was a technologically superior presence in or near that mountain.

It was then that my deeper investigations into the archives now at my disposal revealed a hidden vault within the Observatory Armory. So, of course, being curious, I investigated immediately.

The weaponry and the physical records discovered there filled in the blanks of this rather confusing mystery. Halal, the previous Steward of Earth, had been banished to an unknown point between the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies known as the Void.

After an unknown period, my superior Xclatru Ral removed Halal from the Void, stranding him and his Observatory far in the Northern Reaches of New Pangea.

I provided Jon Raynecksson and his companions with as much information as I could without directly intervening. However, he had already come to a similar conclusion. A central intelligence was leading an army of unknown size and capability.

That Army was massing for what appeared to be an invasion into the Southlands. While I stayed away from Jon Raynecksson, I did slip to Rafi of the Nephilim that help was on the way.”

Myrnran remembered back to her multiple visits to the surface. The humans and other creatures of Threa and were so different from the residents of Earth. So vibrant and full of life. Even Kensai Balthazar had remarked on more than one occasion that Threa was a world of fantasies become real.

The Steward looked back over her notebook and, with a gesture, flashed a series of algorithms on the main viewer.

“Right after that interview with Rafi, I enlisted the help of Schrock the Watcher Raven, who had been following Jon at my behest.

I briefly met with Schrock during his trek back to Numitgart to warn Rayneck the Red of the impending threat. I felt it necessary to upgrade his synaptic response and reasoning capability for him to complete his mission.

Overall, I needed to do very little. Like all Icelandic Ravens, Schrock was a direct descendant of Huginn and Muninn, the original Messengers of Odin. He was already gifted with both speech and a near-human intellect.

Once Schrock made his appearance known in a clearing near Numitgart’s Trelleborg, he called many forest defenders and Keepers of Nature’s Balance. These mainly were Ursine and wolves of various species.

I assisted him by projecting an Avatar image of myself for the animals to see. I then initiated a call to arms among the Ursine and the wolves of The Southlands. My call instructed the forest creatures that all willing defenders should proceed north with all haste to assist Jon Raynecksson and his companions.

Once that piece was in motion, Shrock proceeded to Numitgart. Upon arrival, he discovered that Rayneck the Red was already preparing ten thousand able men and women to march north.

Jarl Rayneck had dreamed of a series of dreams that led him to believe that his son Jon Raynecksson was in danger. Seeing that preparations were underway, I appeared before Jarl Rayneck, instructing him to initiate The Wild Hunt to expedite his army's arrival.

It was an ancient form of travel developed before technology made such things obsolete. The Wild Hunt would keep any abrupt and noticeable appearances of a large cadre of humans to anyone observing the surface, namely my superior Xclatru Ral."

The Steward closed her eyes. Initiating the Wild Hunt had been a snap decision that had taken a great deal of power to manifest the change for so many people. Thankfully, her construct, and the resources of North Star were up to the task.

"With The Jarl and his Army on their way, I headed east after my AI computer Alpha had indeed located other members of Rafi's people.

Seeing an opportunity to enlist their aid, I performed a blanket dream manipulation, which convinced these remaining Nephilim to head west back towards the city they had destroyed some six hundred years before.

My goal with all of these preparations was simple if a bit heavy-handed. I wanted Jon Raynecksson to have all of the resources available that I could give him without me as Steward of Threa becoming physically involved.

Most of what I did was not in violation of Benefactor Protocols, and if I crossed the line a few times, it was for the greater good, and no one was the wiser."

One of the Grays approached her with a tablet, and she scribbled her signature in several places. Daily

duties were often mundane, but Alpha was right; certain things required her direct attention.

After the Grey scuttled off, she continued. "Where was I? Oh yes. It all worked out far better than I had imagined. Jon Raynecksson had already reached out for help in his unique way.

By using his ability to speak to beings at higher levels of existence, he obtained the aid of a species representative. Her name was Deborah, and she was the collective consciousness of all of the bees on Threa.

All of the pieces came together, and Jon spoke to the hearts and minds of all assembled; humans, Nephilim, animals, and Spirits. I never determined if his success was part of his communication ability or his natural leadership skills.

One thing was clear, though, the assembled and now combined Army of the Balance was going to stop the impending advance of these Grogaw.

Intelligence reports from captured prisoners led Jon to find out that the Grogaw called themselves as well as their Army The Children of Halal."

At this, Myrnran's lips tightened, and her eyes narrowed. She wondered what happened to that undying maniac after one of his soldiers dumped him quite unceremoniously into the chasm of running water leading to some unknown abyss.

"In closing, I would like to say that although a conflict did occur, it was controlled using a little-known Benefactor directive, which allowed me to intervene directly.

After that intervention, I left matters in the hands of the Army of the Balance. Further bloodshed was averted because a diplomatic solution was reached.

I, as Steward in Full Authority of the Threa experimentation platform, considered the game a complete success with a win that even allowed me to

outplay my superior Xclatru Ral, who I have not heard from since.”

“Honestly, good riddance,” she murmured to herself.

“Do you want that last sentence also recorded, Steward?” Asked Alpha.

Myrnran looked up at the floating orb and rendered a half-smile. “No need. Ral knows I beat him, and I think I hurt his superiorly intellectual pride in doing so. We may not hear from him for a long time.”

Alpha hummed briefly, “acknowledged Steward. The record will be uploaded for archiving.”

As the Avatar of Alpha drifted away, it stopped, and the enormous red eye turned again to face her.

“I also agree. Good riddance to Xclatru Ral. Proper management of Threa seems to require a more...human touch.” At Alpha’s comment, Myrnran rolled her optics.

“Human,” she muttered under her breath.

Chapter One:

A Shadow Rises

She sat playing with her dolls. Nearby she could see several of her father's men conversing. They were all so big and hairy. Sometimes they scared her with all their face paint and sharp-edged things they carried.

Looking around, she saw her mother with several of her Ladies-In Waiting near the water's edge.

From a short distance away, the child saw her father, Rayneck the Red, approaching. Smiling, the little girl stood up and ran towards him. She could see her father grinning widely through his thick red beard.

Her father was bigger than any other man she had ever seen, but she was never scared of him.

"Papa! Papa!" She cried out as she ran.

She never saw the hole in the ground, more of a crevice hidden by the long grasses near the shore. All she remembered was how the soil felt under her feet, and then she felt no ground.

The big man's smile disappeared as he saw his daughter disappear. "Amra!" the girl heard her father cry out, and then she was falling.

Sharp rocks and roots cut her as she tumbled end over end for what seemed like ages. She could not figure out how to stop. Everything she tried to grab onto cut her hands or slipped from her grasp.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, she stopped tumbling down and crumpled into a sobbing heap. She felt like she had fallen for a very long time. She felt hurt everywhere, and her hands were wet and burning.

Opening her eyes, she could see nothing. Never in her young life had she known such complete darkness.

Even at home in the keep, her bedroom and playroom had torchlight and well-stocked fireplaces for light and warmth.

Here it was so dark it was as if she were blind, and it was cold, bitterly cold. She could feel icy, clammy rocks under her and heard water dripping somewhere.

Amra was terrified of the dark. In her young mind, this was like a nightmare come true. She could hear nothing from above—only the steady dripping of water in the darkness.

She must have lain there for hours in stark immobile terror before she somehow realized she was not alone.

Peering around in the darkness, she saw something a short distance away, something shimmering.

Crawling towards it, she began to make out other objects. A chair, some kind of table. Other things she could barely make out. As the young girl came upon the shimmering source, she realized it was some sort of blanket or covering.

Shivering against the cloying underground cold, she grasped it in her torn, burning hands and wrapped it around her tightly.

Suddenly she did not feel nearly as scared as she had before. The other objects in the room became much more visible. She was in some sort of cave that had been converted into a room.

Amra looked around for a door or other way out and found nothing. Oddly she did not feel the overwhelming terror of the darkness as she had before. She could see, and all of her hurts did not seem nearly so bad.

Mostly what she felt was afraid.

The minute she thought that, she heard the whisper, *“you are not alone. You are safe.”*

Again, the little girl cast her eyes about frantically.

“Who’s there? Who are you?” Seemingly in response, she felt the shimmery blue cover around her move.

"Please, do not be afraid. I do not want to hurt you. I am so alone here. Can you please stay for a while?"

In her young mind, Amra, for some reason, understood that the covering was speaking to her. The young child frowned and shrugged her shoulders.

It was like some fairy tale her mother would tell her before bedtime: a dark, sinister cave and a shimmering blue cloak.

"You are safe. Stay here, with me. Rest your eyes."

Amra suddenly felt very sleepy. As she drifted off, she had the feeling of slumping over, and then nothing.

The young girl must have dreamed because she saw her father in the darkness calling for her. He looked so sad and so scared, and Amra kept wanting to tell him she was safe.

Papa kept coming closer and closer, feeling around with his hands as though blind. Finally, after what seemed like forever, Amra felt her father's hands on her shoulders, and there was some great wrenching as though he was pulling her.

In some way, she sensed as much as she saw the presence of light through her closed eyelids. Opening them, she saw her father and next to her bed.

Both were crying hysterically, holding each other.

"Papa?" Amra heard herself murmur, "where am I?" both of her parents stopped and stared at her in shock.

"By all that is revered Rayneck! It worked." Her mother hurried over to Amra's side, and Rayneck simply stood there as if not knowing what to do.

"Papa, I saw you in my dreams," she said.

"I know Amra, I could feel you, but I could not see you." The big man wrung his great beard, wet with tears.

He collapsed to his knees at Amra's bedside, and she saw him make the sign of the Hammer over his heart.

"By Thor, I looked and looked for you! You have slept for many days since we pulled you out of that hole."

At the mention of the hole, Amra remembered. "Papa, it was so dark down there. I was so scared. I found something"...she looked around, searching for the shimmering blue cover. Surprisingly, it was wrapped around her.

Rayneck the Red touched the fabric almost reverently. "Amra, this cloak probably saved your life. It was so cold down in that hole that you would surely have frozen to death without it."

The young girl reached up, noticing that the cloak was hooded and partly covered her face. She made to pull it back and saw her mother flinch and look away.

Her father continued to look upon her as the hood slid back over her shoulders. From the corner of her eye, she saw her reflection in a mirror close to her bed. The image looking back at her was still her face, but her hair was now streaked with white among the red tresses her family was known for, and her eyes were large. Very large indeed! The strangest thing is they were now a shocking green and gold.

"Papa! What happened to me?" The child quickly pulled the hood back over her head in order to conceal her eyes and hair. From under the hood, she could still see her father looking at her.

"Amra, it took us a very long time to dig you out of that cave. Perhaps three days. When we found you, you were asleep, and nothing could wake you. The Skalds think something happened to you down there. They told me that if one fears enough, their hair will turn white."

Rayneck reached out, pulling her hood back. "As for your eyes, child, I cannot say. I have never seen such."

Her father pulled a strand of her silvery hair back behind her ear and smiled.

"I quite like them," he said finally with a huge grin. "Many are the people of Numitgart who are special. It appears you are now one of them."

Jarl Rayneck put his massive arms around the little girl and pulled her close. "All that matters to me is that you are safe, Amra."

Amra reached her arms around her father's neck and held on for dear life. "Papa! Papa! Thank you for saving me from the dark! Thank you for saving me!"

Rayneck, the Red, looked over the shoulder of the child. He regarded his wife with a most severe gaze.

Slowly so as not to disturb his daughter, Rayneck, the Red brought a finger to his lips. Dianara returned his gaze and nodded briefly. Then, turning, she left her daughter's bedroom without another word.

The little girl with her flowing blue hooded cloak was always by her father's side from that day forward. For her, he was more than a Father. He was a mighty hero who had saved her from the darkness. She knew this because the whispers told her so.

Everywhere that the Jarl went, so did Amra. She was always in his presence, standing quietly or whispering in his ear. So much so that people began calling her The Jarl's Shadow.

Amra rather liked the name, as did her father. Over the following weeks, Amra's condition improved considerably. Her hair slowly regained its original auburn color except for two long silvery streaks in the front that never seemed to go away.

It was her mother and her nursemaid that began noticing the strange behavior. Amra would be found absent from her bed at all hours of the night, only to be found wandering somewhere in the keep.

This began worrying her mother to no end. She ordered her daughter's door bolted shut from the outside at night and guarded by two men at arms.

However, this seemed to do little to stop the child's antics. The Jarl began hearing rumors of Amra still wandering the darkened halls seeming to appear from

nowhere and then disappearing just as quickly into some shadowy corner.

Then things started going missing. It was never anything special, but Rayneck would hear of a woman missing a piece of jewelry, or one of his men would complain of losing a necklace or a ring.

After a fitful night of dreaming and contemplating the unusual rumors, Rayneck sprung upon an idea. If there was a thief in his house, they must be lured into a trap and brought to justice.

Thieves were frowned upon highly, especially in the Jarl's keep. After some discussion with his Skalds, Jarl Rayneck put his plan in motion.

It was simple. He went to the Sergeant at Arms room and left something lying on a table that no thief would pass by—a beautifully crafted dagger with a long-curved blade and an elegant hilt designed like a serpent. Two golden jewels adorned it to represent eyes.

Rayneck had always admired this dagger, one of the first pieces his son Adnar had made while learning his craft at the forge. He had forged it so masterfully that the Jarl often remarked on the craftsmanship.

He remembered the day his son had walked up to him while at dinner and handed it over. "It is too small and pretty for one such as me," remarked Adnar simply as he turned and strode from the hall.

Turning the dagger over and over in his hands, Rayneck could hear himself saying the same. While it was a weapon of exquisite work, it was not a tool for warfare. He had even jokingly remarked on several occasions that it was more for an assassin than anything else. To such words, Dianara merely rolled her eyes and smiled at her husband's strange meanderings.

Laying the dagger down, Rayneck quietly retired to a darkened corner of the room near a window covered by a floor-length drapery.

If a thief were in their midst, skulking for pretty baubles, such a thing would surely catch their eye.

The Jarl sat there on the floor long into the night with only his thoughts. From the nearby window, he could hear the nightbirds calling and the insects chirping.

In the distance, he could hear the watch calling the time in conjunction with the hour bell. This was when Rayneck felt most at peace and also most alone.

Often a man alone with his thoughts for too long conjured up all sorts of mysterious things that needed pondering. Rayneck felt himself nodding off, and for a moment, he thought perhaps he was dreaming when the familiar blue cloak of his daughter appeared in the far corner of the other side of the room.

Even though her hood was pulled low over her face, Rayneck knew it was Amra. She seemed to float along more than walk as she glided out of the shadows. Then, with little more than a glance at the dagger, Rayneck saw her reach down and grasp it.

He saw Amra turn her head right and left, which caused her greenish-gold eyes to shine in the dim torchlight. Then with a swift dash, the hooded little girl headed for the very corner he occupied.

Rayneck grinned, thinking that perhaps a good scare would stop his daughter's thieving ways once and for all. As she approached, he reached out to grab her. Then his hands passed through nothing.

The Jarl stood in disbelief. As soon as Amra had entered the shadow he had hidden in, she had vanished before his very eyes!

"By Odin's missing eye!" He exclaimed, "what manner of illusion is this?" Furrowing his brow, Rayneck stormed out of the room.

Amra's chambers were on the far side of the keep, and it took the Jarl several minutes to walk there. As he

passed his guards, he questioned them to ask if they had seen his daughter.

All of them had nothing but quizzical looks and no reports of her passing. Finally, Rayneck reached his daughter's chamber door. Motioning his men-at-arms aside, he unbolted the door and swung it wide.

There sat Amra on the edge of her bed, inspecting the dagger she had recently stolen. She looked up in terror as her father barged in.

Standing up, she stood there looking very afraid and very helpless. The dagger fell from her fingers and struck the stone floor with a loud clatter.

"Papa I..." was all she said, then words failed her.

The young girl covered her face with her hands and began to sob quietly. Rayneck slowly walked up and looked down upon his daughter.

Her sobbing melted his cold composure, and he felt tears escaping from his eyes as well. Kneeling, he pulled Amra's hands away from her face. His poor sweet little girl looked so ashamed.

"How long?" He asked simply.

Amra lowered her eyes. "I do not know, Father, maybe just two ten days. One night I could not sleep. Mama had locked the door, but I wanted to go out. There was a voice in my head that kept saying to go where it was dark. So I walked over there," she pointed to a shadowed corner. "Next I knew, I was outside and free."

Rayneck stood up slowly. He sat down on the edge of Amra's bed. At his beckoning, the child climbed into his lap, and he wrapped his arms around her.

"It was so strange, Father, like one of the stories mama would tell me before bedtime. I found out that I could walk into any place with a shadow, and I was someplace else. It was like a hallway full of windows and doorways. Every one of them seemed to go someplace

different. I could see other places in the keep, and when I went through a doorway, I was there."

Rayneck sat quietly for some time. It was not by any means the strangest story he had heard. Many times, he had walked in stranger places when he dreamed.

That was his gift from the Lady of the Lands. In his dreams, he saw things and heard even more.

As he sat there slowly rocking back and forth with his daughter on his lap, Rayneck began coming to several conclusions.

Firstly, it was clear that his daughter had inherited some form of gift as well. Many of his people had unique gifts from the Lady. It was just something that the people of Numitgart accepted.

Secondly, whatever had happened down in the deep cavern near the shore had set Amra's gift in motion.

After a moment, the Jarl struck upon an idea. Standing up, he sat his daughter down on her bed and knelt before her. "Do not fret, dearest child."

Rayneck took his daughter's hands in his. "Already they call you The Jarl's Shadow. Perhaps the name is a true omen of your gift."

She looked up wide-eyed. "You are not angry, Papa?"

Rayneck attempted to look stern. "I cannot allow thievery within the keep." Amra looked down at her father's severe expression, sure she was to be punished.

"However," he continued, and Amra looked back up sheepishly. "Every Jarl needs people who can do quiet things. Sometimes things he doesn't want other people to know. Would you like to help your father like that?"

The smile on his daughter's face made the Jarl's stern expression soften. "Oh, Father, yes! I would do anything to help you!"

Rayneck smiled again briefly and then became serious once again.

"You have taken many things, Amra. I can only assume you have done so because you like pretty things like most young girls. Am I correct in this?"

Amra nodded her head and appeared to be about to cry again. Rayneck placed a finger under her chin and lifted it until her eyes met his.

"You are to return all you have taken in the same way you took them. No one must know you ever took anything. We cannot have the Jarl's daughter branded as a thief, can we?"

The little girl shook her head vigorously from side to side with a playful smile. Rayneck reached down and picked up the dagger Amra had dropped.

"This, you may keep," he said, handing the weapon back to her.

The girl took the dagger carefully into her hands and clutched it to her chest.

The Jarl stood abruptly, "but if you are going to have something like that, you had better learn how to use it. I will talk to someone who may be able to help you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Papa! Anything you wish!" exclaimed the girl.

Rayneck narrowed his eyes and showed his teeth.

"You also have a long night ahead of you, Amra Raynecksdotter. Before the suns rise, you will return all you have taken. Is that clear?"

Amra nodded her head again, indicating she understood. The Jarl turned and strode from the room.

As he was about to leave, he looked over his shoulder, "one last thing, daughter."

Amra looked up from the dagger in her hands.

"No one else knows. The Jarl's Shadow is a shadow with a purpose," he said.

With that, Rayneck the Red exited her room. Amra stood up slowly and walked over to her dressing table, opening the drawer.

It was filled with trinkets and baubles. In Amra's mind, she heard a whispering giggle as if a playful child was skipping through her thoughts.

"A long night indeed," she whispered with a smile.

It took little time for the young girl to become accustomed to her new role. For her, it was often more like a game of hiding and seeking.

Her father, ever one to keep up pretenses, kept increasing the difficulty of the game. While Amra found this annoying, she was determined to prove herself.

Rayneck doubled the guard on Amra's door. He then ordered her bedroom to be brightly lit. While this posed a problem, Amra became adept at finding shadows and darkness in places people never thought to look.

Perhaps it had never occurred to her father that by brightly lighting her chambers, he also increased the shadows under her bed.

Whatever the case, Amra was always able to escape from her room and return as she pleased. On every adventure, she would take something pretty.

The stipulation was that she must return anything taken the previous day by the next day's dawn.

Sometimes her father would give her interesting tasks such as listening to groups of men conversing in muted tones in the keep's lower reaches or spending time in one of the local taverns, listening to the common folk's gossip. In doing so, Amra became the Jarl's eyes and ears in places he could not go and learn truths that certain men kept to themselves.

On other occasions, he would have her retrieve something he had placed somewhere in the keep. Although such tasks proved to be progressively tricky, Amra considered it all to be great fun.

Outsmarting guards and soldiers and taking things almost from under people's noses became part and parcel of her life.

She never seemed to question that she required little or no sleep. It just felt natural for her to roam the night, but she grew older, subtle changes did begin to happen.

Perhaps it was her nightly escapades or lack of time under the sun, but she noticed that large dark circles began to appear around her unusual greenish-gold eyes.

Moreover, her skin became pallid in appearance regardless of how much time she spent in daylight.

The white streaks in her hair began to appear again until they ran evenly through the signature red tresses that were her family's trademark.

Sometimes her mother would take keen notice and expressed concern saying that Amra looked like a Hagbui. How would she ever marry and have a family if she did not care better for herself?

For such meandering, Amra cared nothing. She was her father's shadow, The Jarl's Shadow. He had saved her from the darkness of the abyss, judging her not for her strange ways and appearance. But, instead, he had embraced her and told her not to fret.

For her, serving her father was her life. She was as inseparable from him as his actual shadow was.

Several months after the Jarl had made his initial discovery, he strode into her chambers one evening. Amra had been just about to go on her nightly haunt and turned as her father walked in.

"Yes, Papa?" The girl asked. The Jarl walked up and gave her a warm embrace. In quiet times, these were the moments that made her the happiest. Amra returned her father's embrace and kissed his cheek.

She could feel that something was wrong from the worn look on the Jarl's face. "Papa, what troubles you?" She asked as she placed her hand on top of her father's.

"I told you before that if you were to carry that dagger, you should learn to use it." Rayneck the Red's voice was as solemn as the look on his face.

Amra giggled. "Of course, I know how to use a dagger, father. I have training for two hours each morning. We learn all manner of weapons and fighting from the Sergeant at Arms."

Rayneck the Red closed his eyes and sighed deeply. "Do you have it with you?" He asked quietly. Amra nodded, and reaching behind her, she produced the curved blade with the serpent hilt. The two green jewels of the serpent's eyes sparkled in the torchlight.

"Tis a most elegant weapon, my daughter," commented the Jarl. "May I?" He gestured for the dagger, and Amra readily handed it to him.

The Jarl turned it end over end for several moments.

"This weapon was your older brother's first true creation as a blacksmith. Did you know that?" Amra again nodded, unsure where the Jarl was leading her.

"I discovered ages ago that he forged it after a design he learned from one of his teachers in the eastern colonies."

Rayneck the Red held the dagger by its hilt and inspected the blade before continuing.

"This is not a weapon of warfare, my dear. Such weapons as a sword and ax or hammer are designed to assist a man or woman in battle."

Her father handed the dagger back to her.

"That weapon is designed only to kill. It is the weapon of a Snikmorder."

Amra inhaled sharply at the word. She, of course, knew the stories of the dark men who killed in secret. All knew those stories how each Jarl employed one or more of his or her own, as did Karls and nobles.

While she was still learning the nobility and court intrigue methods, she was aware that her father

employed several Snikmordor. They were never seen or known, simply rumors that people whispered about over mugs of mead in dark tavern corners.

Her father looked at her solemnly.

“Amra, you have an amazing gift. To move as one with the shadows is something I have never heard of or read. You can go places, see and do what it takes those who are Snikmorder decades to master, and even then, they are bound by physical limitations you no longer seem to possess.”

Amra must have had a puzzled expression on her face because her father continued. “Men may hide in shadows, but they are still bound by flesh and blood.”

Her father placed his calloused hand over hers.

“You are bound only by the light and your own imagination. That is a special gift, indeed.”

The Jarl stood as if deciding something in his mind.

“Such a gift should not be squandered by merely spying and taking pretty objects. Come with me. I want you to meet someone.”

He turned abruptly and walked out of her room. Amra stared at his retreating form for a moment and then hurried after him.

She followed her father’s enormous form as he marched to a far corner of the keep and began descending a steep staircase. She had been here before but had never gone down the stairs.

Even now, many months after her fall into that sightless cavern, she had a cloying fear of going down underground. Amra gritted her teeth against that fear and remained in step close behind the Jarl.

Downward they seemed to descend for many long minutes, perhaps for half of an hour before the Jarl ducked his head through what looked far more like a natural cave opening than hewn stone.

Amra had heard the stories that the keep of Numitgart resided atop a series of caves and tunnels predating the first colonists some twenty generations ago. Apparently, the stories were true she surmised as she saw her father light a torch and continue further into the pitch-black caverns.

After a brief period, Amra began to see another light shining in the distance, which her father approached.

Within just a few moments, they stepped into a much larger area lit by torches and a very old-looking fireplace.

Around a table near the fire sat three people wearing hooded cloaks similar to her own but colored coal black. All were conversing quietly and playing Hnefatafl.

Amra always had been intrigued by the game and watched as it was skillfully played.

After a moment, one of them looked up.

"Jarl Rayneck," stated the hooded figure in a coarse voice. Amra was puzzled. Usually, men and women deferred to her father, paying him the respect due to his station. However, these people did nothing of the sort.

To Amra, they felt menacing and cold. The man who had spoken stood up finally. She could feel him looking down at her even though she could not see his eyes from beneath the blackened hood.

Amra noted that the fabric of his clothing and cloak were not so much black as blackened as he moved closer. A sort of soot as if from a fireplace seemed to cover every part of him, even his face.

"Your daughter," the man again stated in his toneless voice. Her father nodded curtly. The man stood stock still for a moment, then he moved. He moved so fast that Amra barely saw it.

What she saw was a flash of metal arcing towards her father, and Amra reacted without thinking. Her few short months of training and the thought of her father in imminent danger provoked her reaction. Out flashed

her dagger, and the next she knew, she was thrusting towards the man's groin.

She was somewhat surprised when her blade made no contact, and the man whirled away, coming at the Jarl from another direction.

Amra narrowed her eyes. Now she understood. It was like another game. The Jarl, however, had laid his life on the line for the outcome.

Just as the man advanced for another strike, Amra stepped sideways and disappeared into the shadows. Now she was where she felt most comfortable.

Before her lay the endless hallway of doorways and windows. Finding her way here no longer baffled Amra. She simply thought of a place she remembered seeing in the shadows.

Stepping through a doorway, she reappeared from the shadows just behind the man attacking her father.

Quickly she stepped forward and delivered a vicious kick to the back of his closest leg.

The man let out a grunt and dropped to one knee. Then, taking advantage of the man's suddenly lower height, she stepped forward, driving her dagger towards the back of his neck, just where the spine met the skull.

"Enough!" The Jarl suddenly shouted. Amra stopped her attack, both terrified and bewildered.

Slowly she re-sheathed her weapon. The man rose and sheathed his sword. Her father was looking at him.

"Well?"

The man grunted again, "good reflexes. The trick with the shadows is impressive." The man turned and regarded her with his arms crossed.

"Can you train her or not, Shivnr?" Demanded the Jarl. The one called Shivnr reached up and removed his hood. Amra noted that his head was clean-shaven, as was his face.

The shocking thing for her was seeing Runes and sigils tattooed all over his soot-covered skin. Amra knew that this man was a Sigmorder as likely were his two companions still sitting, quietly observing.

Shivnr nodded once and held out his hand.

"Yes. For enough coin."

The Jarl showed his teeth under his beard and produced a heavy purse.

"Train her. Train her to kill men like you, Shivnr. I have heard rumors and have dreamed that a quiet and subtle element has arisen among my ranks. It is nothing I can remedy on my own unless I were to butcher a whole herd of suspects."

Rayneck the Red leaned his head towards Shivnr.

"Many suspects. Many suspicions. I can't go around beheading everyone based on dreams and suspicion."

Shivnr nodded again just once, "I feel she will be the aptest pupil Jarl Rayneck."

Amra remained silent. She was determined to prove her worth to her father. If this was how she could prove it, then so be it. She looked up at the Jarl just as he looked down from her.

"Learn from these men how to kill men such as they are. It will complete your training as The Jarl's Shadow. Do you understand?"

Amra lowered her eyes. She had known from the moment she had awakened those many months ago in her bed after being rescued that she would never be an ordinary little girl again

Inside her mind, she heard the quiet girlish whisper.

"Tell him. Say you understand."

Amra looked to the man called Shivnr and back to her father. She nodded only once, as Shivnr had done.

"Yes, Father, I understand."

Rayneck the Red knelt in front of her and lifted her chin with a finger. To her eyes, he seemed very sad.

He stood abruptly and strode out of the cavern. Amra watched his retreating form and the light of his torch fade. Shivnr looked down at her.

“Let me show you how to stop what just happened before a man can even draw his blade.”

From that night on, her father never came to her room to visit. Truth be told, she was almost never alone with him again.

When she was in his presence, he appeared aloof and distant towards her, even when she whispered things to him he needed to know.

Rarely did he return words to her in conversation. Instead, she began receiving notes inscribed in strange codes she was required to decipher. Her shadowy soot-covered mentors ensured that Amra became well versed in solving and writing many types of codes.

In this way, Father and daughter continued to communicate; and how she received her tasks. At times her father would write very tender touching things, but never again was he publicly affectionate.

Her father’s distant nature towards her was to remove her from the intricacies of court affairs. His aloofness was copied in public by her mother and her older brother. Amra slowly faded out of being the center of family affairs and court politics because everyone ignored her just as the Jarl did.

In actuality, this suited Amra just fine. She always felt people stared too long and too often with her red and white streaked hair, greenish-gold eyes, and pallid skin.

Her training with her mentors continued as well as daily exercise with the Sergeant at arms, she learned many things from both teachers; both types of fighting had their respective place and time.

However, once she had explained to Shivnr how she could walk with the shadows, her training took on a whole new meaning. The menacing tattooed assassin

changed her thinking about combining combat with shadow walking.

He had often told her, "it is a rare gift to be able to strike from many places seemingly at once. Rarer still is it to be able to strike from shadows completely unseen."

Neither the Jarl nor her mother ever asked about her training with Shivnr and his nameless companions. It was well that they did not, for it was often emotionally and physically excruciating.

In due time, weeks became months, and it wasn't until the night before her tenth birthday when she discovered a coded message from her father: *"I need The Jarl's Shadow this night. Come to the lower hall at the midnight hour."*

Amra was perplexed. She knew that the lower hall was where men gathered to discuss affairs, not meant for random ears to hear.

She looked to the time glass near her bed. The slowly descending sand told her that it was half-past the eleventh hour already.

She pulled her hood over her head and gathered her billowing cloak around her. As she stepped into the shadows in the far corner of her room, she could hear the girlish whisper behind her eyes, *"be ready."*

Amra stepped from one world into the next. Before her lay the endless hall of doors and windows. It took but a moment to find the right one to enter, and she stepped out into the shadows near the fireplace of the lower hall.

Already men had gathered, and she saw her father sitting on his heavy chair at the other end of the room.

Before him was a long table with many chairs; the Karls of Numitgart occupied all. Staying in the darkness away from the torchlight, Amra drifted silently around the room until she was standing just behind and to one side of her father's chair.

It would have appeared as though she were just another eerie silhouette thrown up by the flickering light in the room for anyone looking.

After some time, each man at the table, in his turn, stood and approached the Jarl. Each man bowed and left something at her father's feet—weapons, bags presumably full of coin, parchments, and scrolls.

Amra began to understand that this was a ceremony of fealty. She heard of such things being done in secret so as not to rob any man of his dignity by bowing in subservience publicly.

About halfway through the ceremony, two men stood and approached at once. Presumably, they were Thaness who had joint holding over lands protected by the Jarl.

As they came, Amra began to feel very uneasy. Something about the two men was not right. She could see their eyes shifting and then staring; each seemed pale, and their brows dribbled sweat down their faces.

They ambled as if they were deliberately trying to maintain composure. Finally, both men stood at the base of the dais that her father's chair rested on. Then they stepped closer.

Amra felt very tense and began breathing slowly and deeply. She knew what these men were about to do. No one approached Rayneck the Red this closely unless he bid them do so.

It all seemed to happen so fast and at the same time so slowly. She saw both men reach under their cloaks and heard the unmistakable sound of metal on leather as they began to draw the weapons they had hidden.

Amra knew it was time. She had played this game thousands of times with Shivnr. She knew what to do.

As she stepped forward, she drew her dagger and thrust it up into the closest man's throat in the same motion. Twisting her blade viciously, she yanked the

dagger out from the side of the bewildered attacker's neck, showering the other man with blood.

Allowing momentum to assist, she sliced through the side of the other attacker's neck and returned her dagger to its sheath place just above her right hip.

She continued her step and moved into the shadows on the other side of her father's chair. Both men fell to the floor and did not move.

To the men at the table looking on, it appeared as though a flickering obscure blue shade had moved in front of the Jarl and disappeared before the two men fell at Rayneck's feet.

Amra looked to her father. He peered at her from the corner of his eyes and gave the slightest of nods. Amra stepped further back into the shadows and vanished.

She emerged from the shadows in the lower chambers where Shivnr resided. The grim-looking assassin had just finished rubbing his bald head with soot from the fireplace, and she could barely see his skin under the dark smearing.

Amra quickly and excitedly informed her mentor of what had just happened. Shivnr sat and listened to the rapid litany until she finally ran out of breath.

She stood looking towards him expectantly. Indeed, such a thing was worthy of his praise finally.

The man looked at her with his cold gray eyes. Slowly she saw his ordinarily expressionless face become grim, and then his eyes narrowed in anger, and he frowned.

"Sit down here," he motioned to the chair across the table from him. Amra looked down. Had she done something incorrectly?

She moved over to the chair, and once seated, Shivnr began to speak. "What you have done is nothing to be proud of."

Amra's eyes opened wide with shock and incomprehension. "Master Shivnr, I did everything you said to do. Everything you taught me! It was so easy."

Shivnr slapped his hand upon the table, causing the playing pieces on the board to jump.

Shivnr never displayed emotion. Often, he was so cold that Amra wondered if he was even human.

"There is nothing easy about what you did! You snuffed out two lives! It is nothing to take pride in!"

For the first time in as long as she could remember, Amra felt tears welling up in her eyes. What had she done wrong?

"If you wish to be proud of something, be proud of the skill you displayed protecting your father, the Jarl!"

Amra sat stock still, not knowing what to say. Shivnr's face returned to its typical stony expression.

"I will explain something to you about myself so that perhaps you will understand."

Shivnr pulled out his dagger and placed it on the table. Next to it, he placed a length of wood that looked like a double-ended spoon.

Looking down at the two items, he continued, "I do not kill or steal or spy upon men's affairs because I enjoy doing so. I am what I am because the choices I made in my life drove the hands of Fate to define my path."

Shivnr placed his soot darkened forearms on the table and leaned forward.

"I do what I do because the life I have led makes me better than anyone else at such dark happenings. It does not cause me pride. Just like you, I am an agent of the Balance. We do our work because there are times we must maintain the Balance by less than noble means."

Shivnr took up the dagger. With a swift strike, he brought it down, burying the tip into the tabletop.

Upon the tip of the hilt, he placed the double-ended spoon. It swayed slightly on one end than the other and then became still.

"Imagine that this is the Balance. Every life, every death, every action, every word or behavior affects the Balance. All that is in our world is part of the Balance."

Shivnr's voice was quiet, and Amra leaned forward to hear him.

"These are things you have told me before, Master. What does it have to do with what I just did, and why do you seem so angry with me?"

Shivnr was silent for a moment. "You feel no remorse for what you have done?"

Amra thought momentarily. "No, Master, I did what you taught me and what my father bid of me? So why should I feel remorse?"

At her comment, Shivnr smiled slightly. It was the first time she had seen him smile in all the time Amra had been his pupil.

"I understand now," he replied. He lifted his eyes from the table. "Let's put it into perspective, shall we?"

Shivnr picked up several round pebbles from the table. Amra had seen him and his companions use them countless times as wager pieces in their games.

Shivnr placed a pebble in each depression of the spoon. Amra saw that it remained in Balance.

"What occurred alters Balance in two different ways."

He placed another pebble at one end. Again, the spoon swayed slightly lower.

"You saved your father's life. In doing so, you ensured the peace and prosperity of Numitgart."

He added another pebble to the heavier side.

"Because you saved your father, you maintained the stability of your family." He added another pebble.

“Because you maintained that family stability, you have ensured the happiness of your mother and your siblings. With me so far?”

Amra nodded, and Shivnr continued, “these are all positive things that tip the Balance to the side of good. However, we must look at the other side. We must see all of the consequences of our actions.”

Amra thought she was beginning to understand.

“So, I did a good thing for many by just killing two men. I do not see my error in being proud of doing so.”

Shivnr nodded curtly. “I can see that. I believe it is because you do not perceive both sides of the Balance. For every positive action, a negative must occur for the Balance to be maintained.”

Shivnr picked up a handful of pebbles. He dropped two into the empty depression of the double spoon.

“Two lives were snuffed out before their allotted time. Untimely death, especially by violent means, causes an upset to the Balance, like a ripple in a pond.”

He dropped another pebble into the spoon. It began to sway. “A Karldom has lost its leader and second in command. Another will need to be chosen. This new leader may be good, or he may not. That is his choice to make that will drive his Fate.”

Shivnr added two more pebbles.

“Two wives lost their husbands. Two families lost their fathers. If the fathers and mothers of those two men still live then, they have lost their sons.”

Amra observed the double spoon. It was sitting evenly. “My actions maintained the Balance.”

Shivnr shook his head slightly. “To the casual observer perhaps. Remember that all things affect the Balance.” He added another pebble, and the spoon dipped again.

"That pebble is the anguish of two wives. How would your mother deal with the loss of your father?" He added another, and the spoon dipped further.

"The tears of sons and daughters who will never know their fathers embrace again. How would it feel to you if your father had died this night and you could have done nothing to save him."

He added another pebble.

"Imagine the pain a mother and father would feel to lose a son or daughter before his or her allotted time. Parents are not supposed to bury their children. That pain in itself brings catastrophic ripples to the Balance."

Shivnr added the last pebble, and the spoon weighed heavily to one side.

"Finally, what of the future cut off from these two men? Perhaps Fate would have seen fit for them to have more children who could have brought their ripples to the Balance. How would you feel if your father had died and your baby brother Jon had never been born?"

Shivnr sat back in his chair and regarded Amra.

"Yes. You did the right thing. You followed the orders of the Jarl, and you performed as you were trained. I commend you for that."

He again leaned forward. "However, remember this. Never be proud of killing someone. Every life lost before its allotted time weighs heavily towards the dark side of the Balance. Sometimes there is no other choice, as tonight showed you. Sometimes we do what we have to do to protect the light side of the Balance. That is why we are what we are. We are the agents of the Balance, and our responsibility is grave indeed."

Shivnr stood. "You will kill again. That is part of you now. When you do, you will not think of this conversation. You will simply do it because you are the Jarl's Shadow."

As Shivnr turned towards the fireplace, Amra was shocked to see tears cutting lines down his soot-covered face.

“You will because you have to,” he stated. “Never be proud to do so. Do it and get it done, but always remember this conversation afterward. If you fail to remember it, then you are in danger of losing what makes you human. Do you understand?”

Amra felts tears streaming down her face. Never had she considered such things before. It was frightening to know that while she had done so much good for her father, she may have caused even more harm. She said as much to Shivnr.

“Eeeegh! Think not of it now. What is done is done. No life can be brought back, especially from what you explained to me. Simply always remember that you have an awesome responsibility now. The Jarl’s Shadow is an agent of the Balance in the highest standing.”

Her mentor turned his gaze back to the fire, and he stood as still as a statue.

Having seen him do this countless times before, Amra knew that was her cue to exit. Quietly she left the table and sped towards the closest shadow she could find. Then, just as quickly, she was in her bed-chamber.

Collapsing on the bed, she began to sob uncontrollably. Shivnr was a harsh master, but Amra knew that his every word to her was a lesson.

What if she had been unable to stop those men? What would have happened to Numitgart? What would have happened to her family?

She sobbed even more deeply upon thinking of the two men. What were their wives doing now? And how much pain and suffering would they endure from here on out, because of her?

She recalled Shivnr's words about the children of the two men. What would be going through their heads right now, knowing that their fathers would never return?

Amra's pain became overwhelming. She could feel her heart pounding, and it was hard to breathe. Then the voice behind her eyes spoke to her.

"Embrace all that you feel now," the girlish whisper intoned. *"Reach down and grasp the pain you feel."*

Amra sat up in her bed and crossed her legs. She began breathing deeply. Slowly she felt a sense of calm come over her.

Part of her training was to embrace the almost constant mental, emotional, and physical pain she endured in order to come back time and again to that lower cavern.

Embracing this pain was much more powerful. Closing her eyes, Amra found herself among the shadows of her mind.

Gone was the endless hall of doors and windows. She stood before a black pit that swirled like some inky soup.

"Reach down and embrace me," the voice whispered.

Amra reached down and from the pit rose a childlike hand and arm.

She grasped the hand and felt herself being pulled downward. In the swirling blackness, she felt a pair of arms wrap around her, and she returned the embrace.

Amra was calm now. Her mind cleared, and her heart slowed back down to its slow, heavy beat.

"Well done. All of life is pain. Your pain can break you, or it can make you unbreakable. The choice is yours. Grow from this pain or remain a slave to it."

Amra slowly opened her eyes. She had returned to her bed-chamber.

Quietly she collapsed on her pillow, and for the first time in many moons, the Jarl's Shadow slept in dreamless peace.

Chapter Two

Aggressive Engagement

The Jarl's Shadow watched over the activity down below. The bluff where the final peace accord was established between the Children of Halal and the Army of the Balance was now one of her favorite viewing spots.

Amra often seemed to do little more than observe and follow the Jarl as part of her father's entourage. That was how she wanted it to appear. That was also how the Jarl wanted it.

The less that people knew about Amra, the better. Her manners and clothing were nondescript. While nobles of the Jarls court wore rich apparel and proudly displayed their weapons, Amra was far different.

Her attire was a functional and straightforward two-piece jerkin and pants that clung to a diminutive form. Her ever-present blue cloak covered these.

Behind her, she heard heavy booted feet and the creaking wheels of a massively burdened carriage.

Amra instinctively stepped back into the shadow of the tree she stood near. As the shadow surrounded her, she vanished into it.

She saw the source of the noise finally. Her brother Adnar was leading a team of oxen who bore the weight of a makeshift wagon.

Upon the wagon was a massive stone. It was fully the height of any of the Golden Giants she had encountered.

Keeping the stone steady on the carriage was the Grogaw she had come to know as Ja'Leck. The enormous monster had his hands upon both rock and carriage while at the same time pushing to assist the Oxen straining at the heavy load.

Amra knew what they were about. Of course, she knew. She had been in this very clearing when her brother Jon had clasped arms with Ja'Leck in the final agreement of peace.

That stone would be the monument for all to see that Balance had been brought to the northlands again.

The carriage finally came to a stop, and Amra could hear Adnar and Ja'Leck conversing.

"Here in the center, yes?" She heard her brother ask the Grogaw commander.

"Aye, human," replied Ja'Leck.

Amra still had a hard time understanding their language even though Jon had manifested Ansuz the Rune of Communication so all present at the Line of The Balance so they could understand each other.

Not so much because the language was unclear but more that Grogaw voices sounded like rocks rolling down the side of a hill.

She heard her brother chuckle. "Why do you keep referring to me by race instead of by my name?"

Ja'Leck chuckled in reply, which made Amra's ears twitch at the sound. "Because it reminds me that I am not supposed to eat you."

Adnar chuckled as he pulled his Warhammer out of the carriage and set its head upon the ground. Standing wide-legged, he regarded the hulking Grogaw.

"I do not think you would find me to be an easy kill or good to your taste, Ja'Leck."

The Grogaw commander smiled, looking down at Adnar. Even for all of her brother's height and size, Ja'Leck still towered over him by more than a head span.

"If the humans who came here to wage war are anything like the rest of the humans, then you are surely right. We were always told that men were weak creatures."

Now it was Adnar's turn to smile, "I believe your former master was used to dealing with humans of a different nature. Men and women here are not weak, either in mind or body."

Ja'Leck nodded, "the Deceiver told us many things that were untrue. He filled our minds with dreams and lies. Even now, I can hear whispers in my mind, as if he were still among us."

Amra saw the look of concern on Adnar's face even from this distance.

"Do you think he still lives?"

Ja'Leck shrugged his massive shoulders, "if he does, what does it matter now? His power over us is gone. Deceivers can only hide behind their masks for so long, and then the game is finished."

Adnar looked solemn. Turning to the massive stone on the carriage, he asked, "Help me stand it upright?"

Amra watched as the two grasped the tall stone and set it in place in the middle of the clearing. It always amazed her how strong her brother was. The Grognav commander was no slouch either, and she watched in reluctant admiration of their physical prowess.

Her eyes hardened. She was not strong, or tall, or even beautiful. In the eyes of many, she was simply no one.

"*No matter,*" she thought. While she may not have beauty or strength, she had something no one else could lay claim to. Silently stepping even further into the shadows, The Jarl's Shadow vanished.

Rayneck the Red stood next to Kensai Balthazar as they observed preparations for the journey back to Numitgart.

Since trade agreements were established, it had become clear that a well-built road would be necessary,

not to mention that moving ten thousand Ostmen would require a clear path.

As they watched, Naseem, the Golden Giant approached. Both Rayneck and Kensai looked up at the towering figure.

"It appears to be going well," stated the ancient Nephilim as he made scribbles on a piece of parchment the size of a tapestry.

Rayneck ran his hands through his beard and shook his head slowly. "So far. Your idea to send out a quarter of the contingent to clear the way in advance was good thinking."

Naseem winked at the Jarl, "building a road through the uncharted wilderness is quite the undertaking. Your son, the Warden, may not be concerned with such things. But merchants, caravans, and commoners will use this road. It must be built well."

"Guarded well too," remarked Kensai somberly.

Rayneck turned to Kensai, "we discussed that before. There are no dangers to speak of now in the wildlands. We are at peace."

Kensai rolled her eyes, "Any time you build a road between two population centers where there was none before, the potential arises for people to take from other people. We still don't know all of what is out there. Jon, Splar, and Isbjorna were moving quickly through the lands. Two animals who move quietly by instinct and your very capable son would not have raised much notice to groups of outlaws. For example, we never encountered that mining colony you said was supposed to be out here. It very well could be that they are still out there and they decided to change their trade."

Rayneck frowned. Kensai reminded him of his wife with her frank speech and mannerisms. However, he could not argue with her reasoning.

“Such a discussion must be held for another time. For the time being, we are in such numbers that there should be little to fear.”

The Jarl gave Kensai a sidelong glance. “Especially since your soon-to-be husband will be the one guiding us back.”

Kensai flushed and smiled at his words. Not two weeks had passed since Jon had made his wonderfully awkward proposal in front of everyone. It still seemed like a dream to her. She scanned the horizon to see if she could spot him.

On a distant hill overlooking the activity below, Jon Raynecksson stood quietly. Next to him sat Splar, the enigmatic companion always.

As he contemplated recent events, he felt a familiar presence suddenly.

“I know you are there. Come out and stop trying to startle me.”

As Jon swiveled his head around, Amra stepped from the shadows between two boulders, her hooded midnight blue cloak swirling in the breeze.

“It always amazes me that you know I am nearby,” she quipped.

Jon chuckled. “Our older brother is the only one who can still make me jump.”

Amra smirked. “Aye. I just saw him and the Grognav commander up on the bluff.

They were moving the raw stone into place. Jon looked where Amra’s eyes were pointing. The bluff was easily several Vei from where they were standing. That was Amra’s gift. For all of her unassuming appearance, Amra was what his father called a Shadow Walker.

Her gift was so unique that it was documented in the sagas as the first of its kind.

Such a gift caused ominous mutterings among the common folk of Numitgart. Even as a child, Amra would

simply walk into a shadow, any shadow, and suddenly vanish, only to reappear somewhere else in the keep as she walked out of another shadow.

Many considered Amra touched by the dark powers for such a gift, and people with no understanding of gifts often shunned her.

Even Jon, with his unique gifts, had a difficult time understanding his older sister. He always knew when she was near; not because he felt her presence, but because he sensed a slight disturbance in the Balance.

Amra walked up beside him; Jon regarded her with an impassive gaze.

Amra half smiled at him. "What is it, little brother?"

Jon frowned. Even now that he had attained favor with some unknown Presence in the Strange Places, Amra was still disturbing to him. It often felt as if she were two people occupying the same mortal shell. He well remembered the story his mother had told him as a young boy where Amra had gone missing.

Rayneck never spoke about the dream he had while he communed with Amra. The only thing that everyone knew for sure was that when he awoke, so did Amra.

From that day forward, Amra rarely spoke, and if she did, it was little more than a whisper. She could often be seen sitting next to Rayneck and leaning over to whisper in his ear.

Jon shuddered inwardly. Being closed in for even short amounts of time caused a natural panic to swell within him. He could not even fathom being underground in some dark cavern for days on end.

Amra continued to watch the activities below.

"A great deal of preparation for the journey, dear brother," she murmured.

"Aye," Jon replied, "It is one thing to fly between the world of dreams and reality and another entirely to travel by more mundane methods."

Amra nodded absently. Jon continued his sidelong glances at Amra. She always seemed to be somewhere else in her thoughts. Many found it quite disturbing to fall prey to her vacant stares as if she was looking right through them.

She looked up at Jon, catching his sidelong gaze.

“Jon, please stop trying to discern me. I barely understand myself. Even you, for all of your gifts, could not fathom what I am.”

Amra turned away, her hooded cloak billowing around her, “I will go to Father. He is looking for me.”

Jon watched as Amra approached the shadows between the two boulders. Again he felt that strange disturbance in the Balance as Amra form seemed to become part of the shadows and vanish.

He continued to look at the boulders

“What are you looking at, Warden?”

Jon jumped. He had forgotten Splar was with him.

“You did not see her did you?” Jon asked as he reached up to scratch his friend under his chin.

“See who? If you mean your sister, no, I did not see her. I felt her for a moment, and I smelled her. There are few who actually see her unless she wants to be seen.”

Splar turned and looked down at his charge. *“I have only been around your sister for a short time. She has the favor of something I do not understand.”*

Jon smiled slightly, “there are many in Numitgart who are favored by the Lady, Splar.” The giant feline looked up, gazing back out over the valley floor where men and Golden Giants packed wagons with supplies for the journey south.

“I know of your gifts, Warden, and also the favor of the Lady. What resides with your sister is not from the Lady. It is something else.”

Myrnran Gaia stood upon the bridge of Northstar Observatory. She looked forlornly down upon her world with all of its greens and blues. She felt very much like a mother missing her children. For that is what the peoples of Threa were now. Her children.

Yet even now, she found herself still keenly interested in the events that were occurring after the recent Battle of the Balance. What was more concerning to her was her unexpected visitor. Turning away from the viewing window, she faced the strange arrival.

"You are certain?"

The being regarded her with slanted golden eyes; while some indications led Myrnran to believe it to be a female, its asexual appearance, the finely scaled blue skin, and shocking white hair made it difficult to determine.

The scientist in her had been analyzing the visitor since it arrived. Tall, finely boned, almost aristocratic features, slightly built but musculature still evident.

"If you would stop staring at me for a moment, I will tell you what I know."

Myrnran stiffened slightly. "My apologies. I tend to do that when someone unusual and unexpected just suddenly appears on my bridge."

The creature's eyes narrowed slightly, and the barest hint of a smile appeared. "My apologies also for startling you. However, it was deemed of utmost importance that I engage with you directly Steward of Threa."

Myrnran regarded the strange being again. While certainly alien, its features held more than just a passing resemblance to a human. The difference was its iridescent blue skin.

"Steward, if we could return to the matter at hand instead of admiring my dermal layer, we can proceed."

Gaia furrowed her brows. "Very well. How may I address you?"

“My name is rather difficult to pronounce even for you, but you may call me Nem’JaHal. I have come to warn you of a vessel approaching your planet.”

With a mental flex, Gaia activated the long-range tracking systems of Northstar Observatory.

“I don’t see anything out there,” she stated flatly.

Again, the being afforded her with a wisp of a smile.

“You would not be able to see it on long-range sensors. The vessel is very small, and its hull infused with deflective material.”

Myrnran crossed her arms as she regarded the alien.

“Why are you so concerned about one vessel? The Polaris star system is by no means off-limits. My responsibility is Threa, not some random ship deciding to pass through.”

Nem’Jahal returned her gaze. “As I said, the vessel’s last known coordinates were the planet known as Threa. We have a concern that the passengers of the ship may attempt to land there.”

Myrnran was becoming annoyed.

“Look, Nem’JaHal or whatever your name is, that is not a huge point of concern. Threa, while under Benefactor directive, and my Stewardship has no issue with visitors. Our concerns lie with the populations we monitor. So if someone wants to take a look at what we are doing, that is not a problem.”

Myrnran could see the creature was flustered.

“You fail to understand, Steward. The passengers on the vessel are fugitives and likely headed this way to seek asylum from prosecution for their crimes.”

Myrnran took a moment to digest this.

“What planet are you from?” she asked suddenly.

Nem’JaHal narrowed her eyes, “that information is not relevant, however for purposes of reference, my people are from what your Earth humans call the Arcturus system.”

Now it was Myrnran's turn to narrow her eyes.

"Arturius is a Red Giant star. No orbiting planets."

"Do not believe all that you are told or all that you see," retorted Nem'JaHal. "We choose not to be seen for reasons of our own. We find that when we interact with other species, there are unpleasant occurrences."

At this, Myrnran stepped back reflexively. Inwardly she cursed herself for appearing weak. Of course, there was nothing biological that could harm her. Yet, at the core of her essence, her instincts were still human. Her reaction elicited a laugh from Nem'JaHal.

"It is not me you need to fear Steward of Threa. As I said, the vessel passengers are fugitives and will be dealt with as fugitives. The only reason I came here to tell you anything was as a courtesy. We are well aware of your mandate of no advanced warfare upon the surface of your platform. Does that mandate extend to the rest of your star system?"

Myrnran's eyes widened. "No, as long as such an altercation does not alter the integrity of Threa."

Nem'JaHal nodded curtly. "Good. Then I suggest you let my people deal with these fugitives. We will ensure that no harm comes to your precious experiment."

As soon as the alien finished speaking, it blinked out of existence just as suddenly as it had appeared.

The Steward of Threa stared at the space that the Arturian known as Nem'JaHal had just occupied.

"Alpha! I assume you heard all of that?"

The Northstar Observatory Artificial Intelligence system hummed briefly, "Of course, Steward. I am Alpha. I hear everything."

Myrnran rolled her optics. "*Sometimes, I think it has a god complex of its own.*" Myrnran walked over to her main terminal. With a wave of her hand, a series of virtual screens appeared in front of her.

“Long-range sensors, please, Alpha. I want to see all the way out to the edge of the system.”

The virtual monitor became a viewscreen, and the entire triple star system became visible. As she pointed her fingers in certain areas, the planetary bodies became visible to include Threa.

“The weird blue alien said a vessel was approaching.”

“Affirmative, Steward. While the vessel may be constructed of a deflective material, it will still have some form of propulsion. I am narrowing search parameters to identify energy signatures now.”

After several seconds, a red blip appeared on-screen.

“There, Steward. What I am seeing is a stream of radioactive byproducts commonly seen in matter/anti-matter reactions. That is a propulsion signature.”

Myrnran smiled. “Very clever, Alpha. Is that the only stream you can see?”

Alpha hummed quietly. At the same time, Myrnran’s viewscreens were jumping crazily from area to area as if mimicking Alpha’s search efforts.

Finally, the screens slowed down and zeroed in on a distant area of the Polaris system some distance behind the first energy signature.

“Yes, Steward, there it is. It appears to be closing rapidly to engage the first vessel.”

Myrnran lowered her eyes. Engagements between the same species were not her area of responsibility—especially off-world conflicts. The only way she could become directly involved was if the safety of the inhabitants of Threa were in question.

“The aggressor is projecting a strong energy reading.”

Myrnran looked up and saw a flash of light speeding away from the trailing ship towards the fugitives’ vessel.

She watched in shock as the vessel erupted in stark reality on her view screen. It was nothing really much to

look at—a typically oblong vessel. The image glowed brightly for a moment and then disappeared.

“Steward, the fugitive ship has been destroyed. However, some sort of object detached itself just before it was vaporized.”

“What kind of object?” Demanded Myrnran. In her mind, she already had a glimmer of an idea.

“Unknown Steward, but the object is on a collision course with the surface of Threa.”

“A weapon of some sort?”

“Negative Steward, there appears to be no energy signature to indicate a weapon. I am reading three life forms similar to that of our recent visitor.”

Myrnran hurried over to the viewing window.

“All screens to the main viewing window. Get a lock on that object and also the aggressor's vessel.

Myrnran now saw a clear picture of what was headed towards her planet. It was small and shaped much like an elongated pyramid. There were no windows or exterior markings.

“Atmospheric entry in 2 minutes, Steward. Also, be advised that the aggressor's vessel has emitted another energy burst headed directly for the escaping ship.”

Myrnran whirled around. “The aggressor ship fired on an escape pod?”

“That is affirmative, Steward,” intoned Alpha.

Myrnran turned back around. “That means they fired a weapon that could impact Threa, correct?”

“Theoretically speaking, yes, Steward, but...”

“Alpha target that energy burst and disable it.”

Myrnran placed her hand on a panel, and a helmet dotted with apertures descended onto her head.

“Red alert! Red alert! Battle Stations! Initiate automated defense systems.”

The entire bridge was now bathed in an eerie red light as Greys were hurrying to their stations.

“Alpha, initiate Erasure Protocol against that ship!”

Alpha was silent for a moment, “Steward, are you certain this is a wise course of action?”

“Alpha, remove that ship before it has the chance to fire again. I repeat, initiate Erasure Protocol!”

“Acknowledged Steward. Erasure Protocol enabled.” She sat in her command chair, and the helmet lowered over her head. With a thought, Myrnran Gaia melded with Northstar.

As she opened her eyes, she was looking out on Threa. All around her was the emptiness of space.

Looking to her right, she saw the life pod speeding towards the surface. In the distance behind it, she could see the shapeless blob of darkness emitting a trail of particles and rapidly converging on the life pod.

As if in slow motion, she could see the spurt of energy the blob had fired towards the life pod. Myrnran brought up her hands. To anyone looking at Northstar from the outside, it would have appeared as though two gigantic tendrils of purple mist suddenly manifested in space around the Observatory.

The tendrils coalesced into shapes resembling hands. Myrnran reached out with her left hand and grasped the bolt of energy. Reaching out further with her right, she now held the aggressor ship in her palm.

The Steward of Threa brought her hands together in a loud clap. Out in the void of space, the energy bolt reversed its direction, and the aggressor ship was suddenly speeding towards it.

The two objects met, and briefly, a purple-tinged star flared over the planet of Threa.

As Myrnran looked back towards her world, the life pod sped like a bullet. As it pierced the cloudy atmosphere, Myrnran lost track of it due to the ever-present radioactive flux that permeated the very essence of the world.

“Alpha, can we track where it's going to land?”

After a moment, Alpha answered. “Steward, if it maintains its current speed and trajectory, it will come to rest somewhere in the Northlands.”

Myrnran blinked, causing her link to Northstar to be severed. “Will it be near the Valley of the Balance?”

“That is uncertain, Steward. However, I am quite sure that wherever it lands, someone is going to see it.

Myrnran nodded. The ship was moving too fast for her to create a transposition pocket. There was little she could do but hope.

“Alpha, I am headed to the surface.” As much as she had been planning to stay out of the affairs of the Rayneck family, it appeared a visit was in order.

Chapter Three:

Unlikely Companions

Amra sat next to Rayneck the Red. All around them were members of the family. Jon, of course, was seated next to Kensai. Somewhat back from the fire, the larger members of their extended fold stood silently.

Rafi relaxed with his hands resting on his metal war club. Naseem and two other Giants stood near him.

Across the fire from them sat Ja'Leck, the Grognav commander. Since the preliminary negotiations, he had chosen to make his presence known whenever a fire council convened.

At the edge of the shadows, Amra could just make out Splar. He appeared to be sleeping, but his ears were twitching. He was listening to the talk around the fire.

Looking up in a nearby tree, she could make out the shadowy figures of Schrock and Sharan.

The two messengers watched over the spectacle below much as Huginn and Muninn had watched for mighty Odin long ago.

In such surroundings, Amra always felt very insignificant. She gathered her hooded midnight blue cloak around her and shivered. Not so much from the cold. She sensed something, as though someone had just walked across her grave.

Just as she shivered, she saw Jon stop and look up.
"By the Hammer! Look to the sky!"

Amra raised her eyes to the starry night. Far above, a purple light flashed so brightly as to dim the luminescence of the moons.

"Odin's Spear, what is that?" exclaimed Rayneck.

Amra leaned close to her father's ear. "I feel something, father. The gods do battle this night."

Jon looked over at Amra and smirked. "I am quite sure that something is about to happen. However, I think the only god involved is the Lady of the Lands."

Amra scowled. "You mock the gods because one favors you, little brother. Do not forget that there are other gods besides your silvery mistress."

At this, Kensai stood up and was about to reply. Jon placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Nay. Do not allow my sister to raise your ire. She has not seen what we have seen."

Kensai slowly sat down but cast a watchful eye over the hooded features of Amra.

"Mouthy little thing, isn't she?" she murmured.

At this, Rayneck chuckled. "That's the most she has said in days, Captain Balthazar. When my daughter speaks, it usually means I should listen."

"Yes, Jarl Rayneck, you probably should!"

It was a voice all of them heard. It was not spoken aloud, but every member of the fire council could hear it as distinctly as distant thunder.

The fire they were converged around flared and crackled an uncanny purple shade, and out of the flames, the Lady of the Lands walked. The entire council was stunned, speechless.

Almost as one, they began to kneel, even Ja'Leck of the Grogaw, although he knew not why.

"Enough!" Commanded the Lady. "I do not have time for formalities, and I am no one to worship, that I can assure you! Everyone, sit down. I have a problem, and I need to discuss it with the only people who might be close enough to assist me."

Slowly the assembly settled back into their seats. Gaia was looking intently at each of them.

"There is someone else here. How come I do not see them?" Finally, her eyes settled on Amra.

"Amra Raynecksdotter, correct?"

Amra stepped back involuntarily. She may have just chided her brother for his interaction with The Lady of the Lands, but never in her wildest imagination did she think the Lady even knew about her, let alone her name.

"Well, young lady, speak up," demanded the Lady.

Then she stared very strangely at Amra.

"Excuse me, everyone," with an expansive wave of her hands, and everything suddenly seemed to stop.

Amra looked around the campfire. Everyone, even her brother Jon, seemed somehow frozen in place. She could hear no sounds either. The nearly constant ambiance of the wildlands had ceased.

Looking up, she saw the Lady moving towards her as she continued to regard Amra. Amra noticed that the Lady of the Lands had the most peculiar blue and gold eyes as she came close.

"I think it's time you and I had a moment to ourselves, Amra. My name is Myrnran Gaia. I am sure you have heard of me."

Amra was speechless.

"Do you mind, dear one?" Asked Gaia as she reached forward and placed her hand just below Amra's throat.

She looked down at the Lady's hand and watched in terror as it sank into her body. It felt as if someone was pushing icicles into her. After a moment, she felt the Lady's hand close into a fist.

Myrnran Gaia yanked backward hard, and Amra felt as if something was being torn from her. She lost all feeling and collapsed to the ground. Struggling to breathe, she looked up at Gaia uncomprehendingly. Within her grasp was Amra's midnight blue cloak.

In Gaia's hands, it moved like a living thing, writing and squirming until Gaia let go causing the cloak to sink to the ground next to Amra.

Slowly the Amra's cloak took on the form of what appeared to be a small girl of perhaps nine years.

She was clothed in shadows only, and her skin was so profoundly blue that it shone like ebony in the moonlight. The girl slowly stood up. She looked at Amra with glowing red eyes and then back over to the Lady and finally towards the ground.

Gaia knelt in front of the childlike being and lifted its chin with one finger.

"Skadi," stated Gaia flatly.

Removing her hand Gaia stood back up, and Amra's eyes followed her.

"By the gods, what is that?" She ejected.

The Lady smiled, "I take it you never knew about your passenger, did you?"

Amra tried to shake her head and found that she couldn't move. From her neck down, she felt nothing.

She lowered her eyes to the ground. She knew, of course, she knew—the whispers in her mind, the strange feelings she often had. So many occasions came flooding back to her where something had happened in the darkness.

"Lady Gaia, please do not harm the girl. I am at fault here, but I acted in her best interests, I assure you."

The indigo child raised her hands towards Gaia in supplication. The Steward of Threa looked down at the child, quite like a mother ready to do a scolding.

She again knelt, this time placing her hands upon Amra's head. The blinding pain she felt quickly subsided, but she was still unable to move.

"Lady Gaia, please try to understand. The child would have died if I had not done something drastic to save her."

Amra saw Gaia swivel her head towards the creature she called Skadi.

“You mean something as drastic as possessing her? Of all the foolish things for someone to do. How long have you been hiding inside of her?”

Skadi also knelt, looking at Amra lying on the ground. She reached out and touched Amra’s face, moving a strand of her silvery hair back behind her ear.

“By her recollection of the time, seventeen years.”

Skadi went to her knees suddenly.

“Lady Gaia! Please let me back inside! Can you not feel it? Her life is slipping away from her! I can feel myself slipping as well! It is so cold here!”

Gaia had a look of profound concern.

“By all that is sacred! She is dying, and so are you! Quickly, put your arms around her!”

Amra saw the shining black girl lean over her as she wrapped her arms around Amra’s unresponsive body. Gaia stood back up and uttered a series of words that sounded vaguely like the Old Language.

She placed her hands together and made several wringing and squeezing motions. Skadi disappeared, and Amra’s cloak again billowed around her.

“Young lady, how do you feel now? Can you stand?”

The Steward reached down and grasped Amra’s outreached hand. Amra could feel again, and the pain had subsided. The whispers in her mind again assuaged the throbbing in her head.

Gaia pulled, and Amra found herself nearly lifted off the ground as the Lady helped her back to her feet. Still grasping her arm, Gaia reached up to touch Amra’s face. She flinched and closed her eyes, feeling very much like a tiny field mouse caught in the jaws of a wolf.

“Relax, girl, I just want to check something.” As Gaia touched Amra’s temple, she felt as much as heard a loud buzzing in her ears.

"Amazing," stated Gaia. "A near-perfect symbiosis."

The Lady stepped back from Amra, and the buzzing in her ears subsided. "Amra Raynecksdotter, I do not have a great deal of time here, so we will need to continue this discussion later."

Gaia gestured around her. "As you can see, I have stopped things for a little while. Time has ceased to exist. Do you understand?"

Amra was still in shock. She just stood there as if she were a statue. "Amra! Snap out of it!" she heard her father speaking loudly. Her eyes refocused. Everyone was looking at her. The Lady of the Lands stood across the fire from her. The silver-clad woman locked eyes and gave the briefest of nods.

Amra understood. Whatever had just happened needed to remain quiet, at least for now. Amra lowered her eyes and sat back down next to her father.

Leaning close, she whispered, "when Little Brother's silvery mistress is finished, we need to talk, father."

Amra caught the Lady looking at her from the corner of her eye. There was a half-smirk on her face.

"My apologies for coming so suddenly, everyone, but as I said, I have a bit of a problem."

Jon slowly stood up, "Lady, you are always most welcome at our fire council," he grinned as he spread his hands widely. "It is not as if we could say no anyway."

Myrnran looked amused, "I did tell you some time ago to stop deferring to me as some sort of god Jon."

Jon Raynecksson shrugged and winked. "You did say for everyone to hear not long ago that you are Threa."

Kensai rolled her eyes, "are you really going to flirt with a machine, Jon?"

Her comment brought a peal of laughter from the assembled council, and Jon flushed, sitting down quickly. Seeing that she had everyone's rapt attention, the Steward of Threa continued.

“By now, I am sure you have seen the flashes of light in the sky, correct.”

“Aye,” remarked Rafi, looking down on the Stewards minuscule figure. “I noticed that it looked like a purple explosion. Did you have anything to do with it?”

Myrnran looked up at Rafi with a smirk, “I made a decision Rafi of the Nephilim. One that I am well within my rights to make as Steward.”

Myrnran looked back down at the assembly. “The flashes of light are not relevant. At least not at the moment. What is relevant is that this region may well have visitors soon. These are not sanctioned arrivals. The Benefactors do not even know of them yet. I am uncertain as to their intent.”

At this, most of the assembly rose to their feet. Myrnran could feel a common thread of uneasiness spread throughout the group.

“How many?” asked Rayneck abruptly. “We still have the bulk of The Army of the Balance, and it would take little to prepare to repel invaders!” The Jarl was showing his teeth, and there was a lusty twinkle in his eye.

Myrnran chuckled, and the sound was like pieces of ice swirling together in a mountain stream.

“*Vikings,*” she mused. “*Always ready for a fight.*”

The Steward faced Rayneck and bowed respectfully, “I greatly appreciate the offer Jarl Rayneck, but the situation calls for something more subtle than an army.”

Myrnran swept her arm out towards the vast virgin forest around them. “Besides, you and your army have quite the task before you as it is. Building a road through all of that will be no easy task.”

Rayneck the Red huffed and nodded. He knew he could not overcommit his forces to two tasks at the same time, and he certainly did not want thousands of his people wandering around in the uncharted wilderness.

“I have to agree, My Lady.”

Myrnran saw Jon look at Captain Balthazar and perceived an imperceptible nod pass between them. The two stepped forward.

"Oh no, not the both of you," Myrnran shook her head negatively. "First of all, Jon, you have done far more already than what anyone has asked of you. Secondly, The Army of the Balance needs a guide back through the wildlands that you and your guardians quite literally sprinted through."

She stepped up close to the couple and looked to Kensai. "Furthermore, I understand that there is a wedding to happen sometime soon. Far be it from me to stand in the way of a marriage." Myrnran winked and smiled at Kensai, who blushed and smiled in return.

"No," Myrnran continued, "this task is for neither an army nor for the Warden of the Lands. I believe it will require some diplomacy and a fair bit of secrecy. This vessel is full of refugees from an unknown world. Protocol states that unless they prove hostile, I cannot intervene directly."

She looked around the campfire.

"I allowed humans to choose the path that drives the hands of Fate. Humans did a very noble thing at the Valley of the Balance. Far better than your predecessors on Earth would have done. I would have you do so again with this situation."

The steward turned and looked toward Amra.

"Amra Raynecksdotter."

Amra had been half-listening to the whole conversation. She was still rather dazed from learning that the whispers inside her head were from someone or something other than her imagination.

She snapped back to reality and her eyes refocused.

"My Lady?" Amra curtsied and lowered her head.

"Eyes up, girl!" Commanded the Lady. "I have never liked subservient humans, and I never will."

Amra raised her eyes back up and regarded Myrnran with a steady gaze.

"That's better, and please refer to me as Myrnran or Gaia from now on. This diety nonsense has got to stop, at least with all of you."

She stepped forward, and Amra found herself moving forward almost without her will. Gaia looked her up and down again. Amra felt as if she were being inspected once again by her old mentor Shivnr.

"As a member of your father's entourage and a member of the ruling family of Numitgart, I am asking you to undertake this task."

Amra was so astonished she felt her mouth drop open. Quickly she closed it and replied.

"Me? My Lady...I mean Gaia, surely there are others better qualified than I to accomplish such a task!"

Myrnran's eyes grew cold as she regarded Amra.

"Let me make myself more clear, Amra. This vessel is going to make planetfall sometime in the next twenty-four hours. It will land or crash somewhere south of here. From what I know, that will be well within the borders of Numitgart."

She gestured to Rayneck. "You are the Jarl's daughter, among...other things. You are more than qualified to take on this task, and..." The Steward of Threa extended her hand, "I insist."

Amra found herself entirely at odds. Never had anyone asked her to perform such a thing. No one but her family knew anything about her true nature and now obviously the blonde-haired visage before her.

She looked to her father. Rayneck seemed just as surprised as she was.

"It is an honor to serve The Lady of the Lands Amra, but the choice is yours."

Amra could see a look of concern in her father's eyes. How strange. In the twelve years that she had served as

the Jarl's Shadow, Rayneck had never shown concern for her. They had an agreement about such things.

Amra was Raynecks left hand. The dealer of justice and the purveyor of Balance. Always her work had been done in secret. Now her father was telling her in front of the entire assembly that the choice was hers to accept The Lady of The Lands' request. In truth, she was being forced to accept. Doing otherwise would be considered an insult to both the Lady of the Lands and to the ruling family of Numitgart.

As her eyes hardened, she whispered so quietly that no one else would hear but Gaia, "well played." Myrnran's eyes glittered as she smiled ever so slightly.

Amra extended her hand to meet The Lady's. As the two clasped hands in honor of Amra's acceptance, the young girl felt something hard press into her hand. As she withdrew and opened her fingers, she spied the strangest object. It was a silver orb, perhaps the size of a small apple.

Abruptly the orb floated out of her hand, and to Amra's utter surprise, she saw what appeared to be an eye looking back at her.

"Amra, it is customary to give a gift to those I ask help from," stated Gaia. "This little fellow I think you will find most helpful in assisting you." The silver orb lifted out of Amra's palm and floated between the two women.

"What in Odin's name is that?" asked Jarl Rayneck.

"I call him Bullet," replied Myrnran. "Since Amra does not have Jon's capacity for languages, Bullet can act as an interpreter. He also does a great many other things, Amra Raynecksdotter, but I will leave it up to you and him to discuss."

Myrnran surveyed the assembly once again.

Finally, her eyes fell on Ja'Leck, "Come here, you great ugly beast."

The Grognav commander growled and bared his fangs. Looking around at the group, he saw they were all looking back at him. Grimly Ja'Leck shrugged his shoulders. In his mind, he assumed that his time had come. He had seen firsthand what this Lady of the Lands could do, and there seemed little to stop her from doing the same to him.

He lumbered forward from his place and grounded his double-headed axe defiantly on the ground.

The Lady of the Lands tilted her head in laughter.

"Worry not, Commander Ja'Leck. If I had wanted you dead, I would have burned you just as quickly as I did with The Sons of God."

Ja'Leck scowled. "So, you can read minds too, just like Halal?" His voice was low and grating.

Gaia shrugged her shoulders. "It's kind of a thing with beings like Halal and myself. However, I can assure you that although I can read minds, I do not manipulate them...most of the time."

Gaia flashed the ugly monster a dazzling smile.

Ja'Leck was not impressed. "What do you want, Spirit Talker. If you will not kill me, then why call me out in front of these humans?"

Myrnran's smile vanished. From what she had so far learned of the Grognav, they had an utter distrust of anything magical or even spiritual. Furthermore, Grognav, in general, had little respect for anything except strength and prowess in battle.

"You, Commander, are now the representative of the other intelligent humanoid species inhabiting this region of Threa. As such, it seems only fitting that you accompany Amra Raynecksdotter in this task."

Ja'Leck looked down at the silver-clad Spirit Talker with a stony expression. Then he looked back up at Amra, who was regarding him with a look of disdain.

Amra spat defiantly. "I do not require assistance, Lady Gaia, especially from an ugly Ape Lizard with half of a brain and too many muscles to move well."

Myrnran was silent. "I am afraid I must insist."

The Steward suddenly seemed to grow much taller and was looking Ja'Leck straight in the eyes.

"Considering that I could have turned you, your people, and that insidious mountain into a sheet of glass not long ago, it's the least you can do."

Myrnran returned to normal size and stepped back from the assembly.

"Watch the skies. Whatever is coming will arrive sometime in the next turn of the Suns." She looked around at all of them. "I bid you farewell, and if you need my aid, I will know."

The Steward of Threa waved her hand, and the purple and black swirling disk appeared. Before stepping through it, she looked back at Amra.

"Oh, and for the record, I was never Jon's mistress. I lost the privilege of human contact a long time ago."

As Myrnran stepped through the portal, Amra could hear her voice behind her eyes. "*I will be watching you, Shadow Walker. I will be watching both of you.*"

There was an eerie silence around the campfire that seemed to stretch on and on.

Rayneck looked embarrassed. "Amra, I am sorry..."

"Sorry for what, father?" she interrupted. "Are you sorry that you have now put me in a position where I have to partner with this putrid beast," she indicated Ja'Leck with a jab of her finger. "Or that you put me in a position where I had no choice but to say yes or risk the indignation of the Lady?"

Amra slowly walked up to her father. Vocal outbursts were not her forte, and her next words were meant for his ears alone.

Leaning in close to her father, she whispered, "I follow you father and will do as you bid me, but"...she gave him a sidelong glance, "understand that me partaking in such a public task jeopardizes our secret, and it leaves your backside unprotected while I do it."

Amra's lips tightened. She glanced back over her shoulder at the glowering Grognav commander.

"Father, must I take this overgrown simpleton along? He will only slow me down."

At this, Ja'Leck smiled. It was not a pretty sight. It looked more as if the bottom part of his skull opened in some bizarre arc, and a mouthful of jagged teeth and tusks appeared.

"I am not thrilled by your company either. While we are allies, Jarl Rayneck, I do not have to stand here and be browbeaten by your little wisp of an offspring."

Ja'Leck paused and looked down at Amra. "It was not that long ago that we would have met in battle, mouthy one. At that time, I would have used your spine as a toothpick. Do not think I cannot do so as I please."

There was silence all around the campfire again. Ja'Leck had just done something very foolish, whether he realized it or not. Amra stood still with her arms at her sides. The wind had picked up, and her blue cloak billowed and twisted around her slight form. Her hood was pulled so low over her face that only her mouth and chin could be seen.

"Father," she stated flatly.

"Aye! The fire council is dismissed! Everyone, please return back to your tents." Rayneck the Red grinned fiercely. "My daughter has something she wishes to discuss with Commander Ja'Leck in private."

Slowly the assembly departed until only Jon and Kensai remained. Kensai was starting to protest.

"Shit, is she going to fight him? Jon, you can't let this happen! I won't allow it! He will tear her apart."

"Wait, Kensai," replied Jon as he placed his arm around her waist, guiding her away from the campfire. As they departed, Amra could hear her brother reassuring his betrothed. "Don't worry about Amra. Believe me when I say this. I would be more concerned for the Grogaw."

Once Amra could no longer hear them walking, she turned back to Ja'Leck.

"Commander," she whispered. "I understand that your people respect only two things: strength and how good someone is in a fight." Amra reached behind her and drew her dagger.

Seeing the shiny bit of metal, Ja'Leck laughed, "do you think I fear you with your metal sliver? I will take it from you and insert it where it will do the most good!" The monster grinned at her lewdly.

Amra was nonplussed. She handed the dagger to her father. "Commander, I prefer to do this without a weapon so that you will not be at a disadvantage. You may, of course, keep yours." She indicated the greataxe resting on Ja'Leck's shoulder. She then walked until she was perhaps only ten paces from the Grogaw.

"If you wish to use my spine as a toothpick, I welcome you to try. The Lady only knows what kind of disgusting vermin you have eaten that makes you smell like a rotting corpse."

Ja'Leck bristled at the comment and lowered his axe until it was in both hands in front of him.

Amra looked to Rayneck the Red. "Any rules?"

The Jarl pondered this for a moment. "Amra, you understand that a Grogaw always fights to the death?"

Amra nodded. "Yes. Then they eat what they kill."

Jarl Rayneck was quiet.

"It is your challenge for your honor. No rules other than the choice you make at the end." He looked at both of them. "Understood?"

Amra looked back at JA'leck as he continued to glare down at her. Then she hawked and spat in his face.

The Grognow commander howled in rage at such an insult and charged forward, fully intending to squash the annoying little human before him. Amra still stood still until he was within arm's reach, and then she twirled around to his right side. As Ja'Leck rushed past like some charging bull, she raised her right knee up forcefully and at an angle towards her left shoulder. She then thrust her leg down, and her heel struck the Grognow commander behind his right knee. The combination of the kick and his forward momentum drove JA'Lecks knee into the ground.

Knowing he was open, JA'leck swung his axe around and back towards Amra in an attempt to take her head from her shoulders.

Amra ducked and flowed under the heavy-bladed weapon and twirled again until she was in front of JA'Leck. She stiffened the fingers of her right hand and drew back her elbow.

Her now spear-shaped hand shot forward and struck JA'Leck across his right eye. As his head reared back from the unexpected strike, Amra brought her right knee up again, and the ball of her foot connected sharply with the underside of Ja'Lecks chin. The monster lurched backward even further.

As soon as Amra's right foot touched back to the ground, she spun to her left, looking over her right shoulder. Then, continuing her spin, she lifted her right leg off the ground and swung it backward in an arc.

Her heel collided solidly with Ja'Lecks right temple, and his head jerked to the left as if on a swivel. JA'leck, still on one knee, looked utterly dazed, and then suddenly he fell to the ground.

Amra stepped back from him and waited. Slowly the Grognow rose to his knees and then to his feet.

"How do I taste so far, Commander?" taunted Amra.

Her comment brought a chuckle from Rayneck who sat down by the fire, packed his pipe, and lit it.

"Looks like we will be here for a minute," he retorted.

Amra smirked. "Well, commander? Do you accept defeat, or do I beat on you until bones start breaking?"

JA'leck regarded the tiny human before him. He knew he had been tricked into acting with haste and anger. Such would not happen again. Approaching Amra, he raised his fists. Fighting with bare hands was just as common as any other fighting to the Grogna. He would pound this insulting little wench into a bloody smear.

"This means you have more spice about you than what I would normally eat! That is good!" As he spoke, he shot his left fist forward, followed almost immediately by his right.

Amra stepped to her right and deflected the left fist with her right palm facing outward. She allowed J'leck to overextend with his right as she expected he would.

Circling in the same movement, she jumped slightly and drove her right knee into the soft, unprotected flesh just under Ja'Lecks ribcage.

Ja'Leck gave a whoosh as the air expelled sharply from his lungs, and he buckled at the waist.

Seeing the opportunity, she reached up and clasped her hands around the monster's skull.

Sharply she drove her left knee up, colliding solidly again with JA'Lecks left temple. Retracting her leg, she drove her left knee up in the same fashion. Then, maintaining a hold with her left hand in place, she raised her right hand and, with her hammered fist, struck Ja'Leck in the right temple three times.

Amra spun away and retreated back, waiting. Ja'Leck raised his hands to his head. It felt like the girl

was beating on his very brain. He could not focus his eyes, and his ears were ringing.

Amra started forward again when she heard her father utter two words, "finish it."

She nodded curtly, and took off at a run.

When she was within arm's reach again, she jumped up and over Ja'Lecks right shoulder. As Amra passed over him, she kicked backward with her right leg using all her strength, her heel connecting with the back of Ja'Lecks skull. His head snapped forward, and his slaver jaws snapped shut. He continued forward until he crashed into the ground and didn't move.

Amra looked down at Ja'Lecks unmoving form. She did not feel victorious. She, in fact, felt nothing. She had done as was she was told.

Kneeling, she felt the side of the monster's neck. "Still alive, father, just as you wanted."

Rayneck the Red tapped the ashes out his pipe and took a long pull from his ever-present drinking horn.

Amra scowled. She hated that her father always seemed to be drinking. She allowed her face to return its regular stony expression and said nothing.

"So, what did you learn from that very well-played altercation, My Little Shadow."

At this, Amra smiled slightly. Her father only used that name when she had done something particularly praiseworthy.

"Yes, father. As we had already surmised, the Grogaw are easily provoked and do not take well to insults. As far as the contest, yes, they are competent and capable fighters. I believe he would have given a regular soldier quite a bit of trouble."

Rayneck chuckled at her comment and then patted a spot next to him. Amra went over and sat next to him.

"What else can you tell me, daughter?" he asked.

Amra closed her eyes and mentally reconstructed what had just occurred. "Although they are physically very tough and strong, they still exhibit many of the same weaknesses that their human ancestors had. Namely, they have the same pressure points and weak areas that we do. If I were to engage a Grognav in open battle, I would not strike anywhere on the skull's heavy bone. Nor would I attack anywhere on the front of the upper torso. They are still unprotected at the temples. They have weak unarmored areas behind the knees and under the ribs. They also have the same weak area at the back of the head as humans do because they have a spine that connects to their skull base."

She looked at her father. "Is that why you wanted me to fight him, so we know their weaknesses?"

Rayneck nodded. "Yes, partly. Secondly, I wanted that arrogant eating machine to get taken down a peg or two. He seems to be waking up, by the way."

Rayneck handed the dagger back to her. "You won. It is your choice what to do."

Amra looked down at the dagger. She remembered a time now twelve years ago when her father had first handed the weapon to her.

Then the serpent hilt with its gold jeweled eyes had been bare. Now it was covered with over two hundred silver loops, one for each life she had taken in the service of her Jarl.

She retrieved the dagger from her father and twirled the hilt between her fingers. The firelight glittered along the blade as it spun in the air. After her first two kills on that fateful night, she had given it a name.

"Forlog," she whispered.

Grimly, she walked up to Ja'Leck, who had raised himself up on his elbows, and slowly shook his head. She knelt, and with the tip of her dagger, she pushed his chin up till his eyes met hers.

“How do I taste now, Commander?”

The Grogaw glared at her. Turning his head, he spat a gout of blood onto the ground.

“Not enough of you to eat anyways,” he grumbled.

Ja’Leck turned his eyes back to her.

“So? You bested me. Finish it,” he declared.

Amra pushed the monster’s head up higher, and her hand flashed. Ja’Leck closed his eyes and waited.

After a moment when nothing happened, he opened his eyes to see Amra walking away. She looked back over her shoulder and spoke.

“A new concept for you to learn. It is called mercy.”

She stopped and turned around further. “Besides, I have the feeling you would taste like shit anyway.”

She spun back around, and her blue hooded cloak flowed with her. As she entered the shadows at the edge of the clearing, Ja’Leck could have sworn she vanished. Slowly he got up. His head was pounding like she was still hitting him.

The Grogaw commander reached down and picked up his great axe.

“*Some help you were,*” he thought as he shouldered the weapon and lumbered over to where Rayneck the Red still sat.

The Jarl, seeing him approach, filled two large tankards with ale and thrust one into Ja’Leck’s hand when he was close enough.

The monster quaffed it in one gulp, and Rayneck refilled the flask.

“I suppose you have something to say, Rayneck?” queried Ja’Leck sarcastically.

“Aye,” replied Rayneck. “You just got your arse kicked by a human girl less than half your size.” The Jarl took a gulp. “Kicked quite soundly, I might add.”

Ja'Leck glowered down at the old warrior and then nodded grudgingly. "She is no normal girl, nor is she a normal human, Jarl Rayneck."

Rayneck showed his teeth and quaffed the rest of his ale. "No, she is not. There is nothing normal about her. Or anyone else in my family, for that matter. That's something to remember, Commander Ja'Leck."

The Jarl stood. "Go back to your camp and prepare. Your journey for the Lady of the Lands begins at first light." As Ja'Leck watched the man leave the clearing, he sat thinking of what the girl had said to him.

"Mercy," he muttered under his breath.

As Amra moved through the Shadows, she heard the voice of Skadi.

"You made no kill."

"There was no need," Amra replied. "I was told to send a message. Not every message requires a death. Even one such as him deserves to live. It is not his fault that his nature is arrogant and aggressive. He is a product of his nature and environment."

Amra turned through a doorway in the hallway and emerged just behind her tent in the main camp.

"Besides," she continued, "there was no value added in killing him."

The portal opened on the Bridge of Northstar Observatory with a crackled snap as opposed to the usual swirling rush. Gaia was in a hurry.

She stepped out of the portal with her right fist clenched tightly. The same hand that had only recently entered into Amra Reynecksdottr's physical form.

Gaia made a beeline for the transport lift, scattering her cadre of Grey's as she went.

"Alpha!" She barked.

"Yes, Steward," intoned Alpha's metallic voice. The avatar was nowhere to be seen, so the disembodied voice echoed from all around her.

"Activate my laboratory and all medical diagnostics down to the atomic level." Gaia picked up her pace.

"Yes, Steward, understood. May I ask why you are in such a hurry?"

Gaia was almost running now. "I have a specimen I need to analyze beyond my sensory capabilities, and I can already feel it unraveling."

It was true. Whatever the Steward had just removed from Amra was physically moving in her hand, trying to escape. It was as though Skadi and Amra's combined essence was desperately trying to dissipate back into the ether of this reality.

"Alpha! I also want a full database archive search on Skadi Thiassisdottir. She will be buried deep for sure, and probably somewhere in the archives of the first age of the Common Alliance."

Gaia heard the telltale hum that always occurred when Alpha was doing deep-dive data mining.

"I found her. What specifically are you looking for?"

Gaia didn't answer. She was running. Her hand was shaking with the effort of containing the specimen. Finally, she spied the lit sign over the laboratory entry.

"Alpha, open the lab door, and set a subatomic level containment field as soon as I enter!"

Whatever she had gotten hold of, it wasn't going to escape. The scientist in her refused to allow that.

The door slid open just as she approached, and as soon as she was through, an eerie purple glow permeated the room.

As the door slid shut, Alpha announced, "subatomic containment protocol in effect Steward. Do you require any further precautionary measures?"

Gaia paused thoughtfully. "Close all ventilation. Let's go to a vacuum environment to make sure."

Gaia heard the ventilation system close as the air was sucked out of the room with a whoosh.

Her biosuit construct automatically compensated from natural environment nourishment to the energy pulsing through the laboratory.

While not the most pleasant experience for her, she could indefinitely survive on nearly any kind of energy. Still, her perceptions and cleverly designed construct felt for a moment as if she were suffocating. Her vision blurred for a few seconds and then cleared.

"Alpha, to answer your earlier question, just have the information ready as I ask for it."

Gaia approached her central lab station. As she reached the table, she picked up a specimen disk and, opening her right hand, deftly scraped the contents in her palm into the container.

Securing it with a lid, she placed the disk between her hands on the examination table.

"Alright, you two, let's see what's going on that makes you so unique."

The Steward sat down with her hands raised, fingertips touching. As she gazed at the specimen, it was clear that it was still moving and actively looking for an escape route.

"Alpha, let's do this from a connected sensory interface. I want to be up close and personal."

As Gaia looked up, a helmet similar to her command visor lowered down from an aperture in the laboratory ceiling. Once the device settled on her head, it was a matter of thought to begin the examination process.

With a mental flex, her optics adjusted to calibrate for the laboratory sensor readings. Now it was just concentration and focus.

Leaning over the specimen dish, she peered down at the sample covertly removed from Amra Raynecksdottr.

As she gazed down, her optics adjusted like a microscope, and she was viewing now at a cellular level.

"Alpha prepare examination recording."

"Yes, Steward. Recording on audio and visual."

Peering further, she was able to look at the cell structure. What she saw was quite remarkable.

"Upon preliminary examination of the cell structure, it appears that instead of the normal human cells one would see in a sample, there are two individual sets of cells, and a form of polymer binds them together."

Gaia blinked, and lines of data started streaming from top to bottom in her left optic.

"It appears as though the second set of cells are not human. Alpha, let's go down to molecular bonding."

As she stared, the cells grew increasingly larger until they disappeared altogether. Now she was at the sample's molecular structure.

"At the molecular level, it appears as though the same binding has occurred. Two separate sets of molecules are bound together. However, at this level, the binding seems to be operating at a different frequency. There is a definite vibration at this level that functions outside of phase with this reality."

Myrnran Gaia sat back for a moment. "Alpha, this is the most complete symbiotic relationship I have ever seen. I can assume that it goes down to the atomic level."

"Understood, Steward," Alpha replied. "Some of the material I was able to locate might shed insight into what occurred for such a phenomenon to happen."

Myrnran shook her head from side to side, and the laboratory visor lifted from her head. "Go ahead, Alpha, you have my attention. What do you know that I do not?"

"Perhaps you can tell me what you know, Steward. From your recent altercation with the one you called

Skadi, you are familiar with her. However, the archive does not contain any information regarding this.

Furthermore, there is no data entry of Skadi being an identified or sanctioned life-form on Threa. Moreover, from the sample you have provided, Skadi is non-indigenous to the experimentation platform."

Myrnran frowned, "Alpha turn off the recording and delete the last thirty seconds of conversation."

"Acknowledged Steward. Recording off and dialogue for requested timeframe deleted. Am I to assume that this was one of your more covert operations?"

Myrnran's face was impassive. "In a manner of speaking. I knew Skadi when she was still Jötunn. That was a very long time ago, back when the Steward Protocol was in its infancy. Skadi was the first to volunteer for her essence to be placed in a biosuit construct. As you know from the science archives, the Benefactors were attempting a full cellular and consciousness integration with the prototype cybernetic construct. In short, they were attempting to combine cybernetics and human tissue at the cellular level while at the same time transferring the consciousness."

"Yes, Steward, that is all documented," responded Alpha. "From what I understand, the process of full integration was and still is unachievable."

Myrnran nodded. "Correct. Skadi's body rejected the integration, resulting in a catastrophic breakdown of her cellular mass. Additionally, her essence became fragmented. Certain parts of her conscious energy matrix simply disappeared while the rest remained."

Myrnran closed her eyes. She had remembered all too well the experiment because she had been one of the project's chief scientists. It was horrific to watch.

"Skadi's body unraveled in front of us. When her essence fragmented, the higher-level structure went into ascension as far as we know. All that remained was her

lower unconscious, what we term as the Ego, Id, and Super Ego. The remainder of Skadi's essence was her Shadow Self, or in metaphysical terms, her Dark Side."

Alpha was silent for several moments. "Steward, I am aware that when an Aesir releases from the mortal shell, ascension to a higher level of consciousness is possible. I have never heard of a consciousness fragmenting in such a way."

Myrnran half-smiled at this, "I know the archive states Skadi was not Aesir or from any of their descended branches. What does it say, Alpha? It has been some time since I reviewed the material."

"Steward, Skadi is classified as a Jötunn from the planet designated as Jötunheimr, one of the original nine worlds inhabited by intelligent life as we know it."

Myrnran nodded curtly, "that is the scientific explanation, Alpha. I will give you a more insightful background. Yes, Jötunheimr was one of the first planets that the Aesir discovered when we took to the stars over half a million years ago.

Our explorations at that time were primitive. The Aesir at that time had only interplanetary capability and no space folding technology. Therefore, our travels were bound to only our star system. Jötunheimr was the second planet we explored after Vanaheimr, with who we formed a trade alliance."

"Yes, Steward," replied Alpha. "This is also noted in the retrieved information. Do you have anything more insightful to provide?"

"Yes, I am sure that your information also indicated that the Vanir were not yet a space-faring race and that we formed a trade alliance to provide them with our knowledge and technology.

Once the Vanir were able to ascend to the heavens, they went with us on our voyage of discovery. That is when we explored Jötunheimr."

Myrnran looked up, and the visor descended back down onto her head. Once again, her optics adjusted.

"Alpha, show me a DNA profile."

Almost instantly, the view changed, and she was looking at a spiraling DNA strand. As she examined, she continued her dissertation.

"The Jötunn were chaotic and warlike people. Almost from the beginning, the Aesir and Vanir were in a series of conflicts interspersed with various alliances and treaties. The sagas of Amra and Jon's people have some pretty colorful renditions of that time."

Myrnran zeroed in on the spiraling DNA strand.

"As I suspected," she murmured.

"What is that, Steward?"

Myrnran's eyes refocused, and she was again staring at the specimen dish.

"Nothing, Alpha. State this for the record. The DNA of Amra Raynecksdaottr has undergone a mutative process. Her DNA has many of the same markers in common as her brother Jon Raynecksson. However, she does not possess a genetic marker. I believe that while she did possess mutagenic capability at birth, her mutation process was altered, very likely at a young age. The presence of Skadi, who is now part of Amra down to the DNA level, indicates that whatever occurred for the two to interact is what activated the mutation."

Myrnran shook her head again and rose from her chair as the interface helmet lifted.

"Knowing what I know about Skadi, I would hazard to say that Amra's mutation and her intermingling with Skadi were brought about by some severe physical or emotional trauma. Likely at an early age."

Myrnran began to pace the floor of the laboratory with her hands clasped behind her back. She was lost in thought. She remembered Skadi as an outstanding young scientist who had approached her during a long

period of peace between the Aesir, the Vanir, and the Jötunn. It had been during the last years of her life.

The two had collaborated on many projects, and Myrnran had found herself growing quite fond of the young woman. She had even considered Skadi a friend.

However, the chaotic nature of the Jötunn was often incompatible with the energy that most Aesir possessed.

Gaia had also learned from Skadi that many Jötunn, including herself, possessed unique gifts.

"Alpha, what, if anything, can you tell me that was specifically logged regarding Skadi besides her most horrid demise? We will discuss that more in a moment."

Alpha hummed. "Steward. We are receiving a distress signal from the refugee's vessel. They have attained geosynchronous orbit over Threa. However, they are out of power and no longer have maneuvering capabilities. The orbit is decaying, and the craft will make planetfall within the next twenty-four hours."

Myrnran stopped pacing. "Do they still have life-support or whatever it is they need to survive?"

"That is affirmative, Steward. Also, there is no one injured or in danger on board at this time."

Myrnran breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, at least it won't land like a ghost ship. Return their message and tell them they are authorized to make whatever landing they can safely. Help will be on the way."

Myrnran started pacing again, "Alpha, many of Skadi's people, showed high level innate telepathic and telekinetic capabilities. I remember she was also gifted. Is there any record of it?"

Myrnran was still lost in thought as she approached the laboratory door. Alpha, knowing all too well how absent-minded the Steward could be when she was deep in thought, automatically re-initiated the ventilation system and lowered the containment field until it was a small purple dome over the specimen dish.

Myrnran nearly walked headlong into the door before it opened, and the air system replaced the vacuum.

"Yes, Steward," continued Alpha. "There are many references to Skadi being a highly accomplished practitioner of Umbrakenisis."

"The ability to manipulate light and shadow," she replied matter of factly.

"Affirmative. Skadi's abilities were so accomplished and specialized that her name became synonymous with the word in the ancient tongue for darkness."

The Steward began strolling again. Her mind was racing, going over everything she knew about Umbrakenisis. While it had never been an ability she was capable of using, she knew of it from the nearly inexhaustible supply of knowledge available from the vast cosmic repository on Prime.

Myrnran was slowly walking back toward the bridge. She remembered the result of Skadi's failed integration.

Skadi had lost over seventy percent of her physical mass by the time they had stopped the experiment.

Gaia remembered as she watched Skadi's energy matrix shatter, with part of it ascending to the void while her darker energy had remained.

All that remained of the brilliant young scientist known as Skadi was a cowering black form huddled in front of an utterly destroyed cybernetic construct.

In appearance, Skadi now looked like a very young girl, perhaps nine years old, but her skin had become so jet black it seemed to absorb the light around her.

Gaia had been the only one to rush into the damaged intermingling chamber. She had grabbed the first article of clothing she could find to cover the terrified childlike form. It had been a voluminous shimmering blue over cloak with a hood.

