

## Chapter 1

As the glowing rays cascaded down from the bright sun overhead, they occasionally pierced the thick canopy of leaves sheltering Zoe from the intense warmth bathing her family's field in life giving energy.

She peacefully dozed on a bed of long vivid green grass and long thick black hair that flowed down her back as she lay beneath the great chestnut tree that grew behind her family home. The grass was prickly against the muddy skin that peeked out from her toughened leather three quarter length trousers. But she didn't mind. She loved lying here, basking in the sunlight. The cool breeze gave a freshness to the air and wafted the sweet scent of flowers and pollen from her mother's flower patch under the windows of her childhood home. Slowly drawing in air through her nose she filled her lungs with the world around her, the leather tunic her mother made her creaked from the strain until she let the air rush from her mouth, sinking deeper into the soft ground beneath her.

The pulsing thrum of life surrounding her filled Zoe with joy,

making her feel alive and vibrating with energy. She could feel the swaying of leaves far above her where she lay. The beating wings of a cluster of butterflies fluttering around a bed of flowers of palest pink a few feet away. She felt utterly in sync with the world around her, just lying out here in the open air.

A fly buzzed past her face. Lifting a hand to waft it away a large branch overhead shifted producing a dazzlingly bright light behind her eyelids. Spreading out her fingers she tried to block the fiery ball, so impossibly far away.

The sun was still so warm against her face however. All she could see was the relentless bright light against her face. But that didn't make any sense? Moving her hand once again to block the sun above her, the golden ball briefly vanished behind her fingers but to no avail.

Feeling a presence like a vast swarm of bees looming overhead her eyes burst open in a flash. Two enormous hellishly red eyes filled her vision blazing back down at her from upon high. A thundering voice crashed through her bones "What... Are... You!"

Jolting awake Zoe sat bolt upright in a bedroll of animal furs. A blinding pain suddenly wracked through her head as it crashed into the lower branches of the bushes she was sheltered beneath.

"Aieyah!" Zoe cried.

"What did you see this time!?" Sam exclaimed in a hurried whisper as he strode over to their camp. "I was lying in the grass near where we grew up. I watching the sky until I realised there were two suns. They morphed into these 2 terrible eyes gazing down at me." sighing and holding her head with her hands Zoe continued "Then this voice as loud as thunder spoke to me. That's never happened before" she added timidly.

"w-what did it say?" Sam's voice shook slightly at the possibility the creatures that plagued his sister's dreams may now be drawing closer.

"It just asked what I was? But it was more than that." Zoe stretched out her legs and looked up at Sam. "It felt like there were tens of people watching me from the sky. They were so far away, but still, I could feel

them as though there were in the same room as me."

Placing a hand on her shoulder "These night terrors are getting worse week by week. Do you think we are in danger?" He asked "This new voice could cause us problems; we should remain alert for any sign of someone tailing us" Sam pondered seeming uneasy.

"I couldn't say for sure, but this time it felt more like a warning. As though something big is about to happen. It feels like whoever or whatever it is that pursues me through my dreams has laid eyes on me at long last"

Flopping back down onto the furs Zoe stretched out like a cat and curled up into a ball.

"Don't be getting too comfy Sis, it's your turn to watch right about now." Sam yawned "I'm about to fall down where I stand in a minute.

As the long silence stretched out Sam's eyes feeling heavier by the minute, he knew there was only one thing left to do. Skirting around the edge of the bushes until he was roughly where he imagined the bottom of the sleep roll must be. He stooped low and lifted up the branches

shoving his thick arm into the sharp twigs until he could feel something soft.

Seizing hold as tight as he could he gave a mighty tug pulling the bed and Zoe right out of the bushes into the cool open air. In a flash the pile of furs at Sam's feet burst open as Zoe sprang to her feet. Without a thought Sam let go of his iron tipped spear in his left hand letting it clatter to the floor. He reached out with both hands to catch her wrists before she could land a strike. Giving them a gentle squeeze, the 2 long thin knives dropped with a dull thud in the leaf strewn earth at their feet.

Glaring up at him "You know, it's a mystery how we manage to avoid attracting the attention of every beast in the land with you around".

Letting go of her arms Sam crouched down by the bushes, "and it's a wonder you're still alive without a real weapon".

"humph I can look after myself you know" Zoe shot back squatting down to run her hands over the dark ground searching for her weapons.

Sam nudged his spear under the bushes with his foot and dropped to his knees, seizing the furs with one hand and rolling under the cover of the low hanging leaves. Finding her weapons Zoe sprang up to her feet, broad smile across her face, and gave her glinting blades a twirl in both hands before tucking them neatly into her leather belt.

Shuffling his body further out of sight Sam teased "I'm sure the next Yurk you come across will be so amazed by that performance he may let you live" Slipping completely out of sight now he covered himself with the furs and finally allowed his eyes to close.

"Ha freaking Ha" Zoe murmured under her breath. Taking a deep breath of the crisp night air she let out a long-drawn-out sigh. Feeling herself relax standing there in the darkness. She could feel the presence of only herself and Sam. Bar the owl roosting overhead in a trunk and the ever-present scurrying of the insects and rodents beneath their feet.

She had known Sam as long as she could remember. Growing up they had always tested each other every chance they got. There was little place in the world for those who couldn't defend themselves. Many

strange creatures skulk between the trees of the forests that surrounded the settlements. All manner of creatures from the oversized Yurks with their long tusks, unholy smell, and irritable temper. To the small fluffy Skuri with their big tails jumping between the trees overhead. No one ventured out alone from their village and only the most capable would travel in a party as few as 3 people.

Looking around at the nearby trees she spotted one not far from the bushes that Sam was sleeping under. Bracing herself for a moment, she broke into a sprint, leaping at the trunk of the tree she collided with one foot and pushed herself higher to catch a thick branch. Swinging up onto it she rested a leg over each side of the branch.

"This was the perfect spot to remain hard to see from the ground and ensure nothing took an interest in Sam's sleeping body" She thought to herself. Standing upright on the branch she lent her back against the thick trunk and peered out through the branches at the night sky.

She had never feared the dark. Even as a child before she left her family behind and ventured out on the traditional Years of Trial for

those who came of age at twenty. She had always believed that there was little that could threaten her and Sam in open combat. Between her sharp mind, nimble hands, and Sam's tactical brawn the shadows before them held few true terrors.

The night always made her feel so free. Free to explore away from the eyes of other people, and most of the larger creatures slept away in their dens at night anyway. Only stealthiest, most deadly creatures stalked the land when the moon was up. Those were what she wanted to test her wits against. Only the smartest, only the strong survive.

Her mind turned to the voice that shook her so deeply. "What... Are... You!?" Those words felt like they were carved on the inside of her skull. Was someone trying to find her? She couldn't think of anyone who could have such power as to invade someone's mind. This hadn't been the first time she had felt a disembodied presence. Tendrils of darkness reaching out towards her and swarms of people chasing her through dark alleys were all dreams that plagued her sleeping mind.

There was little doubt she thought to herself. Someone or



something was trying to hunt her down. She needed to learn how to shut these dreams out, or... how to fight back.

Sam awoke to a pain in his side.

"Up sleepy head! time to get moving" Zoe exclaimed loudly.

"Ugh you never could just prod me or something" Sam groaned slowly rolling out from under the bushes into the blazing sunlight.

"Well, if you didn't sleep like a rock maybe you'd get a nicer wakeup call" Zoe quipped back at him. "Besides I let you get plenty of sleep, look" She pointed up at the canopy of leaves high above them "the sun is already nearly at the tree line."

Sam sat up rubbing his eyes with his meaty knuckles. "Alright, time to get some miles in today. We aren't too far from the Halls of Trist now"

"I don't know much about the Trista's; I think dad said they had a big forge or something..." Zoe trailed off into silence carefully watching their surroundings.

"A big forge or something?!" Sam exclaimed "They only have the

largest mining system this side of the Amora mountains! Their family is single handily responsible for supplying ore to nearly every settlement around here." Eyes widening with excitement Sam fervently continued "Dad said the weapons their blacksmiths make never age no matter how much of a beating they take!"

"Having the best weapon doesn't guarantee a victory Sam, you should appreciate that better than most" Zoe smirked to herself giving him a playful punch in the side.

Running his broad thumb over the hatchet strapped to his belt Sam slowly replied "True.. but it certainly doesn't hurt to have a weapon that's reliable. If it fails, you're faced with fighting for your life against an armed foe with only your fists"

Watching Sam rolling up their sleeping furs Zoe started pacing and kicking the ground with her feet, starting to feel restless "Expecting to win a fight is the surest way to meet your end. Understanding your foe and exploiting the slightest opening in their defence can end a fight in only a few strikes." she berated Sam. "Strength and equipment are mere

tools to be wielded. Without the proper skill you'd might as well go into combat with a spoon and be done with it."

Zoe chuckled to herself imagining two oversized men wailing at each other with giant spoons."

Sidling over to the tree she spent half the night in, she collected her modest pack and met Sam at the bush. Where he had finished stuffing the furs into his oversized pack and was adjusting the copper pans strapped to the outside?

"I really don't know what I'd do without you carrying all my stuff around for me" Zoe jibbed standing over Sam. "Carry on like that and I'll make you carry all the pots for a month"

Zoe gasped "you wouldn't dare! Besides there's no point both of us being weighed down with our packs. Someone has to be able to defend us if we get ambushed."

With a mighty heave Sam lifted his pack onto his back, staggering slightly as he found his footing. "I guess that makes sense..." Sam drifted off into silence.

As Zoe took the lead, the pair trekked their way down the forest path that had been cleared out by the locals and those who can travelled this way before them. The forest was almost impossible to traverse when you were carrying supplies if you strayed from the cleared routes. Most animals were used to the herds of people travelling these routes so they usually left them alone. No one travelled alone out here. Every caravan would have at least two or three experienced hunters with them in case a hungry giant cat or other beast took a liking to their cargo, or ample amounts of flesh on their bones.

Using Sam's hatchet Zoe hacked away at the occasional grasping branches and grass that had regrown since the last caravan had come this way. Clearing a path for Sam and his giant pack, but also easing the boredom of walking through the endless forest.

"Do you think we will see Eliza Trista when we reach the Halls of Trist?" Sam spoke into the silence.

"I would imagine so Sam. That is where he lives after all." Zoe replied nonchalantly.

Mulling to himself Sam interrupted the endless sound of their feet trudging through the forest floor. "He's the son of Balmor Trista, he was the one who made Glaceal for our family"

"Is that the blue blade Dad always carries around?" Zoe thought, lines creasing her forehead.

"The very same" Sam confirmed. "It's one of the eight blades forged from Tristinite that was made and bestowed to our family three generations ago, all the villages around here were struggling to hold back the forest. Attacks from animals and outcasts were so common that something had to be done. They needed a way to push them back once and for all."

"Spare me the lecture Sam, we all know you're going to get down on one knee and propose the first time you lay eyes on Eliza" Zoe jibbed hacking at the weeds at the edges of the path.

Silence reigned over them as they continued their brisk march towards the Tristown. Raising her right fist above her head Sam froze...

"What did you hear?" Sam breathed as quietly as he could.

"Something moved, behind us, on the left" Zoe exhaled. Ever so slowly she crossed her hands and drew her daggers from her thick leather belt.

The tall grass close to Sam rustled vigorously as a pale green and black striped Elthros soared from it. Expecting the leap, Zoe twisted and hurled a dagger from her left hand with deadly precision. It sailed clean through the beast's left shoulder sending a mist of red through the air.

The Elthros landed on Sam's pack, claws burying themselves deep into the bag. Twisting and turning Sam furiously tried to throw it off until its wound became too much to bear. Falling to the forest floor it rolled onto its feet and bolted for the cover of the forest. A rumbling growl of frustration as its dark tail whipped up leaves behind it, clearly in a substantial amount of pain.

## **Chapter 2**

"We need to move quickly" Zoe hissed between her teeth. That beast won't go far and now it's got a rival to pursue.

"Agreed" Sam sighed, resigning himself to a relentless march to the next village.

"Elthros never let a target go free, especially now I've marked it" Zoe said starting to walk into the trees. Stopping she closed her eyes, slowing her breathing to clear her mind she felt the faint glow of life all around her. The birds in the trees and the thousands of insects below her feet. Feeling the mental tug of her dagger a few metres to her right buried in leaves she snapped her eyes open.

Letting the image fill her mind she held out her hand, slicing through the air in deadly silence she caught the hilt sheathing it in one smooth motion.

Finished checking his pack with a loud heaving Sam pulled it over

his shoulders. “You’ll have to teach that to me someday” Sam called out as he sidled over.

“Someday Sam, if we don’t end up as cat food”

The pair push forwards in silence at a brisk pace as the day wears on, both a little on edge watching the forests edge at either side for signs of movement. It appeared that most of the creatures had cleared the area after noise of their fight had echoed through the trees. As the sun started to draw low against the canopy the slow realisation that they would be hard pressed to reach Tristown before the light of day faded dawned upon them both.

“Z... I’m... going to... need a... minute.” Sam panted. “We don’t have time Sam, that Elthros is going to be out for blood once it has the cover of darkness.”

With a clanging thud Sam’s pack hit the ground, panting breath visible as he looked up into the dimming sky. Turning back to him “Get up, it’s tracking us just beyond those trees. We’re never going to be able to close this gap, look the sun has almost completely set. It will surely



strike when night falls.”

Zoe paced encircling Sam as he sat on the ground, head resting on his knees.

“What if I fetch the guards from the gate?” Zoe thinks out loud. “If I slip through the trees and sprint ahead, I could make it to the next village in only a few minutes. It would take some time for it to realise you’re alone this time.”

“That’s a damn risky plan Z... But I don’t think we have much choice.” Sam trailed off quietly. Leave the pack here and don’t change course. Keep moving as fast as you can. I’ll be back soon.” Darting off she broke into a full out sprint quickly fading into the darkness. Running for both of their lives.

“Halt human! Announce yourself!”

“Zoe of Helios, I request your aid with an Elthros. Sam of Helios is still out there”

The watchman atop the wall saluted, turning he yelled down to gates. “Raise the gates, and two of you go with her.”

“For Trist! The two guards saluted raising their pikes. As the gate raised hardly more than one metre from the ground two short men ran out from underneath. “Dwarves” Zoe thought to herself. “I should have known, at least they won’t flee when this gets ugly.”

“This way!” Zoe called out beckoning to the two pikemen as she started to jog back down the forest path Sam was likely to take. Zoe draws both of her daggers focusing on the dark forest ahead of her she let her mind relax, trying to pick out any signs of life. “There!” She yelled, sliding to a stop as the large figure of Sam emerged from the shadows. His giant backpack was on the ground a few metres away from him, spear in hand, the Elthros was slunk low to the ground on the pathway behind him.

As the Elthros began to circle Sam the two guards caught up behind Zoe. “By the gods” exclaimed the guards. With its eyes locked onto Sam there was only one victim the feline had its mind on. With a twitch of its tail in anticipation it finally leapt at Sam once again.

Bracing himself, point of his spear held up at its face he side stepped

right, twirling the spear to slam hard into its injured shoulder.

Landing hard on its feet, its front legs buckled crashing face first into the dirt.

Without a moment pause the fearless dwarfs charged forward past Zoe, Pikes raised to skewer the beast. In a feat of unnatural strength and rage the Elthros dragged itself up to its feet, growling down at the two Dwarfs who stood their ground. Holding the beast at a distance.

Desperation filling Zoe. Realizing this battle was only going to end in death she had to try something reckless. Laying her palms out flat with a dagger on each she closed her eyes, picturing the scene before her she could see the arc her blades should take, curving through the air to pierce the Elthros either side of the beast's long body. With a gasp she felt a deep chill in her core and a pain in her fingers as the daggers rocketed forward away from her. Hearing a deep rumbling roar that reverberated through the forest she opened her eyes to see the two guards' stride forward and plunge both pikes deep into the Elthros chest, cutting it short. Sam jogged up behind it, drawing his hand axe from his

belt and swung at its neck, cleaving halfway through its flesh. Leaving nothing to chance he grabbed the fur atop its head and swung again. Parting it from its body.

“Fine work master Sam!” one of the dwarves roared. “We shall dine like champions tonight once the others hear of this!” striking his thick chest with a thump.

Breathing heavily Sam lets the head roll to ground as he spots Zoe kneeling on the ground a few metres away. “Zoe!?” he calls out questioningly. Shivering slightly, mind reeling as to what she had just accomplished she raised her head in response.

“I’m grand Sam” she sighed, pulling herself to her feet her hands darted instinctively to her belt. Groaning she called back “any of you see where my daggers went?”

A grin slowly spread over Sam's face as he turned back to the carcass, “it seems you’ve miss placed them over here, they’re buried halfway down the hilt”

**Notes gap**

They go into the Tristown, respect earned by the hardy people.

They send out peons to drag the beast into town for meat, furs, trophies, medicinal remedies Killing an elthros is a rare feat. The town will be safer for a while as its roars and smell of blood will scare most other creatures away. Complain to Helios about letting a elthros past, elthros is the towns emblem

zoe dagger in table, tinged red, and defend helios