

Under A Midnight Sun

Chapter I

The Death of Me

“It is a popular fairytale that upon the approach of a great and terrible time, great heroes will arise. They say these heroes can overcome any trial, any hardship, and any enemy who crosses them. They say these heroes will save the world. What these fairytales don’t say is that heroes are just normal people, in extraordinary circumstances, and they are never alone. Friends walk by them, always.” – Gareth Grolidic, Master Archivist

Prologue. The Dawn of Despair

The womb of stone, a world of living earth.

Life springs forth from the earth, life returns to it in death. Perhaps then, even the earth’s own life rests within what stands in its womb now.

A meeting of minds, two great powers who will help but in a small part the fate of this world.

“My Lord Citadel, it has been a long time since you would see me.” The first one spoke, an oldish man of indeterminate age, with a haunted look in his eyes and the crooked stance of one who has much weight to bear. He shrouds himself in a simple brown robe, made of the simplest offerings of the earth and easily woven by the humblest hands.

“Our differences we should put aside, old friend.” The one addressed as the Lord Citadel spoke. “Your son returns.” This one wears travel clothes of an expensive pedigree, finely woven silks and cashmeres, expensively dyed into colours that stain the walls with their brilliance.

“I have no *son!*” The first one spits. “A disappointment, and you are in a poor spirit of jest to remind me of that which I cursed!”

“But you know the destiny he promises. You hear it, the murmurs of the earth upon which he walks, the song which the stars sing, you listen, even in the womb of creation.” The Lord Citadel speaks.

“Yes, yes I know.” The robed one speaks in hasty impatience. “It brings an accomplice of destiny with it.” He says, refusing to refer to his son as anything but.

“And they come to you, they will. And they will come to me firstly, so that I would tell them what needs doing.” The Lord Citadel says.

“And they will go off gallivanting doing whatever they wish to do, Lord Citadel. You know you cannot change what they will, or must do. By their will or not.”

“That is why I come to see you, old friend. This will be the last time I would lay eyes on my most loyal friend and companion these years past. I would beg the chance for a last drink.” The Lord Citadel speaks with a twinge, a strum of sadness by the heart.

“Of course, of course. To fate then, and destiny!”

The tap of old clay goblets echoes in the womb, clear as crystal.

I. Approach –

Vashiel, the capital city of the Republic of the same name. Prime example of one of Human’s greatest triumphs, Citadel of the Lords. Seas to the north, west and east. A vast plain leading to the capital to the south. Dense forests embracing the borders to the Republic, making the city all but unassailable. The mingling of cultures from a thousand different beings, the trade of a million goods thriving within its walls.

The Crown Jewel of the Republic, the centre of the world. Nestled against a massive mountain ridge, at the very pinnacle of the Middle Continent. Impregnable, ancient, and prosperous.

And as of right now, of absolutely no consequence to the traveler on the road, who couldn't have cared less if she was riding into a backwater village with dung as its export and who would happily put up in an outhouse if it meant getting out of the sun. It was hot. So hot, the heat felt like a liquid burning the skin. So hot, the traveler was sure the city in the distance was a mirage. Dead insects littered the road, struck down by the heat that just didn't seem natural.

Elijah Yuvenua, Elementalist-in-training and Adept-to-be, rode her golden-white mare Brilliant Dawn down the empty cobbled road. Decked in her formal Whites, an elaborate affair of thick billowing sleeves and sweeping skirts, which originated from an embroidered vest of about two inches of thick wool and cotton with trimmings of gold and runes of silver and spelled against weather, wear, dirt and attacks. She wished she could have stripped down to her leathers if it meant she could shed at least half the heat under those robes. And yet, it was necessary, an unpleasant necessity, for one who sought to receive her Trial from the Lord Citadel himself. This being the test of her abilities assigned by The Courts however, she had no choice but to endure.

"Would you at least say something to take my mind off this heat?" She demanded rather petulantly, to the shadow behind her.

No reply.

Elijah turned to look, and there it was. As constant as the shadow the sun cast for her, the blot in the landscape stared back at her, as unfathomable and as deep as the colour it represented. Three weeks, and she had yet to figure out who this was, let alone why he did what he did for her. He was the epitome of the colour of the Abyss, black from the tip of his helmet to the soles of his boots. Sheltered in armour of the finest quality (to her untrained eye) and seemingly of impossible workmanship were joints moved like the liquid body, plates that slid like scales with each movement and yet it seemed would laugh at the effort of the sharpest blade to scratch it.

Inscrutable through the sliver of his eyeslits, silent as the clouds that streaked the skies, he rode a horse of the purest black. Of the only three words he had ever said in three weeks, two of those were that of his mount's name: Darkest Midnight. He hadn't even told her his own name. Now, Elijah was sure that despite the colouration, they were both equally as honest and reliable as enigmatic beings went, disturbing as their presence was, or their methods were. That didn't stop her from keeping a surreptitious eye on him from any distance at any time, and she was infuriatingly sure he was absolutely aware of every look she gave him.

Many times Elijah had gone to sleep with the Black Rider (as she called him) on first watch, and had always woken up in the morning to see a row of dead bodies neatly lined up on the side of the road. Everytime she asked, his answer would be 'Brigands'. It still unsettled her, the way she would never notice a thing until the next morning. It wore on her nerves everytime he wouldn't let her take first watch, like as if he knew something she didn't. And the worst thing was, he never woke her up for the second watch.

"It wouldn't kill you to say something, you know. I know you're not one of those animated suits of armour, or else I wouldn't have had to rescue you from that cliff." Elijah chided, trying to ignore the rivulets of sweat that formed little rivers down her neck.

No response. Elijah carried on.

"Oh, sure. I've seen what you can do. Six Stone Drakes and nary a scratch on you, wow, what a great warrior, one would think. No-one could have done better, one might think. You're the one everyone looks up to, maybe." Elijah rattled on, as the sun got, impossibly, hotter.

"Children adulate you, men bow before your feet. Maybe you don't like talking, maybe you have some stutter that you're utterly embarrassed of. Oh sure- ***BUT FOR THE SAKE OF MY SANITY, WOULD YOU PLEASE SAY SOMETHING!?***"

At the end of her rope and burning it quickly, Elijah finally snapped. She stopped Brilliant Dawn and wheeled the slightly surprised equestrian around to face her

shadow. Dawn whinnied once in mild surprise, but was too intelligent to question the mood of her master.

It was something new, at least it got a reaction out of the Black Rider. A minor stiffening of the body, perhaps, or some barely perceptible motion. He stopped, as calmly as death went about its rounds, and spoke.

"What would you have me say? I have little to offer."

Elijah fumed at his words, so irrepressibly unflappable, that she forgot the heat for a moment.

"I don't care what you are or who you *think* you are, you're not one of the High Lords of Eia'da and I certainly wouldn't care if you were! Don't give me that cocky 'I'm the dark mysterious warrior, fear me!' attitude, and don't think that you were doing me a favour by allowing me to rescue you! I'm *not* as helpless as you think, and I'll be *damned* if I let a man do my work for me just because he thinks he's *better*!" She spat, verbal lances borne of three weeks' consideration and irritation, in equal measure.

Surprisingly, he nodded. With that hollow voice that sounded like it came not from a helmet made by human hands, but from some deep crevasse, he replied.

"I have but little to offer in gratitude except my services, I make poor companionship where conversation is concerned, lest I should bore you with my litany."

Elijah opened her mouth - paused -, and thought about it. Finally, she turned Brilliant Dawn around and urged her forwards. Obliging, Dawn trotted on at a slightly faster pace.

"We near the Citadel. You need only accompany me there, and no further. I would have you tell me your name, at least, and why you would do so much in return for me." Elijah spoke over her shoulder, softly.

The capital city came closer. She could finally see the queue waiting to enter the city gates, and noticed that pedestrian traffic was at a minimal today. She edged Brilliant Dawn over to the right as they passed the first of the farmers' carts. They headed for the pedestrian gate, a little to the side of the merchant's gantry. Elijah was mildly aware of the murmurs and whispers of the farmers driving their stock as they passed, but she wasn't surprised if the fully armed and armoured walking darkness didn't draw some sort of response.

From behind her, the hollow voice spoke like a whisper to her ear.

"I am Lorstar of Vashiel, son of Saraphorn, of the Chrystaphel Sun legacy. Of the Runic Order I am a part, and my services are given freely to those who earned them."

Elijah's eyes narrowed at that last part, and she spoke again.

"You don't say. So I earned myself a bodyguard who doesn't sleep, eat, cares not about the weather and listens to whatever I say. And does so unconditionally, no matter where I might have gone." She remarked, in a calm voice.

"I simply pledged myself to you for your deed. It is perhaps a coincidence that this was also my destination. You have brought me here, and perhaps the right thing was done as such." Lorstar replied, calmly. "You might say it was fate." He added, after a slight pause, as a feeble attempt at a joke.

Elijah cautiously turned her back to him and went the rest of the way to the gate as she processed this revelation. She was still contemplating it when the gate guard stopped her.

"Hoi, woman! Stop and state your business!" he growled as he nearly got trampled by Brilliant Dawn. He might have been grateful though, if he knew that Dawn was every little bit as intelligent as her eyes betrayed, and deliberately stopped herself just within snorting distance, which she did. Rather to the guard's annoyance.

Elijah snapped out of it. "Oh, my pardons. I am Elijah, of the Yuvenua Legacy, of The Four Courts from the Eastern Ceylasian Peninsula. I am here on assignment for the Lord Citadel."

She was in the process of removing a scroll from her voluminous sleeves when a new voice spoke.

"Milady, your companion. Be he...?"

Elijah looked up. The man who accosted her had gone, replaced by another man. Older, more gnarled, but who had the sort of self-confidence Elijah knew only came from a man who had faced more swords and lived than half the guards on duty right now. She rightly guessed he was the guard captain when he summoned a small contingent of the guards around him, and none looked friendly in the least.

"What business is it of yours who my traveling companions are, good sir?" Elijah asked in her most courtly manner. She could feel the tension building, and Brilliant Dawn was no fool either. Muscles in the legs of both beings tensed, waiting.

The guard captain's hand never left the hilt as he raised his head slowly to look at her.

"Know you who you travel with, my lady? A most unnatural being, that fellow is."

Elijah turned to look at Lorstar, who stood there unmoving. There it was again, that feeling she had picked up someone far from ordinary. She really wished she hadn't taken the mountain pass that day. Funny, how sometimes every mote of your being tells you not to take a road, and yet you do so anyway.

"Good sir, please do not be so hasty in your decision. I know not what has transpired between this city and him, but if you might be so kind as to explain to me-?"

"No explanation necessary, good lady." Spoke yet another newer voice. This one spoke with authority, the sort that belonged to a man who knew what he said would be heeded, who knew what he did was right and true. The Lord Citadel. Lord Vashiel Corlum, the Twelfth.

The stout, broad shouldered man strode over to the guard captain, his small entourage clustered behind him. His presence was electric, the effect undeniable. The guards took up position, in the way no amount of training would inspire. He stared at the guard captain and spoke gravely.

"He is a member of the Runic Order, no matter who his progenitor may be." The Lord Citadel said, sternly. "I will not have my men behaving in such an uncivil manner to anyone who has done nothing to deserve such treatment, even for the sins of his father."

The Lord Citadel was not a very imposing man, standing only a meter and seven tall. He was as well built as the next man, and could wield sword and pen both with equal skill and valour. The difference between him and his men, however, was obvious at first glance. The Lord Citadel was nominally an 'impressive' presence at best. Elijah was sure that if she were to pass him in the street, and he was dressed in peasant rags, she would stand up and notice almost immediately. He stood with the confidence of honesty, the strength of belief. People near him noticed. He had a true belief that what he did truly mattered, and that his people were his first and only concern. And despite all this, he was a canny and calculating man, the sort who could play the most venomous politics with the best of the rest, who could pick apart a detractor's protests if it so pleased him. He was a shrewd man, who knew where every copper piece went, and yet could be trusted to spend his fortune if it was for the greater good. Such men were rare, but such men were always powerful, for they had the support of all whom they stood for.

And how, to see him out in the street like this! Was his trust so explicit, that he could wander the streets, trusting his subjects to keep him safe? Elijah knew that could not be. And she was right too, even if she didn't know it yet.

The Lord Citadel appraised the situation with a simple glance. He stared at Brilliant Dawn in the eye, and smiled at her. Dawn snorted once in return.

"A beautiful horse, milady. She must have been a gift."

Elijah started at his sudden observation. She grasped for words, and finally nodded.

"Yes, Lord Citadel. A gift from Grand Master Teredoc Harcha. He sends his regards."

"And mine, to him, Elijah of The Four Courts, daughter of Mirya, of the Yuvenua legacy." Lord Vashiel replied, using the court language only reserved for dignitaries and formalities. It was an unwritten social norm that those in higher stations would not speak to those below them like this, and yet the respect accorded to Elijah was almost unprecedented. Elijah was stunned as she stared at the Lord Citadel.

"How-" She stammered. That he would know her name and legacy! A Lord Citadel, to bother with such a minor-?

"I received word of your arrival a day before from Teredoc. A little birdie told me." Lord Vashiel chuckled, that glint of the sly fox in his eye.

Elijah started for a moment, then suddenly remembered what she was doing here, and immediately dismounted.

"My Lord, your mount awaits." She tried to return the proper etiquette as was proper, trying to remember the half-learned lessons on noble etiquette. She really began to wish she hadn't slept through lessons she thought she would never need. She hoped she wouldn't screw up.

She didn't, or else Lord Vashiel didn't care. The Lord Citadel walked up to Brilliant Dawn, patted her head once and whispered something in her ear. Brilliant Dawn stood stock still (to Elijah's thrice-shocked surprise) and let him mount. As he gestured Lorstar forward, he leaned over and offered Elijah his hand.

"Come, milady. We haven't the day to waste on pleasantries."

As Elijah mounted Brilliant Dawn with the Lord Citadel's help, she couldn't help looking at both Lord Vashiel and Lorstar. Something bugged her, and she was sure it was something she had just heard. And, as if on cue, Lord Vashiel answered her unspoken question.

"You shall find out about our mysterious friend soon enough."

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The halls of the Citadel were not typically grand, as was something often expected from great lords of the most powerful nations. Instead, there was a *feeling* of grandness. In spite of the weathered surface of the hewn stone walls, the floors polished

by fourscore generations of Lords and Men, and the lack of any real decorations or trappings, Eliah knew that the great halls served a far greater function. As the Lord Citadel himself led them to the inner sanctums, Eliah took note of the architecture and made her own observations.

But as she also noted, there was a sort of majesty to the place which could not be put to words nor denoted by mere physical objects. It was a feeling, the ever present state of reverie and honour that permeated the air. Of course, the ostentatious gold and glitter that many foreign dignitaries paid true homage to were to be found further in, where Lord Vashiel held Court.

Many would argue about what formed a ruler's the basis of power. Some would rightly argue that the true seat of power came from those who supported you, and not the wealth that did. The wealth was only a means to the end, and it proved fragile seating material indeed. They were right.

* * *

"Eliah of The Courts, present to me your Trial and make your case known to me." The Lord Citadel spoke in the audience chamber, a cavernous white chamber, supported by 12 ornate pillars and lit by a hundred thousand slivers of light, from the myriad stained windows that ringed the chamber. If one were to look, one would realize that the story of the Citadel was told in the pillars and windows, but Eliah really couldn't have noticed that. She was as nervous as an apprentice at a blacksmith's, hoping to get the job and yet dreading it. She cleared her throat and spoke with a practiced tone.

"I, Eliah of the Yuvenua legacy, come as a supplicant from the The Four Courts, to bring my Trial to the Lord Citadel, Lord Vashiel of the Corlum legacy. The conditions of my Trial are as decreed by Court Master Teredoc: The locating of the Deep Tower, of the Dark Geomancer Saraphorn, of the Chrystaphel Sun legacy, that the knowledge be safely returned to the Lord Citadel for further action."

And immediately, the thought struck her. *Now* she knew why she had the bad feeling. Although alienated from the association due to rote memorisation, the legacy of Chrystaphel Sun finally made itself clear to her. The Dark Geomancer's son was, and had been, her traveling companion and faithful guard for three weeks. For a second, she was stunned, and her tongue tripped on itself as her brain moved to form the next words. However, she quickly righted her composure and carried on.

"The Concern I have been given is to reveal and mark the location of the Deep Tower, so that The Four Courts may successfully mount a raid on the Dark Geomancer and punish him for his misdeeds. I am required to do no more, save to return alive." Eliah swallowed as she finished the last word, and sweat that had nothing to do with the temperature rolled down her neck.

<What have I gotten into?> Eliah thought to herself as her body mechanically took the customary three steps backwards. *<Have I been sent to find Lorstar's father so that we may kill him!? What of Lorstar then?>*

Elijah did not notice the Lord Citadel's look in her direction, or she would have clearly known he thought the same. Still, he spoke again, this time with more force.

"Let the Trial be considered at my leisure. Let Lorstar of the Runic Order come forth and present arms." Lord Vashiel commanded.

With the silence of confidence, or the quiet of shame, Lorstar stepped before the Lord Citadel and drew his great sword with flourish.

The massive sword, fully six strides in length and half a stride across, screeched metallicly as it left its scabbard strapped across his back. In an overhead arc, it cut the air like a crescent moon and landed squarely in the open palm of Lorstar's other hand. Lorstar knelt before the Lord Citadel, the weapon held up in offering.

"I bring before you the only legacy I will know, the pride of a warrior. My blood for my Lord, my Father and my Saviour. For He I shall not shirk my duties, or forsake my life and my honour, for He I shall give my all but waste not one drop of blood in his service. I give to you the greatsword LongForge, to do as you see fit."

The hollow voice from the darkness of Lorstar's helmet reverberated through the room like nothing else did, the vastness of a cave with the emptiness of a tomb, evoking in all present the coldness of the crypt. Elijah shuddered. The Lord Citadel however, looked unfazed and glared burningly at Lorstar, still unmoving with his sword offered to the Lord.

Lord Vashiel stood, and strode down the stairs towards Lorstar. His voice booming, he announced to those in the Hall.

"The legacy of a warrior is the lives of those he has saved, the pride of a warrior is the surety that he can carry out his duties even in distress. To not shirk his duties or give up his life..."

The Lord Citadel stopped a handsbreadth from Lorstar.

"That is sheer folly."

In a heartbeat, he suddenly grabbed the hilt of the sword and swung the sword much like Lorstar had, in a crescent moon over his head, and brought it towards Lorstar's neck.

Elijah had no time to react, even as she saw the sword. Her mind spoke, but her body was just beginning to hear it.

The sword stopped a finger's breadth from Lorstar's prone form, and rested gently on his shoulder instead.

"But I like the part about not wasting a drop of blood in my service. Did you think that up too?" The Lord Citadel spoke, his voice suddenly warm. He smiled, and it was as if he were joking with Lorstar.

Lorstar, perhaps not aware of what had happened, or too brave to move, nodded gravely. Lord Vashiel laughed, a loud, yet uncrude laugh. It was the sort to put any man or woman at ease, and Eliah just barely stopped herself from hyperventilating.

"So be it. I accept your offer now, Lorstar. You have finally found meaning in what I told you those many years ago, and now you come back to me, a wiser soul. Lift your head so that I may look upon your face."

Lorstar lifted his head, an apparition of darkness staring at the Lord Citadel. He frowned.

"I do not hope that you have only learned from what I told you and remain a fool in the rest, Lorstar. I would look upon your face."

Elijah watched the exchange, fascinated. She had not, and still didn't, know what to make of what she was witnessing. It was a meeting of parallels, of friends, and also of those separated by station, or Lord and Knight. Elijah had seen one or the other in a formal Court, but never both together.

Lorstar hesitated. Something was not right, Elijah noted. He seemed... flustered? Was that the word? Elijah was not sure, but Lorstar did not seem to want to heed his Lord on this matter.

"Lorstar, of the Chrystaphel Sun legacy, I would have you remove your helmet and face me eye to eye!" The Lord Citadel spoke, with an edge in his voice which was now clearly a command. The tension began to rise in the chamber, obvious for all to see.

But in a sudden change of heart, it seemed, the Lord Citadel lowered his voice and addressed the chamber at large.

"I understand you may not wish to let this be widely known. I shall make this one concession. Leave us be, all but Elijah of the Courts!"

Quietly but fussily, those in attendance streamed out of the chamber, around Elijah, who stared in stunned surprise as the flow of people went around her and past the main doors.

Elijah couldn't find anything to say in her confusion.

The door closed, a final slam in Eliah's hanging question mark. She looked to Lord Vashiel.

"My lord, what is going on?"

"You shall know, young Eliah." Lord Vashiel replied. "Show us your face, Lorstar."

Slowly, but most certainly painfully, Lorstar's hands finally went to the helmet. Eliah noted that they trembled as they did, a sort of fear that she could simply not understand. Why would removing a helmet be so difficult?

Eliah suddenly conjured thoughts of some hideous monstrosity, an abomination of man, perhaps, a creature that should not have been but nonetheless made its way into the world. Mayhaps a demon-cursed man? A deformed child, saved from the gutter perhaps? A cursed visage as a legacy of his father?

The helmet came off. Eliah held her breath.

A mane of ebony hair so dark that any light seemed white upon it cascaded out from under the helmet, to settle across the expanse of the black armour that encased the body, framing the gentle, porcelain face that was finally revealed.

It was totally beyond Eliah's expectations.

The person was not an abomination, nor was he demon-touched. He was certainly not what Eliah had expected at any rate, except for the fact that he was not a He.

What Eliah thought was positively the most beautiful face she had ever seen blinked at the Lord Citadel with wide indigo eyes, made all the more apparent with a striking pair of lips that would need no dyes, and a natural blush that no rouge could produce.

Lorstar was quite undoubtedly a woman, so beautiful she made even Eliah blush.

"A...?" Eliah gasped, but could not speak.

"Young lady, *Preth Eliah?*" Lord Vashiel replied in kind, showing an aptitude for the many languages in the Republic. "This... is Lorstar."

Eliah stared at the person she had thought was quite the epitome of the strong, silent type of man. She simply would not believe what she had known and heard all these three weeks were all a farce.

"No falsehood, Eliah. However, you might want to hear us out." Lord Vashiel addressed Eliah, snapping her out of her reverie. "This will be quite a story, I assure you."

* * *

The guest chambers were everything Eliah had hoped for and more. Large spacious rooms made from quarried stone, a major luxury anywhere in the world. Lush drapery that were so thick she could use them as cloaks in winter. Tapers made from fine tallow that didn't turn everything she ate into smoked food (she kind of liked the taste of the better brand of candles, however. It was a guilty vice she wouldn't admit even on her deathbed). And best of all, a real feather bed and comforter free from all the usual biting nasties that were the bane of her existence.

Still, those took second place to the tapestry that was a story unfolding before her, as told by Lord Vashiel.

"The Chrystaphel Sun legacy was great, once. It was actually an alliance between my legacy and theirs that would lead to the creation of this great democracy. My ancestor, Lord Vashiel Corlum the first, once served another man. You might have heard of the legacy of Mier'lar, the Bloody King. You know the story, the king who ruled by fear, who killed without mercy, because he feared death himself more than anything.

So, it comes to the point which, historians always warn, repeats itself. Someone became *very* unhappy with Mier'lar. He staged an uprising, a rebellion, that took years to surface but brought the Bloody King down in what we historically remember as the Ten Days of Blood and Sorrow. That man was Vashiel Corlum the first. I know only that he served the Bloody King, but oddly, it is never mentioned how."

"So where does the Chrystaphel Sun legacy come in?" Eliah asked.

Lord Vashiel nodded, gesturing towards Lorstar as he spoke. Lorstar sat, sullenly, impassively.

"Vashiel Corlum had a friend, a rare instance in those days. He was Runewar Chrystaphel Sun, an Emissary Knight. One of the old orders that existed before Mier'lar. One of the few orders that worked hard to keep the populace feeling safe and protected, even as Mier'lar's paranoid insanity killed more every day.

I should say that my ancestor had the *fortune* of meeting Runewar, as it was the Knight who made him see truth. Vashiel Corlum finally emerged from his haze of servitude, understood what his King was doing, and it scared him. Enough to make him start asking questions, and getting answers from others who thought likewise. That was the start of the rebellion, and the eventual rise of this Republic. Throughout all this, it was old Runewar who helped marshal the people, who made them see the tyranny, who supported Vashiel Corlum in his efforts... who stood by him. He helped form the Runic Order as the Peoples' protectors, and since then, those of the Chrystaphel Sun legacy have remained loyal retainers for the Corlum legacy, the Protectors and Advisors to the court. Until Saraphorn."

Throughout all this, Eliah noticed that Lorstar remained quiet, refusing to move a muscle or speak. Indeed, her face could have been made from stone, cold as it was. She spoke, quizzically.

"My Lord, I know of Saraphorn's treachery and betrayal... but what of Lorstar? What secret would she harbour that only you would put her in your trust, and no others will?"

At that, Lorstar's eyes blazed at Eliah's use of the pronoun, but narrowed and calmed again in an instant. Eliah knew something was going on. Lord Vashiel coughed once, and stood.

"I think... it might be best to let... Lorstar explain. I take my leave now, fare well."

"My Lord-" Eliah started to protest, but the Lord Citadel dismissed her with a bow and three quick steps to the door. Even then, Eliah's heart skipped a beat when she heard the soft, voice that was as beautiful diamonds, but as strong. Eliah stared as he closed the door behind him, then looked at Lorstar, who was also getting up.

"Lorstar, stay, please. Tell me of your self."

Lorstar stopped, and turned to regard Eliah with fierce blue eyes that chilled Eliah with the burning intensity of fire.

"You need not know my shame. And you need not stay, once your task is over. Leave me to my contrition."

With that, Lorstar stepped out of the room, leaving Eliah alone with a final slam of the doors. The lavishness of the room left her still empty.

* * *

The audience hall was busy the next day, as it was Hearing Day, where the Lord Citadel would listen to the supplications of his people and address them.

But first, it would begin with the Lord's Honour, where the Lord Citadel made his *own* requests. And the first two supplicants were, unsurprisingly, Eliah Yuvenua, apprentice of The Four Courts, and Lorstar Chrystaphel Sun, Knight of the Runic Order. Both were in their formal gear, which meant Lorstar was again the Black Rider Eliah first met.

"To Elistar of the Yuvenua legacy, of The Four Courts, I give to you my blessings to begin your Trial. Upon successful completion, I shall send word to Master Teredoc of

your new status as Journeyman Elementalist. May the Brother Kings and Queen Sisters light your way."

Elijah bowed, and retreated to the side as the Lord Citadel spoke again.

"To Lorstar of the Chrystaphel Sun legacy, I task upon you to protect Elijah of the Yuvenua legacy, and to give whatever aid and succor she may need in trying times. You shall first accompany her to the Deep Tower, wherever it may lie, and henceforth guard her with your life until death releases you, or she does. Upon your pride and honour, I place this."

And almost immediately, as the whisperings of gossip began, Lorstar and Elijah both did a double take. The Lord Citadel waved a hand.

"Go now, Elijah. Bring me fair tidings."

* * *

"It looks like we're going to be together for a long time." Elijah commented as they trod down the dusty road, under a sun much more favorable than before. Besides, Elijah was now properly dressed for the road. A simple leather vest for protection, voluminous but not loose riding clothes that didn't keep the heat in. Her cloak, robe and all other extraneous clutter were all tied in a neat bundle and had been left in the generous care of the Lord Citadel's very capable chamberlains.

And, no response from the silently brooding figure behind her. No problem, she was used to that.

"Maybe when I see your father, I'll ask him what's with your Cursed Warrior thing, and why they call you his son." Elijah commented, much too casually.

"You will speak nothing of this." Came the distinctly *male* hollow voice from behind Elijah. This time, it had the cold intensity of Lorstar's baleful gaze.

"Then maybe you'd like to tell me why this is such a shameful thing to speak about?" Elijah asked, testing the water in a manner of speaking.

"It is mine alone to bear." Came the reply. Elijah wasn't sure, but it sounded sorrowful. She pushed the issue.

"It's ours now. If you don't tell me, it's not going to help us work together." Elijah said, patiently. She knew she was getting somewhere now.

Darker Midnight neighed once, unexpectedly. Elijah stopped, and turned Brilliant Dawn around. Lorstar had stopped, and was looking straight at her.

"I do not know what your intentions are, Yuvenua. Why do you insist on knowing?"

She'd struck gold on this one, Eliah thought.

"Because I care." She replied, truthfully.

Lorstar paused, and seemed to think about it. Finally, the response came.

"He was great once. I was the apprentice, a father and son relation that was common in Vashiel. I learned Geomancy from him, as a means of continuing my service to the Lord Citadel. Saraphorn wasn't always like what you heard about him. He was a good man... a long time ago..."

Lorstar trailed off wistfully, as if remembering good times gone by.

"Then one day, he found something. Something terrible. I know not what, but it changed him. Made him wary, withdrawn. The Lord Citadel knows I tried to find out what it was, but he wouldn't tell me. But every day that passed, Saraphorn became more reclusive. Perhaps the evil that one talks of nowadays took him. Maybe he discovered something. One day, he told me. Learn the secrets of the Dark Courts... or be forever outcast by him. I refused."

Eliah nodded, the story being what she had come to expect so far. It wasn't uncommon for this to happen, although normally not to a legacy as renown as the Chrystaphel Sun.

"So what happened then?"

"He cast me out, renounced me as his son. He ranted, and said that he would never have a son like me, who would not serve the Great Citadel and, ultimately, be its demise. He said he would make me live to regret my decision."

Eliah stared at Lorstar.

"That means..."

"My father cursed me. I am his son no longer."

* * *

As the day wore on, Eliah pondered the thought in a stupor. It was unlikely, she thought. Impossible, more like. No man had the power to curse people with sheer force of will since the Old Days, when thaumaturgic magic was rampant. It simply didn't happen.

Lorstar followed behind her, as silent as a shadow as always.

"Elijah, perhaps we should rest a while. We are approaching the forest at the edge of the border."

Elijah paused long enough to tilt her head in thought.

"Lorstar?"

"Yes?"

"That armour... is it yours?"

Lorstar paused, then replied slowly.

"A gift from my father. A suit of Voidstone platemail, the curse that keeps me alive until time takes me. And maybe... not even then."

It should be known that Terra Nyx, or Voidstone as it's commonly referred to, was the rarest, most valuable substance in the world. It was impervious to all known physical assaults, and so magically inert that no spell had ever penetrated it. As black as the dayless depths it comes from, Voidstone is found only in one part of the known world: In and around the western base of the mountain range known as Myko's Spine. As soft and pliable as clay in its lightless womb, Voidstone acquires its legendary indestructibility as soon as it is exposed to light of any sort. So rare is this substance that a sword simply edged with this adamantine material is prized over a duke's ransom. So difficult to properly craft in the pitch darkness required that any armour fortunate enough to have even a thin layering of it is a prize worthy of a princess's hand in marriage. Zealously hoarded by those who mine it, a single vein of Terra Nyx would make its prospector rich unto his dying days.

And here Lorstar was wearing not just a suit of armour plated with it, but seemingly made *entirely* out of the black diamantine, forged and crafted with a skill not akin to mortal hands, with a two-handed sword made entirely of the same material. For pure monetary value, it would buy an entire kingdom and its subjects.

Elijah appeared to ponder the armour slowly as Lorstar stopped besides her. She still looked dazed, but a spark was coming to her eyes. Lorstar's armour wasn't completely smooth, as she had first thought... it was rough... full of carvings and intricate designs. She slowly ran a hand over them.

"Those runes..."

"My own. My own magic. None of my father's."

"I know. But to carve them..."

Lorstar pulled Darker Midnight over the side of the road, towards the forested edge of the forest. A relatively comfortable position, from the looks of it. A small clearing ringed by trees, healthy looking grass. Someone had even dug a firepit for overnight stays. It was sheltered, and Eliah was sure that there was a source of clean water somewhere.

“Over here.” Lorstar gestured. Eliah followed.

As she did, Lorstar moved past the camping site and pushed further into the forest. Eliah stared. She stopped Brilliant Dawn and shouted after him.

“Lorstar! Where are you going?”

Lorstar said nothing, and kept going. Eliah immediately spurred Dawn after him.

“Lorstar, if you’re going to forage, at least tell me! You could’ve taken Brilliant Dawn with you!”

Lorstar remained quiet, and kept moving into the forest. Eliah was finding it a little hard to follow him as the mottled shadows broke up his patterned armour. She urged Brilliant Dawn on a little faster. The mare didn’t fare as well however. She had been brought up on the plains.

* * *

Eliah wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but by her guess it was at least half an hour before Lorstar finally stopped. Eliah noticed he had stopped at another clearing. More of a glade, actually. Beautiful flowers in the field, a small bubbling spring, birdsong. The works. Eliah dismounted and stomped up to him angrily.

“Lorstar! You do NOT go all ‘mysterious’ on people and lead them to glades in the middle of nowhere without *telling* them!”

Lorstar turned to look at her, from the back of Darker Midnight. Eliah stared right back up.

“My apologies.”

Eliah sighed, and shook her head. She wasn’t happy to admit it, but she had gotten used to this behaviour. So far... *so far*, it hadn’t killed them yet.

“So. This is the resting spot you mentioned? Right, let’s get to it.”

Eliah was about to urge Brilliant Dawn another step forwards when Lorstar’s arm snapped up in front of the mare’s face, startling it. It reared, and Eliah had to hang on for dear life.

“What do you think you’re doing!?” Eliah shouted at him after Dawn calmed down.

“This is not the place.”

Elijah paused and did a double take.

“Excuse me?”

Lorstar urged Darker Midnight over to the edge of the glade and stopped. Eliah noticed that Brilliant Dawn snorted and started prancing nervously. She was pretty sure her mare was always right when she sensed something wrong.

“Is there... something wrong?”

Lorstar raised his hands, and spoke something.

The glade disappeared and was replaced by a giant, gaping hole in the ground. A huge yawning pit, rimmed by Earth that looked like an oozing sore. The pit went on forever, and Eliah was sure she heard something in that column of darkness in the ground. Eliah watched the transformation, and all around her, the trees began to wither.

“...! Lorstar! *WHAT are you DOING?*”

When Lorstar finally put down his hands and turned around, Eliah realized that all around her, the trees were sickly and dying. She tapped the ground with her toes once, and cringed at the slimy, sticky texture.

“Lorstar, what is this? Is this your doing?”

“Not mine. What you saw was an illusion. A glamour cast to fool the eyes. A simple one, but powerful. I merely removed it.”

Elijah glanced at the hole in the ground, and walked over. She peered into it just as a fetid blast of hot air hit her in the face, the smell of rotten meat and swamp water clinging to it. Lorstar dismounted and pulled her over before she could retch into the pit.

“When you are better, we shall rest for a while. Then you will return to Vashiel.”

Elijah, wiping the last bits of lunch away with a rag, shot a look at Lorstar. She looked betrayed.

“You knew where the Deep Tower was. All along.”

Lorstar nodded guiltily, if blackness that absorbed everything and gave nothing back but a void in one's vision to hint at one's existence could betray anything as simple as Guilt.

"I... did not wish to interfere with your Trial. You had best return to the Citadel with your findings, Yuvenua." He spoke in a mellow voice, but Eliah straightened to her full riding height and glared at him.

"If I return to Vashiel. What about you?"

Lorstar glanced at the pit.

"I'm going to see my father."

* * *

They had been 'arguing' for hours, if a one sided argument with only one angry party was anything like an argument.

"The Deep Tower is no place for an apprentice like you, Yuvenua."

Eliah was mildly touched by his unusual show of compassion for her. But that didn't cancel the fact that she was insulted.

"Maybe, but I'm *Tetramagicka*. I command *all* the elements, not just a half-cocked apprentice who can barely appease Court of Earth." She bit back.

"They may yet become the greatest in their field, Yuvenua. It is not difficult to master one Element. You have no guarantee that you may become the best in all of yours. Few have." Lorstar commented calmly as they sat around a fire in a small, untainted clearing a ways from the Deep Tower. Eliah huffed.

"I *can* and I *will*. Let nobody say that I didn't try!" Eliah retorted, pride severely injured. She didn't even know why she should have felt this way talking to Lorstar.

Lorstar said nothing as he stood up and went over to Darker Midnight. He apparently said something, and Midnight snorted, bobbing its head.

"I've instructed Darker Midnight to bring Brilliant Dawn back to Vashiel safely. You should go now." He said as Darker Midnight trotted over and nudged Brilliant Dawn in the flank.

"You're not sending me away-" Eliah started.

"The Deep Tower is no place for any one living being, least of all you, Yuvenua." Lorstar announced, firmly. "Perhaps you would like to test your guts again?" He said.

Elijah glared darkly at Lorstar. Lorstar returned the favour.

“I’m not letting you goad me into going back, Lorstar. The Lord Citadel was clear on this. Where I go, you go. If I go back to Vashiel, you *will* follow me back. Either way, I win.” She growled between clenched teeth.

There was a silence. Something that was palpable, and could probably be touched if anyone tried.

Lorstar, unfathomable behind the darkness of his armour, said nothing and turned away. Elijah nodded with self-satisfaction and walked over to Brilliant Dawn, who was being annoyed by Darker Midnight. She whispered in Dawn’s ear and the mare did an about face. Both horses disappeared into the forest.

Elijah packed their rations and with a snap of her fingers, extinguished the campfire. The little dancing flames winked out, rather than die like a normal fire.

“Let’s go say hi to Daddy.”

* * *

The Deep Tower was something out of Elijah’s childhood nightmares. As she stood at its lip and looked down, she had the impression of a mass grave. The soil that was more muck than anything, gave her the feeling that even the earth itself was rotting, like a corpse. There was a gust of wind that came from the pit, a smell like a charnel house and a village privy, hot and wet and sticky. Elijah had a rag tied around her face to keep the worst of it out, but her eyes stung and burned and her travel robe, suddenly too thick and heavy and clammy, would have been gone in an instant if not for the thought that her bare skin would be in contact with this foul air otherwise.

“Ware the wind, Elijah. It blows through all the Tower, and when it is strong, you can hear the torment of the Earth itself brought forth from the walls of the Tower.” Lorstar cautioned as they found what looked like a stone staircase leading down into the Deep. “Many who hear it have fallen and in to a worse fate in these depths.”

Elijah didn’t need Lorstar to remind her of anything, for all her thoughts and instincts told her that she shouldn’t even *be* here. The stone itself was slippery, like wet bones sticking out through an old corpse. Elijah was loathe to touch the walls for support, lest she feel something she really wished she didn’t. And the wind soughed on.

“Is it natural to feel scared here?” Elijah said.

“All do.” Lorstar responded, simply.

“Not that. The spirits, the elementals, here. It’s like a horde of *something* terrible invaded and scared away the Court of Earth here and took over. Now the palace is but a den of beasts.” Eliah said, shuddering slightly. The air was warm, but she knew fear needed little to chill the heart.

“And it is. Those that live beneath are now Saraphorn’s servants, the spirit of the earth itself broken by his practice.” Lorstar replied, and wasn’t Eliah sure, but did she hear a crack of resentment in his voice?

“How do you know where to find him?” Eliah asked, suddenly curious. The Deep Tower, for all its brooding impressiveness, was really little more than a hole in the ground.

“He already knows we are here. We will find him, or not.” Lorstar replied in that irritatingly nonchalant manner again, the sort of indifference that Eliah found both reassuring yet irritating at the same time.

“And... how *will* he know we are here?” Eliah asked, too annoyed to have thought of the obvious answers.

Lorstar said nothing as they descended deeper into the darkness.

* * *

In the Citadel, back in Vashiel, there were whispers going around. It came from the palace, down to the guards, from mouth to ear and back again. Everyone knew, from the loftiest aristocrat to the grubbiest tramp.

The Deep Tower had appeared.

Everyone knew what it meant. There was mild panic, a ripple that rode this way and that, and talk which caroused round and around. But nothing came of it. Everyone knew it was for the Chrystaphel Sun legacy to settle.

From a peak of the Citadel, the Lord Citadel looked on towards the south, impassively, or perhaps just masking his features well. The sentinels by his sides showed nothing at all, had no thoughts of their own that they would allow to deflect their sworn duty. Lord Vashiel took a sniff of the air, and knew that the smell had travelled far.

“So, it begins, the Beginning of the End.”

Lord Vashiel turned and descended the staircase, his sentinels silent shadows.

* * *

I.I Descent into Darkness

“It’s getting awfully dark in here, Lorstar.” Eliah commented as they made their way further down the Deep Tower. “Think I should light a lantern or something?”

“Stop here.”

Eliah, used to his sudden replies and motions, had developed pretty good reflexes. She stopped a stair short of bumping into Lorstar. She could only be glad that it wasn’t too slippery.

“Yes?” Eliah asked, patiently.

Lorstar turned around and held a finger in her face. Eliah sighed, and put up patiently as Lorstar sketched something in the air. At first, Eliah could only see his finger moving in the air as he muttered something, but slowly, she noticed that as he repeated the pattern, a faint glow appeared in the air. The glow eventually coalesced into an odd, fuzzy shape, and finally sharpened into a symbol. And there was a snap. Eliah winced, and when she opened her eyes, she realized that she could see perfectly well in the dark.

“This is my magic now.” Lorstar commented. “The Rune magic.”

And they carried on.

* * *

Something stirred in the Dark. Maybe it was the stretched, faded sound of footsteps far above. Or the rain of black water that dripped on it with every step taken by the Violators. Maybe the burning white shaft of sunlight that suddenly opened up above it woke it.

Whatever it was, it was awake now. It was not happy, and it always liked to eat before it went back to sleep.

The gristle pit that was its nest rattled and slurped as it heaved itself out of the rot-pool and vented some foul *air* from some gaping orifice that was maybe not quite there, not quite in sight. Perhaps what was a squeal of terror from some minor denizen of the Deep Tower rang out through the catacombs surrounding its nest... perhaps it was a squeal of warning.

* * *

Eliah did not have a good feeling. This came partially from experience, and mostly because they had not seen anything for the past half hour that they had been descending into the Deep Tower. The wind was stronger now, that was a sure sign of progress, but Eliah could not shake off the feeling that every second of peace she had

now would be paid back triple when they finally met something. She voiced her concern to Lorstar.

“Lorstar, how much longer does this go? I know the Tower is supposed to be deep, but if this goes on any longer I think we’ll end up on the other side of the world.”

Lorstar actually appeared to ponder this question as they paused to let Eliah rest a while.

“Then it appears we have reached our destination.” He said, slowly.

Elijah did not like that sound. She was hot, tired and sweaty. She also had a pounding headache and her eyes felt hot.

da-dump.

Something reverberated in the dark. There was a *feeling*, not a sound, that buzzed in the sides of Eliah’s head. Her ears began to heat up as the feeling got worse.

bzzt-bzzzt. bzzt-bzzzt.

An ache in the back of her head began. She felt like someone was striking her head with a hammer, but it spread the pain all round instead.

da-dump. da-dump.

Elijah’s persistent feeling got worse. She could feel her heart beat harder, her head got lighter.

Bzzt-BZZZT. Bzzt-BZZZT.

She began to shake as she realized that her legs would not hold her weight. Her body trembled, the pit of her stomach rippled like some frantic insect.

Da-DUMP. Da-DUMP.

Her breathing became louder, and became a struggle for breath. She began to black out as her senses were assaulted by the combined attack in her head and body. She began to fall.

BZZT-BZZZT.BZZT-BZZZT.

DA-DUMP.DA-DUMP.

BZZT-BZZZT.BZZT-BZZZT.

DA-DUMP.DA-

And then *they* were falling. Both bodies hurled into the darkness.

* * *

In the Deep, the Great Deep that *might* have been the bottom of the Tower, the creature half-stirred, half-heaved. It was a half-hearted action, probably, it had been so *long* since it had had *anything* to eat since... well, it had no sense of time. But it knew, that somehow, somewhere, a thing called *time* existed. It might have been an arbitrary value *something* made up, but it wasn't sure. Maybe it was. Perhaps it wasn't.

The creature wasn't even sure if it actually needed to *eat*. It might have had to, once. But nowadays things blurred together into a continuous, endless, single awareness. It was simply *now*, and *here*. Maybe that was all that mattered...

Maybe.

* * *

Elijah was barely conscious, aware, partially, of her situation.

<*I'm falling.*> was her first thought since fighting her way back from the black mire of her mind.

She was barely aware, but she knew she was plunging downwards, falling into the darkness, inexorably.

And there was another observation.

<*Someone's holding me.*>

And then she woke up, completely. And there was nothing but darkness. For a moment, she panicked, thinking that maybe the runes Lorstar had cast had worn off, and she struggled. The darkness held fast, held her tightly in its grip, unshakeable.

"Be still." The darkness spoke to her.

It was Lorstar.

Elijah was stunned into acquiescence, and quietly obeyed him. She knew they were still falling, quite possibly to their dooms, but she was comforted.

<*He cares.*>

And then there was a massive impact, not unlike the sound of a large wooden plank hitting the water very hard, very fast. And the jolt was not unlike a slab of rock landing upon the back of a large, gelatinous creature.

And the *HUGE* roar that accompanied it. It was quite obviously a roar of pain, or something like that. Maybe.

<Damn.> Eliah thought. And there was nothing doubtful in that.

Darkness took her again.

* * *

It had been a long time. As time was to other beings. Maybe. Its perception was hazy, unsure. All that mattered was the Passing. The inevitable knowledge that things happened around it, and had been happening for as long as its memory held.

And then... and then... an explosion. That had been something it did not mistake, even after what passed for centuries. A solid feel of pain, the common denominator for all that lived, even one as surreal as the Creature Beneath.

It was time to feed.

* * *

Jolt. Jolt. Jolt.

Eliah was dimly aware that something was insistently and repeatedly nudging her belly, and that she was in a vaguely uncomfortable position.

Joltjoltjolt, jolt.

She was also aware now that her whole body was rather uncomfortable. She lifted her head, and saw the floor beneath, racing by.

“Waking up would be well advised.” Lorstar’s voice came to her, and her brain began its work, sluggishly.

“Wh-...” Eliah started.

“We are presently being chased by the Creature Beneath, one of the Origin Beasts that lived before all Man and the age of Sentience.” Lorstar continued, as he ran seemingly without effort through a cavern of indeterminable length. Eliah was glad to have noticed that since she could still see, Lorstar’s runes were still working.

“Origin wha~?” Eliah murmured unsteadily.

“One of the Beasts mentioned in legends to have helped shape the rest of the creatures of the world. Including us. I have no doubt that it should not mind reclaiming what is rightfully its.” Lorstar continued. Eliah noticed dimly that he had her body slung

across his shoulder and that uncomfortable bumping came from his running in great strides across the cavern floor.

A roar in the distance made the very flesh of the earth shake, and Eliah's skull to rattle.

"It comes." Lorstar said simply as he set Eliah down. "Now run."

She did.

* * *

The Origin Beast, whatever it may be, ravaged on, spurred by ancient memories and the one constant of all existence: Hunger. It may have needed to feed, or feeding may have simply been a preprogrammed directive on its part, or one it may have developed as a prerogative for its progeny but it knew whatever had set it off was the source of its freshly revived memory.

The massive shape pressed on, leaving liquefied bedrock in its wake, and the stripped skeletons of a hundred unfortunate creatures.

Maybe it might have felt that chasing whatever had its attention was losing its appeal.

Its hunger abated.

Of that, it was sure.

* * *

"Is... it... still... chasing us...?" Eliah panted, the air burned cold in her lungs. Every breath was a war waged with her brain and muscle, forcing it to take in air, cold, life giving air. They had taken refuge in a small crack in the wall when the walls finally stopped rumbling and they couldn't hear the Origin Creature any more.

"It appears not." Lorstar said, maddeningly calm and, apparently, still very much energetic.

"Good." Eliah burped in one rude breath. "I might've had to give it what for." She sounded a little unconvincing, even to herself. A very faint impression of bemused interest burned itself into her back where, Eliah was sure, Lorstar was looking at her with eyebrows raised.

Eliah noticed something else. There was a wind. It was blowing quite strongly from the fissure they were wedged in. It smelled strangely fresh for an underground chasm.

“We have arrived.” Lorstar said. He walked over to a larger fissure in the wall near-by. “At the Spire.”

Elijah joined Lorstar.

* * *

The Spire was, as it turned out, a misnomer. If Elijah could believe anything, it would be that the Spire was just as well the bottom of a well. Or an Anti-Spire, as far as something that was jutting out *the wrong way up* could be called Anti-Anything.

They were at the very bottom of a massive, *massive* spiral of rock that jugged out from the subterranean ceiling of a bubble within the deep earth, a massive needle in the not-sky overlooking an equally massive Ziggurat that stood beneath them.

And around them, was an entire village.

Elijah looked around. Then looked down. Or up.

It was all a matter of perspective. Or in this case, relativity.

“Lorstar, are we at the *top* or *bottom* of the Spire?” Elijah whispered, cautiously, lest her tenuous hold on reality force her to do something stupid.

“If you will, we are at the zenith and the base.” Lorstar replied. “We are at the bottom of the Spire, but the top of the Tower.” It was a little cryptic to Elijah, in the sense that ripples in a body of water told the observer that it might be an innocent waterbug swimming to the surface for a quick breath, or the snout of a very big and hungry alligator.

“Explain it to me in terms I understand.” Elijah said, watching through the cracks in the Spire as shambling figures walked on the *ceiling* of what she perceived to be the giant cavern. Strangely, even though her mind was telling that everything should’ve been falling out of the not-sky screaming, a part of her told her it was perfectly normal.

“All the world is made of magic, to a greater or lesser degree.” Lorstar explained, patiently. “The earth we live on exudes a very faint magic, which we call Gravity.”

Elijah scratched her head. She remembered that lesson well. Having the feeling of your guts pulled out through your legs was bad enough, it didn’t help her practical lessons had her stuck to the ceiling upside down. She murmured some vague permission to carry on.

“This magic comes from the Heart of the Earth, and gets weaker as it travels outwards.” Lorstar continued, as is he would have anyway if Eliah hadn’t told him to. “However, like most natural magics, it has its faults and fissures.”

Lorstar gestured out the cracks in the Spire, and picked up a little pebble.

“This is one such area where the magic flows wildly. Out there—“ Lorstar paused, pushing the little pebble out the crack. It suddenly flew *up* the Spire, according to Eliah’s point of view, towards the demihuman village ‘above’ her.

“-Gravity has reversed itself. It’s like a river eddy, with multiple points of magic flowing together and causing ripples and stirs. In here, the gravity is normal.”

Eliah blinked. It made sense, if you looked at it that way.

“So, there are pockets where Gravity reverses itself, because there’re too many streams of it pushing against each other?” Eliah ventured. Lorstar nodded.

“Yes. In extreme cases, they form places like The Darks. However, here, the balance is very fine. The next pebble I put outside might fall the other way as Gravity shifts again.”

Eliah shuddered at the thought of The Darks. It was a massive pit in the Valley of Yorn, an isolated gorge miles away from civilization. Or if you would, civilization was miles away from *it*. It was not rumour, but fact, that once every few years, the massive black hole would suddenly rise from its pit and suck in everything for miles. People could tell because the entire sky would shift entire spectrums of colour, and the clouds would vanish from the sky for months. It was said the valley was gouged by the source of The Darks millennia ago, and if you looked carefully, you could see that the rock indeed looked like it had been sucked towards some massive force. Nobody ventured near, except maybe to tempt fate.

Then another question popped into her mind.

“Why is there a village here?” Eliah quizzed.

“They are his livestock.” Lorstar said.

“Livestock?” Eliah turned to look inquisitively at Lorstar.

“Saraphorn lives in the Ziggurat, performing his arts, undisturbed. The creatures serve under him in return for whatever benefits he deems fit... a source of fresh meat, if you will.”

Eliah thought about it for a moment. From her memory of the books at the Library of the Courts, she could make out the lumpy, distinct shape of the Demorcs and the tall,

lanky Grimwalds. Creatures that lived out of the light, because they always had, but were by no means beasts, in the same way humans called themselves humans but other creatures 'animals' even though technically this wasn't entirely true.

"Are they... his slaves?" Eliah whispered, grimly fascinated and horrified at the same time.

"Willing raw material." Lorstar replied calmly. Above the din of the activity 'above' them, Eliah didn't really stand out much. "He protects them as much as a shepherd cares for his flock. He uses them as he sees fit, and those lucky enough to be spared his attention carry on as usual."

"But... don't they mind?" Eliah said, trying her best to think about how they felt, but failing quite spectacularly. It isn't hard when your mind is like a white slate of chalk.

"They like it. Under him, they have flourished against all the odds of the Underworld." Lorstar said, nonchalantly.

"Odds?" Eliah croaked, not liking what she had heard. She definitely did not learn about this in Court studies.

"Like the world above, there is a world below." Lorstar said. "Not many are aware. And would do well not to. The darkness does not reward pleasant looks or disposition. It has its place, and it is not on the Surface."

Eliah suddenly felt sick all over again.

"Come." Lorstar said. "We are nearly ended."

* * *

It was a strange sensation, Eliah would later admit, to feel your head and your feet exchanging places, then your body realizing it should do the same and following in its own sluggish way. An image passed through her mind, like that of a human turning into a ripple for a second.

"We have arrived." Lorstar announced, when she had shaken off the feeling.

Eliah stared at the small portal at what she assumed was the tip of the Ziggurat. She looked up. The entire village was still bustling above her, oblivious to their presence. Occasionally, grains of sand would fall from above, stop, then fly back to the village. Apparently it was a game for the young Demorcs, as she could hear what passed for excited screams everytime the grains of sand kept falling and onto the Ziggurat. She guessed they couldn't see very far.

<Good for them,> Eliah thought as some of the grains of sand landed in her hair.
<They're having fun and I'm being pelted with sand.>

Lorstar entered the portal without a second look back, and Eliah had to hurry to follow.

* * *

The portal was, quite rightfully, named for its sole purpose.

Eliah decided that going from what was already a dark and dank place into something that was on a completely different level of dark and dank suited the purpose of the doorway she had just stepped through. Immediately, her robes clung to her, and her hair felt sticky.

“Lorstar, shouldn't Saraphorn be doing something about us by now?” Eliah whispered, very quietly. She hoped he could hear her through his helmet.

“He already has. It will be waiting when we get there.” Lorstar replied, quite nonchalantly. Eliah supposed he knew where ‘there’ was.

“You don't suppose I should begin calling up some protection?” Eliah whispered again, her fingers tracing nervous lines around her pouches.

“This is *his* kingdom of Earth, Eliah. You would be powerless against what he can call up.” Lorstar replied, and Eliah cursed herself for not having known it earlier. She would see precious few of the servants of the other Elemental Courts here.

“I'll try.” Was her simple response.

“That will do.” Lorstar replied, just as simply. For some reason, to Eliah, it meant the world.

* * *

A wisp of silk fluttered lightly as a breeze brushed it. Ornaments wrought of the finest precious metals and stones were laid out upon the onyx table, glittering weakly in the translucent green glow of the chamber. A figure, humming to itself, shuffled past racks of books and displays, all screened with black silk.

“Oh ye sons of fathers and children of daughters... all who return to their home once again... let the sires be proud, the sirrahs sing loud... gleeful days, for we raise our hands high, champion our fires...”

A chair, moulded in the finest approximation of royalty, stood silently. It had been shaped right out of the rock from which the room was made of, a part of it, a living extension. The figure touched it, almost wistfully.

“...then let the champions return, to light the blaze once again... bring light to this world, which once burned so bright.”

* * *

It had been, at most, an uneventful journey.

Elijah was glad that, imposing as it had seemed, the Ziggurat was not actually as convoluted as she had first envisioned it. So far, Lorstar had had no problems navigating it, which made Elijah confident of the simplicity of the route.

“Do not stray, Elijah. The walls are impregnated with illusions and forces of change. Lose sight of me and we will never see each other again.” Lorstar whispered, almost randomly.

Elijah decided, wisely, that she had a lot to learn.

* * *

The light at the end of the tunnel, as they say, is beautiful. Elijah couldn't have agreed more. It had been the only focal point of their travels so far in the unknown hours they had spent down here, and frankly, Elijah would never get enough of the sun again, no matter HOW hot.

Lorstar paused when they finally saw it. Elijah bumped into him.

“Lor-“ Elijah began.

“This is your last chance, Elijah.” Lorstar said gravelly. “There is still one last opportunity for you to leave this place and return to the Citadel. Once I enter, there will be no respite.”

Elijah swallowed. She had dreaded this moment, somewhat. It had been a culmination of all her thoughts, worryings, dreams of bravado and more. She had thought she would face Saraphorn together with Lorstar, but...

“You truly believe I am unable to stand up to him?” Elijah asked, cautiously.

“I believe that you know yourself better than I do.” Lorstar replied.

Elijah pondered, but for a second.

“I believe... we’re both here to find out.” Eliah said, firmly. She stood straighter, stood stronger, more determinedly. She had not known she had been meekly following behind till now.

“We’re in this together, right?”

* * *

I.II DIRGE

It was a sad, sad day. Personal tragedies always were. Weeping, mourning women, teary-eyed boys, strong men who would not be denied a moment of softness in their moment of tragedy.

It was a funeral.

The deceased was a member of a large, extended family. The patriarch, if you would. That he died at an unbelievable old age of 103 was almost unprecedented in this city, *even* in this world.

Lord Vashiel watched over the proceedings, as he well should. It was never a subtle thing when the city’s oldest citizen passed away and left nearly six generations behind him to mourn for him.

Lord Vashiel was not wholly occupied with the procession however, as his mind was on other things. There would be a cremation, he thought. A pyre to burn into the night and, come the morrow, the ashes would be swept into an urn and placed in a mausoleum.

There would be no burial. Consignment into the ground had ended when rumours of Saraphorn’s Tower had started spreading. It was almost spontaneous.

And that, The Lord Citadel thought, was just one sign of the coming times.

* * *

The mood was festive, if unexpected.

It was barely the climatic encounter Eliah had thought it would be.

They had stepped into, what she thought, was a nightmare. A jolly nightmare. The sort you never expect from a nightmare, and that which is the worst cause to fear. A nightmare parody of a celebration, if she thought of it. The stone cavern was festooned in black silks, glittering like the night sky with precious jewels of a million colours, shapes and sizes. The table was covered in riches Eliah thought even the Lord Citadel couldn’t afford.

“Son.” Saraphorn spoke, standing nonchalantly by the stone throne.

Elijah looked at Lorstar. Lorstar was silent, glaring, accusingly, at his father.

“Have you come to join me, or kill me?” Saraphorn continued, blithely.

He was not what Elijah would’ve thought of an evil necromantic wizard. Her idea was that of a hunched, wrinkled, wizened old man with a beaked nose and a screeching voice. He would be dressed all in black, evil, tattered clothes with demonic runes scrawled all over in some pattern that would elude her. He would have armies of dead creatures at his beck and call, and he most definitely would be bald.

Saraphorn was, if anything she had ever seen, a man in good physical condition, albeit ageing. He stood tall, straight and firm, with no weakness in stature nor voice nor body. He looked very much like what Elijah envisioned Lorstar to be if not for the curse. His hair, although streaked white, was very much intact. And he wore a simple brown robe, which looked woven from rough fibers.

“Why?” Lorstar growled.

Saraphorn looked down as he pondered the question.

“Why what? There are many Whys we would all like answers to, son.” Saraphorn said, conversationally. “I, myself, have many Whys. But those do not matter... my only concern is you, son.” Saraphorn said. He held his hands out to Lorstar.

Lorstar stood his ground.

“There are matters abound, son.” Saraphorn said, grimly. He folded his arms back under his robes. “I would tell you, if you would open your mind.”

Lorstar visibly trembled at this apparent barb.

“What is it, father? What is it about you and your obsession with the Great Citadel? Why do you want to rule its people so badly? Is it power? Wealth? Slaves? Do you wish to corrupt the world!?” Lorstar shouted accusingly. Elijah was taken aback. She had never seen Lorstar this way before.

Saraphorn looked at Lorstar, then at the glittering jewels and gold that bedecked the chamber.

“There is no greater provider than this earth, no parent more patient than this soil.”

He scooped a handful of dirt from the floor.

“I do not seek power, for it is given to me by the Mother Earth.”

He closed his fist, and when it opened, a large, brilliant diamond appeared. Eliah’s eyes sparkled.

“I do not seek wealth, for what is gold and jewels but the children of this earth?”

He flung the diamond at a wall with great flourish, and as it hit the wall, the diamond disappeared, like a pebble would in a pond. The wall rippled, and was still.

“I do not crave to have my own servants nor slaves, for I have all I need or want, and I would *never* corrupt my home.” Saraphorn said. Then he sighed.

“But, what I do need, is a loyal, loving person by my side-“ Saraphorn continued. “-To help me save this world.”

Lorstar snorted, once, loudly.

“Save it? What from!?” Lorstar mocked. “There is no greater threat than the one who would create the Deep Tower, the festering wound in the soil you *so lovingly* claim to never want to hurt!”

Saraphorn clucked, an echo in the cavern that resounded irritatingly.

“The earth does not fester, it protects. The tower is a channel for the birth of all that would love this planet, and it simply seeks to keep the unwanted out. It did not reject you, true?”

Saraphorn turned to Eliah.

“You... girl. You are from the Courts, are you not?” He said, not unkindly. Eliah was reminded of a favourite uncle. “Perhaps Master Teredoc has told you of the history of our people?”

Eliah nodded, shyly. Saraphorn smiled.

“All lies.” He made a grand gesture to the cavern around him.

“This; this world. I have spoken to it, communed with its very soul. It tells me, we are not its true progeny. We are not of its seed.”

And this drew the sound of a sharp, sonorous ringing as Lorstar drew his sword from its scabbard.

“*Lies.*” Lorstar growled.

“There are no lies here, son, but what you choose to believe.” Saraphorn said, reproachfully. He turned, and upon the Throne of Stone lay a book.

Elijah stared.

The tome appeared to be like a slab of cooled, molten rock. It was a dull reddish-grey, but Elijah could see the rivulets of raw, intense magic flowing like veins under its skin. It looked like a live volcano, and if Elijah squinted, she could have sworn it beat like a heart.

“*Dier Tome ‘vo Destro*. The Tome of Destruction. Made from the scale of The Destroyer, he who would end this world and all other worlds like it.” Saraphorn spoke... in a voice that was half a chant, like a poem from memory.

“Listen to me, Lorstar... and you, Girl. Something comes. This God that gave us life, our existence, comes to claim us again. It will be a most terrible deliverance. He whose flesh came to this world and seeded it with life, from which this book is made and which a barest fraction of his knowledge is contained within... he comes to claim us again as his own.”

And there was a terrible keen and wail as a presence made itself known. Elijah turned around, in sheer terror. It was not here, but she knew.

The Origin Beast had come for them again.

“Elijah, stay here.” Lorstar commanded, his composure regained. He ran over to one of the hanging silk curtains and pulled it down, causing a shower of rare and expensive gems to come down in a patter of glittering wealth. He bound Saraphorn’s unresisting arms before turning to face Elijah. Elijah’s gaze flicked back towards Saraphorn. Lorstar handed her a dagger.

“Stick him if he so much as moves.” He commanded, and then he was gone.

* * *

Life was good for Zzolik. He had been born into this world in darkness, but that was where he belonged. He lived under the Great Ziggurat, the place where their Great Protector lived. He hunted, and brought food for his family unit. They had their little trinkets, and he was contented. He had many children, and grandchildren, and he hoped to see yet more before his life ended.

It was a typical *gejuk* (for their people had no term for ‘day’, but measured their activities in cycles) for him, wake up at the cycle of the third colour of their phosphorous fungi, to go and hunt for the delectable little creatures that spawned around the Ziggurat and never seemed to run out.

And he was there again this *gejuk*, snare in hand, spear in the other, waiting for a typical family pack to come along and cross his well hidden traps.

He was a little uneasy however, as he realized he was hunting too near to the traditional burial site where his people consigned their dead. He wasn't superstitious, but he knew the dangers of wandering too close to the entrance. There was a force out there, something their Great Protector called Light, that would blind their eyes and burn their fragile skins if they wandered too near.

But a little longer, he told himself. A minor risk to take and he would soon be returning with a net-full of the delicious little creatures they called *kobold*.

And then, the burial grounds came alive, and swallowed *him*.

* * *

Elijah stood her ground, facing off with the man she had thought would be the vilest villain she had ever known. Desecrator of life, hater of humanity. He would speak in dark rhymes and laugh with evil cackling tones. He would be dressed in elaborate blacks, and have minions aplenty, at his beck and call. It would've been a romantic villain from the popular ballads.

She was still shocked that he was a simple middle-aged man with a brown robe who wouldn't even give her the Evil Eye.

"...You really are telling the truth, aren't you?" Elijah ventured, rather shakily. *<Here comes the evil side.>* She thought. *<It's almost always when you're alone...>*

"I tell no lies, they do not serve my purpose." Saraphorn said, calmly. He was unfazed, his being cornered by someone who'd kill him at the wishes of his own son seemingly unimportant. "Those who do, have no true faith in their cause, they do not believe."

Elijah thought about it. The more she did, the more it made sense. And she thought about it some more.

"Saraphorn... may I call you that?" Elijah asked.

Saraphorn nodded. "It is more than some would deign me worthy of."

"What... does the book tell you?" She asked. A great curiosity loomed within her, an overwhelming tide that tingled from her spine to her neck. She had to know.

She had to.

* * *

There was pandemonium. There was chaos. There was the customary screaming and shouting.

Most of all, there was an entire village trying to escape the predations of the awakened Origin Beast, whose true hunger had been awakened at Saraphorn's command. It either knew nor cared what caused it to hunger, what wakened it fully.

It only cared that it hungered, and it had to feed.

Amidst the insane gibbering of the terrified Demorcs, the shrieking children who were only playing with grit an hour before, those who tried to lead their families to safety, carry their worldly possessions... strode another being of black.

Lorstar would face off this creature, a being born of The Destroyer. A progenitor of life... and its reaper.

All for the folly of his father.

* * *

"Hold the book, talk to it. Let it tell you what it will." Saraphorn's voice echoed in the chamber. Eliah stepped up.

"The book knows who you are, knows all the children of The Destroyer. It will tell you what it will, what your destiny shall be."

Eliah held out a hand.

"Touch it..."

Eliah touched it.

* * *

A great limb, indescribable in its complexity and form, beautiful in its origins but terrifying in its power, sent Lorstar sailing like a rag doll over the heads of the fleeing Demorcs. A sound like stone crunching might have been heard as Lorstar crashed into a giant stone pillar. The pillar collapsed, Lorstar did not.

"Again." Lorstar growled to himself. The giant sword held by his side, Lorstar watched and waited as the Origin Beast plowed its way towards him, primal anger telling it he was its greatest danger.

The battle of Beasts began. The beast of Instinct, and the beast of Reason.

* * *

I hunger. The universe must feed me. I am the one who sees all, I am the one who consumes all. I am the essence of The End, the one finality that greets all in existence, for existence itself must end someday. I am null, and I am void, and I am form and I am substance. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.

An Eye. A burning Eye. A fiery black void filled her vision. It watched her. It knew her. It knew all whom it gazed upon, for they were all its children.

Elijah had an impression of magma blood and molten crust, a primordial world that lived, that consumed and created. It took and it gave... but something was wrong. It defied all conventions, and kept taking, but gave almost nothing... like a volcano that ate at the Earth's blood, but would not return the blood to the flesh.

I hunger. The eternal hunger. Nothing may sate it, but everything will stave it. All shall return to me.

And Elijah could see no more as the Eye closed in on her.

* * *

There was an animal scream, but it was a weak cry. It was a weak cry, compared to the Originator of the scream. Lorstar screamed, but he could not match the Origin Beast. It was a good scream, but it paled in comparison to the one that had first Created the lungs for it.

Still, the scream gave Lorstar strength, and with that strength, Lorstar drove the Origin Beast back into the Spire, back into the darkness. A thousand wounds marked the surface of the Origin Beast, trails of the substance of life pumped from the seeping wounds. Lorstar fared not much better, internally, but he had won.

The Origin Beast mourned for itself, a great trembling bass of a groan, which peaked into a whine, and retreated faster than a person could blink, back to its pit.

Logic had sent the Beast into remission. But it had been a narrow win.

Lorstar would not forgive Saraphorn, ever.

The Ziggurat awaited.

* * *

Elijah fell, clutching the book in a death grip. Saraphorn caught her with arms mysteriously unbound, and slowly laid her out a table of the smoothest onyx. A drape of black silk was placed across her prone form.

“Sleep, and may you find your answer.” He whispered.

“*SA-RA-PHOOOORRRRNNN!!!!*” The primal scream raged, and Saraphorn turned to face his son.

“You have returned.” Saraphorn said, calmly.

Lorstar wasted no words, but struck down Saraphorn where he stood.

* * *

In a large part of the castle of the Lord Citadel, a wondrous library existed. Rich carpets muffled the footsteps of those who walked its mahogany and oak floors. Globes of witchfire kept the place warm, even in the whitest winter storms. Meticulously kept amidst carved shelves made by artisans who believed in their work, books and scrolls, parchments and vellum lay in attendance, awaiting the day when they would be called upon for the knowledge stored in them.

Crystal chandeliers, lit by simple witchlights of the wizards who sometimes came here to study from the Lord Citadel’s vast wealth, kept the library bright and safe from accidental fires. Indeed, a world of magic and mundane doings maintained an easy balance in the library, for knowledge was for all to share.

So thought the Lord Citadel.

In his private study, Lord Vashiel pored over letters written by vassals and allies, requesting this and that. He was more of a figurehead than actual ruler, but that didn’t mean he sat on his hands.

In his private study, a single, large diamond floated. It would be impossible to damage nor take the diamond by any man alive, and any who might have tried never left behind anything to tell his short, sad story.

The Lord Citadel heard a loud snap, and turned to see the diamond with a crack in its otherwise unblemished surface.

* * *

Elijah awakened. It was a dark world she saw, or she saw nothing at all. But she could hear.

“There... can be... no hatred between... the People.”

It was a sound of death.

“Hush. Rest.”

It was a woman’s voice.

“We have... lived in folly... all this time.”

“It’ll be all right.”

“The *geas*... was my folly... lift...”

“Don’t. This is... my punishment, and your gift.”

“I was... a fool.”

“As am I.”

“Forgive me...”

“As I plead the same. Father... rest. Be at peace.”

“And you... too...”

And there was a sigh, and a gasp.

Elijah sparked a small fire from a tinderbox she found in a pouch, and peered under the tinny light.

Lorstar, helmet off, cradled Saraphorn’s head in her lap. There was a shiny substance that reflected the light just barely, but Elijah could tell what it was from the smell. An evil, coppery smell of blood.

“Lorstar...” Elijah started.

“In death, perhaps that is our only understanding.” Lorstar whispered, to no one. “I was a fool for not listening.”

“Lorstar, what did he tell you?” Elijah said. A tenor in the air made her eyes water. She would not admit to her feelings now.

“My heart told me. I am a fool.” Lorstar said again. “There can be no going back now.”

“Then...” Eliah said. “We shall walk onwards, and make our way through this darkness.”

And so ends the beginning of the Tales.

EPILOGUE I.

Elijah's Diary

I do not have dreams of that day, but somehow I know it will come when the time is right.

We looked in his larder, his wardrobe. These are not trappings of a man whose dream is to conquer the world. These... are the trappings of a man living a simple life... a life any of us could have led, and would dream of doing so, simply. No man bent on conquering the world would eat tubers, wear handspun clothes.

A man who lived his life humbly for a cause, that was what we found.

We made our way out of the Deep Tower, supporting each other. I carried the Tome with me, and neither of us asked each other what happened during that time. I believe that we will eventually tell all, but that day has not come yet.

Darkest Midnight and Brilliant Dawn were waiting for us. I shall never cease to be amazed by them. Simple beasts, but not so simple underneath.

Behind us, the Deep Tower closed on its own like flesh covering a wound, or perhaps just that of a gaping maw shutting tight. I shall never be too glad never to lay eyes on it again.

We rested at the behest of the Lord Citadel. He too, did not ask us what transpired, nor did he question Lorstar's decision to finally remove that dread armour of his (hers?) and walk in the light.

Lorstar is very very pale.

I am tired now, and perhaps I shall continue this another day. For now, the sun beckons me to rest, and mayhaps I shall seek my answers from Master Teredoc.

Good Day, Good Evening and Good Night. And perhaps, if I should not wake, Good Morrow.