

*The Nightwing's  
Quest*

*Stirling Davenport*

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*I dedicate this book to my son and granddaughter, my parents,  
and the fairies at Rockdale.*



# *Part One*



## Prologue

### *Archives of Alvarra*

#### History of Nightwing Seran

*In the days when women were the slaves of men, the High Kings were in power, supported by their champions, the Siadhin Lords. Each of the twelve Siadhin Lords ruled the Great Houses of the cities. And each Lord was aided by a priest-magician. Thus there were twelve houses of dark-elven magic to protect the realm from the goblins, demons, trolls and ogres who besieged it from the vast underground called the Merimn'a.*

*It was said that the caverns of the Merimn'a had yielded rich ores of silver and precious stones. But from the deepest netherworld, the Kolkondor, Demon of Destruction, learning of their wealth, had sent his minions to steal the treasure from the dwarves who mined it.*

*Then, there had been such battles that the very heart of the earth trembled. Cave-ins and earthquakes resulted, killing the dwarves, and leaving only foul creatures.*

*Since that time, it was up to the Siadhin Lord's great army of warriors and priest-magicians to protect the dark-elven cities from the terrible horde of the underworld.*

*Thus, the cities of that time became centers of warfare and each day the army went forth to battle the creatures of the Merimn'a. All the wealth of the people went to make weapons, and the wailing of the hungry filled the streets.*

*Assisting the High King and the Siadhin Lords were the priest magicians serving Gantalor, the god of war and magic. The wizards who worshipped this god drew circles of chalk in front of each Great House and said incantations for the victory of the elves over the fell creatures of Kolkondor.*

*In each city a priest-magician resided, whose duty it was to chose two females to be sacrificed to Gantalor. Each time the moon above was full, the mushroom called the moonteller turned silver. Then, these two would be brought from the pits where they were chained and thrown into a chasm leading to the Merimn'a.*

*These women and girls were considered by the Alvarran rulers to be a small*

*price to pay for safety. And yet, in the hearts of the females of the realm, rebellion festered, fed by the callous disregard of generations of Alvarran men, from the High King himself to the Lords of Siadhin, his henchmen, and all who used their women like animals for the slaughter.*

*Thus it was that the female, Sonner, pregnant with her first born, escaped from her owner, and secretly followed the army to the very edge of the Underworld. There she saw the great secret so terrible that it shook her to her soul: there were no ogres or trolls or demons. Only a great sea covered the once wealthy mines of the dwarves. It was all a lie, to keep the women enslaved.*

*It is a common dark-elven saying that a pregnant woman has the sight. So it must have been with Sonner, for she was blessed with a vision. The Goddess Miralor Herself spoke—She who comes to women in labor, She who blesses the newborn ones and sees to the dying ones who enter the realm of invisibility. Miralor stood before her, clothed in a veil of dark light, and said:*

*“Sonner, brave and good woman of Alvarra, in your womb is a daughter, whom you have named Seran. Is it not so?”*

*The poor woman nodded, overwhelmed.*

*“Seran will be next ruler of Alvarra, newly cleansed of the evil that now runs through it like a poison. You will call her Nightwing and all will bow down to her.”*

*Sonner was too frightened to speak. The vision disappeared. In a rush, she scrambled back, eluding guards and lords and wizards. And in the days that followed, the news was whispered from woman to woman and town to town, from the slave pens to the pits of the doomed.*

*The revolution was born.*

*The most beautiful flowers grow in darkness.*

—Alvarran proverb.

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THE RABBIT SNIFFED the piquant mist of early morning. A faint breeze made her ebon fur a glossy ripple, and stirred the leaves of the ironwood tree. The rabbit's ears flexed backwards toward the sound. The tree's curved trunk obscured the small opening of a tunnel.

A figure emerged. The rabbit's nose quivered, her body still.

The figure straightened with precision, grace and something more. A gleam of basalt caught the first glimmer of sunlight.

The rabbit's body moved in one fluid leap, prelude to a dash for the bushes, but the knife was quicker. With a piercing squeal, the squirming animal was pinioned to the ground, and the hue of its fur underwent a metamorphosis—from deep black to light brown with white patches. Her pink nose twitched in her death throes.

The hunter strolled to retrieve his weapon, snorting with a vicious disappointment. His dark skin matched dark cloth, a wholly black silhouette against the trees and the blush of dawn on the horizon. His breath came in taut bursts as he scanned the trees. His pointed ears twitched with feral excitement. His mouth watered and yet he did not feed on the slain brown rabbit.

The dark elf sheathed his blade in the deep pocket of his legging. With a wary glance at the rising sun, he melted back into the shadows, staring at the body of the rabbit, in the vain hope that it might change again. The tree sighed, and a raven lighted on a low-hanging branch, ready to make a meal of the fallen creature.

A swoop to the ground, claws extended, ended in frustration. Before it

had reached the corpse, there was not a single whisker, nor a drop of blood, nor an indentation in the sandy soil. The startled raven flew away.

The hunter frowned, examining his blade. The blood had disappeared from that, too. Disappointment congealed into rage as he hurried down the endless steps leading to the caverns and lands below.

When he reached the first inner door, he was greeted by his lieutenants, who sang his praises. He bore their congratulations with a stern, impatient dignity.

"Child's work," he said, letting the cold drafts of air fill his nostrils and calm his nerves.

"But, Lord, you dared the Scourge," said one.

"You're not even burned," said another.

"Sunlight is the least of my enemies," he insisted.

"We are eager to destroy them, My Lord."

"When do we fight?" asked another.

"When I say it is time," said the hunter.

A sweet voice said, "Dekhalis, My Lord, let me take your hood." A woman emerged from a lighted doorway. Crystalline jewelry reflected the quartz ceiling above her.

"Ah, Priestess Theowla," said the hunter. "Queen Theowla, they will call you, when I am crowned."

She smirked, sliding next to him, her tufted ears soft with desire. "The Goddess Drimma will be pleased that she is worshipped, instead of that weakling Miralor."

"Truly. Better the wine of revenge than the milk of compassion. Leave us," he told his lieutenants, and they obeyed with alacrity. Dekhalis pressed a spot on the granite wall, causing a slab of stone to slide open. He and the woman entered, activating a warm shower of light that illuminated a down-filled pallet.

The woman's chest was warm against his own. "Did you get the Nightwing's rabbit?" she breathed, her lowered eyes filled with guile.

"No. My mother's magic is strong. But she cannot watch my sisters every moment. First Ombra, then Tiala, and the others. When the last of them is dead, I will be King. I will avenge my father and all other men who have been exiled under the Nightwing's tyranny these last twenty-five hundred years." He looked at Theowla. "And you will have your revenge for being passed over by my mother as High Priestess of the House of Drimma."

A large, white spider on the wall observed that Dekhalis's glance upon his consort was not soft and though his body showed desire, his expression resembled the stone-edged blade he pulled from his leg sheath and laid upon the green marble table by the bed.

IN THE royal death chambers of Alvarra, deep beneath the earth's surface, sixty-seven dark elves assembled for the funeral of Ombra Denshadiel, the Nightwing's oldest daughter.

Like statues, they kept vigil beside the shimmering Lake of All Souls, their ebon faces flickering with the blue light of the phosphorescent water. The sound of water dripping off stalactites echoed in the immense chamber. Nobles, friends and royal family were dressed in the sacred black of the Nightwing. The men wore long robes, the women a variety of garments, ranging from pants and tunics to flowing gowns.

As the eldest daughter of the Nightwing, Ombra would have become the next ruler of Alvarra. Her mother, the Nightwing Avenwyndar, was too old to attend, but the new heir, the second daughter, Tiala, was present, her chin held high.

By custom, only the royal daughters participated in the rites, while royal sons obediently watched. There was a son, the Nightwing's youngest child, Dekhalis. Tall and athletic, his face was hard as he looked down on his sister's bowed head. He put his arm around her and whispered, "She slipped."

Tiala stared at him, frowning over tear-filled, green eyes. Anguish marred her delicate features. "How could that be, Dekhalis?"

He blinked and looked away, but she dug her nails into his arm. "Ombra was used to the crystal mines. She even slept there. She wouldn't have fallen from a bridge she used every day."

Dekhalis pointed at the ceiling. The ritual was starting.

Birth and death were the most sacred of events in Alvarra, and, of the accompanying ceremonies, a royal funeral was the most hallowed of all. First, the body was lowered into the Lake of All Souls, which was believed to be bottomless. Next, the royal daughters tossed starflowers into the water as symbols of their bond with the departed. Then the time of mourning would officially begin. To ensure the safe journey of the departed from this life to the next, no elf in the entire country would be allowed to wear armor, use arms, or employ magical artifacts or spells for three moons.

Tiala looked up at the ceiling of the cavern, then at the thrice-woven silken rope hanging down and encircling her sister's bier. As the dark crystal casket descended toward the Lake of All Souls, the bards began playing *The Endless Dream*.

Only a fully trained bard could play the sixty-three-stringed dreaming

harp. The notes rose to the top of the glowing, flickering cave and enfolded the celebrants. There was a hush over the crowd, and envy surged within Tiala. Someday, if she were good enough, she could play one of those harps. She would be the first bard Nightwing.

She stooped to pluck a single starflower from the bunch at her feet. She tossed it over the lake, and its pink, translucent petals took on a shimmer of blue as it spiraled down and dipped beneath the water. Her sisters came forward and did the same, each tossing a long-stemmed starflower into the lake to join their sister Ombra's body.

First the spirited Eleppon, taut and angry in the uniform of the Swift Legion. The pants and short tunic with billowing sleeves were better suited for riding horses than attending ceremonies of state. With a look of compassion at her older sister, she hurled the starflower into the lake.

Next, tiny Noth, dressed in a black velvet blouse and hose, fingering a necklace of multicolored stones. She disliked crowds and ceremonies, and she scowled as she tossed her flower.

Last, the youngest, willowy Inuari, whose robe bore the black rabbit insignia at the collar denoting her rank as chelate to Miralor. Sobbing and sniffing, she threw her flower with such a weak arm that it barely cleared the bank. Tiala supported her sister to keep her from falling.

As each of the sisters tossed her flower, Dekhalis stood at a discreet distance, along with the other males, watching the rippling circles spread across the placid lake.

Above the crowd, a ledge juttred out from the slab of stone, and the ancient priestess Kalista stepped onto it. Her centuries-old face was covered with a spiderweb of lines in the ghostly light. As the last shimmering note faded from the dreaming harps, all eyes lifted to her shadowed figure. The quiet resonated with the dripping water, and the crone waited until the echoes of the music were swallowed by the cavern. When she spoke, her ageless voice was tinged with nuances of sagacity.

"The time of mourning is at hand." There was a murmur of assent from the Nightwing's daughters. The High Priestess tossed a last starflower into the lake and said, "Our beloved Nightwing's oldest daughter has descended. Name her with your wishes."

"For Ombra...for Ombra," whispered the crowd, accompanied by the dreaming harps, as each person added a wish for the royal daughter.

The priestess finished, "We send her wise counsel and profound love as she joins her revered ancestors. May she soon grow accustomed to the deeper life."

There was only the *plop* of dripping water until the hollow cavern was pierced by the sound of a low, melancholy bell, whose somber tones echoed

mournfully through the area. Each tufted ear reverberated with the sound, as did the entire country of Alvarra, from the depths of the Royal City to the grotto of the poorest farmer above.

The priestess spoke, “The death bell has rung from the Temple of Miralor and the emissaries of the Goddess will now gather our possessions of power. Thus, we put ourselves at Her mercy, knowing that life and death are in Her hands. You may approach, Appointed Ones.”

A tall figure entered the cavern from the far exit. She wore a body suit of bright red and a matching mask, and carried a large toad-skin bag. As she circulated among the celebrants, each elf woman deposited carefully wrapped weapons and magic artifacts into the leather sack. Most had nothing to consign, but many a noble woman trained in weapons play as a form of sport and exercise.

Forbidden to possess such items for centuries, the men stood quietly with arms folded into their robes. Their expressions ranged from resentment to resignation. Before the emissary’s bag was full, a similarly garbed figure entered with another bag. The muffled thud of metal and wood echoed in counterpoint to the renewed music of the harps.

Tiala placed a small crystal music box and a silver dagger into the bag. Likewise, Eleppon solemnly surrendered her long sword, wrapped in a sheath of pink silk. Noth dropped a small pouch into the sack, and it made a faint clinking sound; she liked to keep her weapons a secret.

The masked one looked for Dekhalis, but whenever she saw him, he disappeared again into the crowd. Tiala also watched his movements with increasing anxiety. As a favored royal son, he had not been prohibited from weapons play like other men. She herself had assisted his training.

Tiala noticed an elf woman whose smirk seemed out of place. She recognized this one as Theowla Twomothers, standing with a small group of priestesses from the House of Drimma. There was a place for revenge, Tiala well knew. It was a part of her history. But Tiala had never trusted Theowla. She was a woman in whom bitterness and ambition lurked beneath a net of seductive beauty.

At last, the emissaries from the temple had collected items from everyone except Dekhalis. Looking around, the woman in red saw him standing by the exit with folded arms.

All eyes followed her as she walked up to him and held out the bag. The harps sang.

From a side slit in his robe, Dekhalis withdrew a needle-sharp stiletto and suspended it over the neck of the bag, a smile lurking at the corners of his mouth. He laid the edge of the stiletto under the chin of the masked elf woman, and she held her breath.

“I hereby challenge the time-honored traditions of Alvarra.” His bitter tone shattered the peaceful stillness, and the people whispered, staring.

Immobilized, Tiala watched his malicious expression. Eleppon took a step forward, fists clenched, while Noth hovered in the background, more curious than upset. Inuari clasped her hands so tightly that her dark knuckles paled.

Dekhalis looked around, pleased with the reactions he was receiving. His green eyes sought those of Kalista on her ledge. "I refuse to go into mourning," he announced, his voice echoing like a shout.

"Brother—don't!" Tiala cried.

Dekhalis narrowed his cat-like eyes at her, and she shrank back at the newly revealed hatred. Tiala identified Theowla's soft chuckle from the shadows.

Kalista's voice cut through the tension. "Since you are in contempt of our traditions, you no longer deserve to live among us. In the name of our ruler, the Nightwing, I hereby exile you to the Purple Moors of Forgetfulness."

There was a gasp from the crowd. Tiala felt a knot in her stomach. *Oh, my brother.*

The vast purple moors were enchanted in such a way that once a creature set foot on them, all memory was wiped away forever. For the long-lived elves, such a fate was a prospect second to death. Whatever his crimes, no elf honestly wished that agony on another.

But Dekhalis's cruel laugh cut through their sympathy. "Do you expect me to abide by your judgement? I have never been one of you, neither able to rule nor to enjoy the innocent pleasures of the common man. I care nothing for your traditions." His stiletto glinted in the velvety light and those around him drew back in shock. "Who will oppose me?"

"Don't," Tiala said again. Inuari covered her face in her hands.

"What do you mean to do, brother?" asked little Noth, her face a mask of guile.

"I will live, dear sister, whereas *you*..." he shrugged and pointed to Tiala, and then to each of his sisters in turn. "Who knows what might happen to all of you? After all, wasn't Ombra's death a tragic accident?"

A group of women close to Dekhalis moved in to encircle him, but he waved his weapon at them with obvious meaning. His well-knit body rippled with muscular zeal as he stalked the weaponless would-be attackers. One by one, they withdrew.

Eleppon moved to Tiala's side and murmured, "Should I send for the guards?"

Even without weapons, their personal guards, the Ladies of Skill, were formidable. With weapons, they would prevail.

Tiala's clear voice entreated the priestess on the outcropping. "May the Ladies of Skill be spared the prohibition, Mouth of Miralor?"

Eleppon admired her sister's resourcefulness. She had used the spiritual title, not the secular one. Maybe it would allow for a change of policy.

Dekhalis hesitated, too, and looked up with his first uncertainty.

The crone held out her hands, and many could see they were shaking. In a voice that no longer seemed ageless, she croaked, “My daughter, we are a proud race, an ancient people. We must not let the actions and threats of a diseased one infect our way of life and our traditions. The full three moons will be observed.”

Dekhalis chuckled with a soft cruelty; then, leaping to the exit, he turned and glared once more at his sister Tiala. “Be very careful, sister—you are next,” he said.

Tiala darted forward and her sister Eleppon moved with her. But Dekhalis ducked into a hidden passage. Tiala knew she could find it, given time, but by then, he would be gone. Such passages were one of the features of underground life, where privacy—especially the royal kind—was a treasure well-guarded by stone.

Over the excited whispers of the assembly, Kalista addressed Tiala by her formal title, “Tiala na’a Nightwing, you must continue the ceremonies.”

Tiala’s voice shook as she strove for calm. “Yes, your Reverence.” She spread her arms. “Please—you are all invited to the feast at the Royal House in honor of my sister, Ombra. Let us celebrate her entrance into the life of the dead.” Tiala could not continue, as fear clogged her throat.

Eleppon took her arm and together they watched the guests move through a high archway that opened to a wide tunnel with crystalline walls warmed by the saffron glow of phosphor-stone lamps. One by one, the bards packed up their harps and joined them.

Peering at every shadow, Tiala led her sisters through a narrow tunnel known only to herself, back to the Royal House. The tunnel ended in a concealed door behind a fountain in the great hall.

She was greeted by a tall, dark-elven woman dressed in the livery of the Nightwing. A deep blue body suit with a silver emblem of a rabbit as a breastplate and chased silver gauntlets identified her as a Lady of Skill. Tiala whispered, “Guard my sisters well. See that no food or drink touches their lips before it is tasted—and search for Dekhalis. He must be found.”

“Yes, na’a Nightwing.”

Seeing Tiala stride off, Eleppon protested. “Where are you going?”

“To see our Mother,” said Tiala. “Ombra wouldn’t want you to miss her feast.”

Tiala had no stomach for the delicacies being served in the banquet hall, and went instead to an inner set of rooms, well hidden from the common area. She nodded to the priestesses who stood watch and entered the central chamber.

The cavern contained an ornate, white marble cabinet, two lizard skin

chairs set against the wall, and a giant sea shell with thistle down coverlets. In this bed was the thin, fragile body of a 497-year old elf. Tiala pulled one of the chairs closer to the bed and sat down.

The Nightwing Avenwyndar was so old she was becoming transparent, in the way that the ancient elves did as they departed their lives. No one knew how much longer she could last. Her body seemed small, nestled in the down-filled bed. She looked asleep, though she occasionally stroked the long fur of her familiar, the black rabbit curled at her side.

Tiala wondered what world the Nightwing visited and hesitated to disturb her. She said, "I know you are aware of everything, Mother—even when you are not here. Please tell me what to do about Dekhhalis."

She waited, but there was no change in the Nightwing's soft breathing.

"The High Priestess has decreed that we cannot break the time of mourning for Ombra, but I must do something." Tiala's voice broke. "By the end of the three moons, he can raise an army. You know the sort of charm he has and how many admirers are already close to him. My mother, I have been a fool. Dekhhalis must have planned this for a long time. Who knows how many warriors he has trained?"

The silence reverberated after her hurried speech. She swallowed. "Years ago, a traveler brought us news of a place in the surface lands where upworld fighters go to prove themselves. Remember? He said it was a fortress called the Manor, ruled by one named Mischa—surely some powerful woman like ourselves."

Tiala peered at her mother's face, but the diaphanous features were relaxed and remote. "You see? There I might find champions who are not subject to our rules, and who can help protect us from..." A tear escaped, running from the corner of her eye into her long, tufted ear. She brushed it away in irritation. *Why is this happening to us, Mother? What deeds have we done to deserve this betrayal?* Into her mind came a voice—not paper-thin like the figure in the bed, but strong like the wind that barreled down the central flue of their cave in winter.

*If it is your destiny to travel to the upworlders, my daughter, then it is there you must go. I have seen this day coming, as I watched your brother's heart grow hard with envy and hatred.*

Tiala stared. *You knew? We had no warning...*

*Perhaps I was not meant to bear a son. My first one was kidnapped, born long before you or your sisters. That is why Dekhhalis is so precious to me. But I let it blind me to the truth.*

Tiala wanted to say something comforting, but could think of nothing.

*Some things must take their course. Go, my child, and have courage. I give you my blessing.*

Tiala leaned down and kissed the Nightwing's face. "I will not fail you. Spirit of the foremothers be with us," she murmured, and went to the arched doorway of the small cavern.

Tiala's own room was not far, and she hurried there, closing and locking the round door behind her. With shaking fingers, she lit a lumpy green candle and took a sheet of dark parchment made of thin, supple bark. She dipped a raven's quill pen into the inkstand on her desk. In a few moments, she had written in pale, luminous ink: "Mischa, May darkness light your way and beauty surround you in the land of Terrarg."

Quickly, she outlined her plight, and asked for safe passage to the upworld stronghold. In return for help in finding champions Tiala would pay any sum of *z'a*—dark-elven gold—that Mischa might name. She was sophisticated enough to know that the upworld worked on a gold standard, not the silver—or *luaavh*—favored in Alvarra.

The dark elf tossed back her glossy hair and blew out the candle, then arose, rolling the parchment. She wet her fingers and pinched off a piece of the soft green wax to seal it.

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FAR FROM Alvarra, in the upworld called Terrarg, the sun beat down with the harsh, white glare of mid-morning, making the Manor appear like a glistening diamond on the sand. The Outland Territories stretched for leagues in all directions.

Inside the practice halls and enclosed arena, the guests huddled with an air of expectancy, protected from the heat by a roof and thick walls of stone. High, slotted windows let in only a few rays. The stadium was illuminated by torches set into the walls. The fifty circular rows of seats were graduated around a stone pit. Hundreds of spectators murmured with mingled excitement and fear. Most of them knew they might be called to fight.

A white-garbed herald mounted a high platform and announced, "Yellow Thirteen—three contestants." In the Manor, as elsewhere, the local dialect was augmented by Terrargian, a language of traders—with words borrowed from the human, elven and dwarven tongues.

Each of the potential combatants wore an armband of colored silk, with a numerical symbol written in the universal fighter's code. Not all of the guests could read, but most had enough experience to recognize numbers.

An usher moved into the rows of seats, and chose three fighters whose yellow armbands bore the symbol for thirteen. He then led them to the arena

floor, depositing their armbands into a pouch at his waist.

The fighting pit was of smooth stone, covered with a thin layer of sand that failed to hide the stains of recent battle. Circling the pit was a slotted trough from which drifted the smell of the sewers below. A high wall prevented the crowd from touching the combatants. As usual, the arena was filled to capacity. Various banners hung from the high ceiling, belonging to champions from years past who had lent their names to the Manor for posterity.

A very large young man was one of the chosen. He wore brown leggings and a short robe, and his long, brown hair was drawn into a monk's clasp on the top of his head. On his back were strapped two butterfly knives made of metal alloy. They looked almost new. A muscle twitched around his mouth, the only mark of his nervousness. He strove for calm as he breathed deeply, eyes half closed.

The second contestant was older, a well-muscled blue elf, who smirked with self-confidence, shrugged off the aid of the usher, and strode with purpose to the stone floor. He was girded with two weapons, one a long, ruby-hilted sword which had an iridescence to its silver blade, the other a well-worn bastard sword made of steel. He also carried a small javelin on his back, and daggers hidden in his boots and sleeves. He folded his arms and smiled at the crowd, turning his handsome, battle-scarred face this way and that.

The third was a stout, middle-aged dwarf, who also shook off the usher's arm and stomped toward the pit, amid shouts and cheers from the crowd. He had a great axe strapped to his back, and carried a long spear decorated with dwarven runes in silver and bronze.

"Bejo, the Mighty!"

"Victory be yours, Bejo."

The dwarf's face grew comical as he bestowed a gap-toothed grin on his admirers.

The herald announced, "Obsidian, novice from the lands to the east...Six Stixopholous, veteran of the Seven Years War...and Bejo of the shining axe... will fight..." the crowd was hushed in anticipation "the three ogre brothers of Ddor."

The crowd cheered, not only for the favorite, Bejo, but because the ogres were infamous criminals who had been sought for years. They had terrorized the desert and wilderness beyond, looting, raping, and burning whole villages.

"Good luck," said the elf to his tall companion. Obsidian nodded, his brown eyes focused on the huge double doors at the far end of the arena. He strove to ignore the bloodstains on either side.

Bejo the dwarf and Six Stix the blue elf scowled at each other. Six Stix spat and turned his back on him. They moved away from each other, putting the monk between them. Bejo had not fought in the Seven Years War against

the elves, but it was clear he wished he had.

Bejo raised his axe and planted himself in a battle stance, while Six Stix drew his bastard sword, gripping it before him with both hands. Obsidian stood, knees slightly bent.

A gasp went up from the assembly as the doors opened and three huge, exceedingly ugly humanoids emerged. The smallest of them was three times the size of Six Stix. Their leathery skin had a greenish cast and was covered with boils. Their hair looked like the branches of stunted trees, and they gave off a hideous stench. They carried spiked clubs, and growled, fanning out, with heavy, stomping tread.

When the ogre nearest Six Stix got within arm's length, the blue elf whirled his bastard sword and sliced through the hide of the ogre's chest. Howling, the ogre crashed his club down with the force of a falling tree.

Six Stix leapt to the side and raised his sword a second time. He deftly severed the tendons in the backs of the ogre's knees, sending him to the floor.

Seeing the defeat of his brother, the second ogre attacked Six Stix with his spiked club, ramming the elf's shoulder with a terrible blow. Six Stix fell to one knee, clutching his shoulder, his dark blue eyes wincing with pain.

The third ogre lunged at Bejo with a gloating howl. The dwarf brought his axe down on the ogre's arm, but the monster deflected the blow and swung his club, hitting Bejo in the belly. The dwarf sat down heavily, in great pain, but managed to thrust his spear into the ogre's side. With a horrible wail, the ogre fell on the dwarf, who was crushed under the monster's dead weight. The crowd screamed, "Get up, Bejo."

Obsidian, who had been casting his brown eyes back and forth between the two contests, decided that the elf was in greater need of help. The lamed ogre was struggling to his knees while his brother was raising his club for another blow. The monk reached behind him and in one graceful movement, drew the butterfly knives from their sheaths. Before the ogres could further damage the elf, Obsidian wielded his knives against the ogres in a flurry of motion so swift that no one could follow it.

But the ogres felt all the power of the fifty slicing strokes. Turning in pain and terror, they fled to the edge of the floor, one of them hopping on one foot, both dripping green blood from shallow cuts.

The crowd was on its feet.

"Did you see that monk? He's amazing."

"I don't believe it."

"Finish them."

"Kill them."

Many had lost family members to the terrible ogre brothers in past years and some had even worse tales to tell. It was said that the ogres roasted and

ate even their own young.

Those nearest the pit hollered, "Bejo! Get up, Bejo." But the dwarf lay still.

It was the ogre who staggered to his feet. He plucked the lance from his side and tossed it onto the dwarf's body. As the throng hurled obscenities at him, he roared back at them and shook his noxious fists, green blood pouring from his side. The monster lumbered closer to his brothers.

Obsidian crossed his butterfly knives in front of him, eyes locked on the ogres. He panted, infused with a new fear.

Six Stix waited for the monk to strike, then shrugged. He leapt up, unsheathing the elegant long sword, his shoulder muscles bulging against the leather vest. Swiftly, he attacked one of the ogres, goring him neatly through the belly. The ogre fell to the stone floor, and his skull cracked open like a nut, spilling green viscous liquid toward the sluices at the edge of the pit. The other ogres moved forward, growling and circling the elf as he taunted them with his blade held high.

Obsidian still did not move. He glanced at the lifeless body of his fellow fighter, Bejo, and narrowed his eyes at the ogres.

Six Stix stepped back a pace and grated at Obsidian, "Do I have to do all the work?"

The youth replied, "It's against my principles to kill without provocation."

Six Stix's slanted eyebrows shot even higher, "Provocation? Do I have to die to get your help?"

Obsidian frowned with uncertainty. "At least you kill fast; that is merciful."

Six Stix grunted an obscenity. He reached behind him for his javelin and sent it squarely into the heart of the second ogre as the fiend advanced with filthy claws. Then, stooping over Bejo's sprawled body, Six Stix grasped the exquisitely carved spear and raised it to his good shoulder, aiming squarely at the third ogre's forehead.

The spectators were on their feet now, their hoarse cheers drowning out even the roar of the ogre's battle cries.

The last ogre brother gave a ghastly scream, his eyes bulged out, and dark spittle drooled from his mouth. The cries of the audience and the sight of his own blood spilling on the floor had driven him to the very brink of madness.

The spear glided through the air with a purpose, slicing into the ogre's forehead like a hand into a glove. The bronze point embedded itself deep into his flesh. The ogre grabbed the handle and wrestled with it, attempting to dislodge it, howling with each movement.

Six Stix's vision clouded over. Disoriented, he was vaguely aware of the ogre's struggle. He strove to hide his exhaustion, but his shoulder felt dislocated.

He stumbled to one knee and watched as the ogre broke the shaft of the spear. The weapon splintered into pieces, the runic writing obliterated forever, the point embedded in his forehead. Six Stix let out his breath as the ogre finally collapsed.

When it was obvious that the monster was dead, the crowd cheered with abandon and tossed coins into the arena floor. Six Stix heaved to his feet and bowed, showing his dimpled smile. Ignoring the pain in his shoulder, he gathered all the money, and Obsidian left by the exit passageway that had opened behind them.

Four gnomes wearing purple livery wrapped the body of the dwarf in a scarlet cloth, and carried him off on a stretcher. The spectators maintained the respectful silence that followed the death of a fellow contestant.

Once out of sight, the monk doubled over and took a deep breath. He had survived his first real battle. He hadn't expected it to be so terrifying. The monks had trained him well, but not for the revulsion and terror the ogres had evoked. *Not for the death of a comrade.* Bile rose in his throat.

Six Stix soon joined him, still stuffing money into his bulging waist band and under his mail shirt. With his good arm, he slapped Obsidian on the back, grinning up at him. "Good fight, little brother."

Obsidian stared at the fighter. "How can you be so jolly when you've just killed three fellow creatures—and seen your own comrade die at their hands? Look at your shoulder. It's bleeding."

Six Stix noticed the youth's pallor. "Not your first battle, is it?" The monk didn't reply. "Well, well. You religious ones always seem to be your own worst enemies. Can't drink, can't wench, and now, can't even eat, I'll wager." He laughed at the youth's greenish complexion. "Your appetite will return, though you may not believe it. As soon as I get this shoulder seen to, we'll eat."

Obsidian swallowed. *This elf interests me. I would like to feel his confidence, his lust for life. But I want to be in control of myself—shaping my body and mind until I am one with the Master of All...* He was vaguely aware of Six Stix relating some battle story as they walked up the stairs toward the common rooms. He admired the indigo scars on the fighter's body, but wasn't sure he wanted to know their history.

THAT EVENING, in one of the guest rooms of Mischa's manor, an elven wizard sat brooding. One candle cast its light from a wall niche above his shoulder, illuminating his bluish skin. Another candle flickered on the table

before him. Embaza was tall and angular, even when seated with his dark blue cloak around him. His handsome face seemed ageless, a mine of elven shadows, strained and haunted.

He gripped the candle and dripped several drops of wax into a small dish. He blew on the wax to hasten its drying and began to work it with his long fingers until the mass bore a close resemblance to himself. He then drew a long steel needle from a hidden pocket of his cloak and pushed it gently into the wax of the figure's neck.

He leaned his head back, and the cloak slipped down his shoulders, revealing a necklace of rare firestones that sparkled blue, then white, in the candle's glow. His mouth opened in a silent scream of both torture and ecstasy. The darker skin at his lower neck had an ebony hue quite different from the deep blue of his face and hands. Soon he would have to reapply the dye.

Tears brimmed in his green eyes, and he withdrew the needle, his body slumping like a marionette whose strings had just been cut. When he straightened, he returned the objects to the recesses of his robe. He sighed with relief and a smile curved his lips. *Pain is my friend.*

He stood and surveyed the room. It was small and plain, but comfortable. The bed was made of hardwood, the tall chest furnished with a lock as he had requested. The floor was bare. He donned the hood of his cloak, entered the closet, and slipped into the darkness, closing the door behind him. He had excellent night vision and soon found a slight crack in the back wall.

Embaza pressed on one side of the crack and the wall swung open to a dark corridor beyond. He took a small strip of cloth from inside his cloak. Onto it he had glued eight very fine needles with dried sap. Now he pressed the cloth over the spot that opened the secret passage, his nimble fingers avoiding the needles. Then he side-stepped the doorway and released his hand. The hidden passage closed as silently as it had opened.

The hallway was cool and damp, dimly lit by chips of silica worked into the stone walls. The material was said to be older than the desert, from a time when the earth itself was hot. It was rare to find such stones nowadays, but Mischa's grandfather had purchased them at high cost from greedy tribal chiefs.

With his night vision, Embaza didn't need the light. His soft boots made little noise as he crept along to the southwest. He ignored two doors for a third, where he stopped and listened for a few moments.

*Ab, she is asleep.* Examining the door, he found a small piece of thread to one side, two feet from the bottom. He tugged it gently, and the door came open, revealing another closet as black as his own.

He pressed through the garments that hung to the right, causing a slight rustle in the stillness of the cramped chamber. Soundlessly, he opened the door to the adjoining bedroom.

A diminutive female was in the down quilted bed. Her flaming red hair glistened even in the darkness. The woman's sleep was troubled by his presence and she sniffed the air like an animal.

Undaunted, Embaza approached and peered at her sleeping figure. *Polah. You have a secret, too, and I will know it.*

She gave a slight moan. Embaza's sensitive ears discerned a note of torment. He tried to imagine what she must be dreaming. He sent a tendril of consciousness out to her, but then she seemed to fall into a deeper sleep, not moving, barely breathing, as if she were in a coma. Embaza waited for many minutes, watching her still form, then decided to leave.

As he stepped back into the closet, he stumbled over a tiny wire caught on the soft leather of his boot. Polah was instantly awake, and she sat up in the bed, peering at the closet as if she could strip away the darkness like a skin. She covered her upper half with the blanket. "Who's there?" she murmured, a seductive growl in her voice that underlay her peculiar lilting accent. *A southern accent*, she had said at dinner.

Embaza shuddered, reminded of wolves and foxes roaming the woods of his youth—or someone's youth. He never wanted to think about childhood and never lingered long on the reasons why.

But now, he could see the red-haired Polah as if she were that first remembered woodland animal, outlined against a full, silvery moon, standing proud and fearless on a mound of earth. The scent of moss and fur overwhelmed his senses as he let his imagination have its sway.

All this took but a moment, after which Embaza flattened himself to the wall of the closet and cultivated quiet, his green eyes peering softly into the darkness of the bedroom where the woman sat with feral alertness, her red hair crackling with electricity around her small, heart-shaped face.

The invisible thread being woven between them grew stronger, like a hollow log filling with rainwater.

"Little fox," Embaza whispered in a low, caressing voice.

Polah sat transfixed, her shining, black eyes darting to the corner of the room. Her skin flushed, she reached up to touch her cheek. She looked back toward the closet and something in her body had softened, yet her voice was bitter.

"Do you think you know me?" she asked.

"I will always know you," answered Embaza. There was a long silence.

"You frighten me," she said. "Please leave." *Before you are sorry.*

Embaza backed away from the menace in her voice, opened the door, and left without a word. Exhilaration filled his breast and every step seemed like a sparkling pool amid the shadows of the night. He made his way to his own closet door and entered his room, taking no notice of the needles sticking into

his palm or the taste of the sticky sap as he absentmindedly licked his fingers. In his mind, he smelled only moss and fur.