

the Forbidden Realms

Chapters 1-5 unedited preview

These chapters are told from two points of view; Nerana and Aélla. Please pay attention to the chapter titles for ease of reading.

Any chapter *without* a name should be regarded as Nerana's point of view.

There are also footnotes located at the bottom of each page. Because of the fundamentals of PDF files, you may need to scroll to the bottom of the page to view the description of each asterisks.

Nerana – NEER-ahn-ah

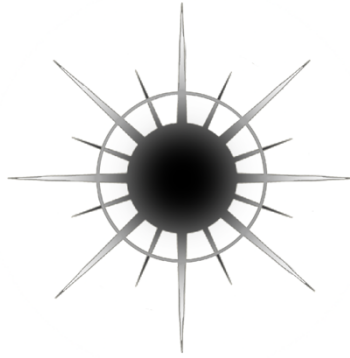
Aélla – AY-LAH

Y'ven - YEVEN

The Forbidden Realms

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CHAPTER ONE

BLOOD AND STEEL

Nerana

Her life ended that day.

Six months past, when she embarked upon the dangerous and forbidden Trials of Blood. Now she walked alone, tired and hungry, as she made her way to the village of Rhys deep within the heart of Ravinshire. Clutched tightly in her arms was a worn leather notebook. The pages filled with scribbled stories and songs written by the friend she'd never see again.

Wolves howled in the distance as the moons shined against the dark sky. Neer wrapped tighter around the notebook, vowing to protect it before even herself should trouble find her. Dried blood, blackened with age, stained the edges of the crinkled pages.

After Loryk's death, she spent weeks in the crypts beneath Porsdur. The old sconces were hardly enough to keep the moist hollows illuminated, but still she sat, speaking to his grave, and reading every word of his lengthy journal. Now she walked through his home of Ravinshire, where she planned to gift his family with his final thoughts and poems.

Though undeserving, Neer didn't do this for them. She needed closure. A way to move passed such a deep and dreadful end to what was once the most valuable friendship she ever had. She couldn't carry his writings forever, and she

knew that despite their differences and beliefs, Loryk loved his family, and for that, they should know the truth of his fate.

Dirt shuffled beneath her worn leather boots as she carried along the desolate High Road*. Tall yellow grass covered the empty fields surrounded the road in every direction. Heavy trails from wagons and carts rutted the packed dirt, though the sprawling Road of Ravinshire didn't see much use. Each village was at least a day's walk from another, and since her entry into the hold two weeks ago, she'd only passed by a handful of merchants, couriers, and bandits.

None of which noticed the teal of her eyes as they walked by with pleasant smiles or attempted to steal her coin. She was lucky, for the Child of Skye was forbidden in all of Laeroth, and in a place such as Ravinshire, the Order would've been contacted immediately upon her recognition.

She kept her eyes on the dust and pebbles at her feet as she walked through the night.

Hours later, sunlight broke through the heavy darkness. Orange light embraced her with its warmth and soothed the chill of her skin. The endless wheat fields and creaking windmills faded into dense woods as she moved closer to the logging district.

The faint whine of rusted hinges caught her attention as she passed by a faded signpost. Sun and rain had washed most of the chiseled letters away, but she could make them out enough to read *Morinth*. With a heavy, relieved sigh, she headed toward the small village.

Several miles past, she breathed in the scent of fresh cut pine. A river carved through the thinning trees. Water lapped against the banks as it flowed through the foothills of the Whispering Mountains.

Tanning racks were set out along the streets, quickly changing the scent from fresh pine to hot leather. Doors creak as residents venture out of their homes. Their red hair and round waistlines were typical of a Ravinshire native. Deep wrinkles laid cracks across the faces of men far too young for such aging. Their tired eyes and calloused hands were proof of the hard labor they daily provided.

Neer focused on the road as she wandered through the street. She could hear their voices as they whispered of a stranger's arrival. *Morinth* was three weeks from the border of Llyne, and far enough into Ravinshire territory that the possibility of a straggler walking through was near impossible. Whoever would come this far into the southern hold had reason, and the villagers weren't eager to welcome newcomers.

*A long stretch of road that travels through each hold in the human territories of Laeroth. The road is 4,239 miles in length, including all neighborhood streets, bridges, and incomplete paths. The majority of the road is made of loose dirt, while some areas, such as those which travel through the capital hold of Skye, are embellished with packed cobblestones.

“Six blessin’s*!” A man greeted with reserved disposition. Being from the south, where your hide is as thick as it is strong, it was clear he wasn’t looking to extend an invitation. “Where’s yer pa, girl?”

“He’s ill,” she lied. It was a known law in Ravinshire that women were lesser than men, and they had no trouble enforcing such beliefs. Had Neer explained she was traveling alone of her own volition she would be accused of sacrilege and publicly lashed. Even her clothes, which were tight trousers and a long sleeve top, were considered too masculine attire for the women of Ravinshire. Luckily, they don’t invoke such strict rules upon travelers, but she kept herself guarded all the same. “I’m to bring him wares from Dorthe**.”

“Dorthe, aye? Let’s see what ya got there.”

While looking at the sky, she sighed. With a wince, she slung the bag from her shoulder and opened it for the man to see. He peered nosily into the white canvas to find clothing, a small coin purse, and medicine. He eyed her for a quick second and then backed away. His attention moved quickly to the weapon on her side, and he tensed. “Women shouldn’t be carryin’ weapons. That an elvish blade you got? You know them’re forbidden in Laeroth.”

She stepped back. “Yes. My father bought it off a merchant during first winter when he fell ill. Spent most of our coin on it, but he said it’d do me better than a human weapon if I’m to find myself in trouble on the road.”

He eyed her suspiciously. “Well, you don’t look like much trouble. Keep that thing hidden, ’less ya want to be findin’ yourself in the temple dungeons.”

She nodded. “I’ll be sure to find a suitable sheath from your blacksmith?”

“Simon’ll fit you for a nice one. Last ’ome on the right up there. The Mansker Inn is just up the road an’ to the left. Be sure to ask Mariah for a bath. You could use one.”

“Thank you.” Her voice was unenthusiased. It had become her natural tone since she returned from Nhamashel. She performed the usual bow with her hands cupped together in front of her chest. It was a common gesture of prayer, thanks, greeting, or goodbye used among the richly devout, though it seemed reserved for those of Ravinshire or anyone in the presence of a Priest. Neer never found herself using such a gesture as it was forbidden in her rebel hold of Llyne.

The man returned the gesture and then stepped aside. The village had come to life within the minutes she had spoken to him. Chickens squawked and cows whined as farmers tended to their daily chores. She kept her head down as she made her way past the residents wandering the streets.

**A common greeting among the devout, though to Neer it’s more a warning than welcome. The phrase refers to the six divines of the Order of Saro. Anyone faithful enough to speak such a harmless phrase is viewed as an enemy to our heroine, as they’d see nothing more than to put her head on a pike.*

*** A village in Ravinshire. Neer chose one at random, and hoped it was still a working civilization to better suit her lie.*

Upon entering the inn, she was greeted with the smell of fresh-baked bread and strong mead. Her eyes averted to a man sitting by the hearth. The soft melodies of his drum mixed with the quiet conversations of the patrons. Mist filled her eyes when she envisioned Loryk sitting by the fire, playing one of his many songs. She could still hear the soft strum of his lute, and the scribble of his quill against parchment.

A young girl no older than seven swept nearby. She paid no mind to the sorceress as she carried out her duties.

Neer wiped her eyes when the tinkle of bells brightened the dull noises of the inn. A woman dressed in a thin skirt adorned with tiny silver bells sat across a man's lap. The innkeeper, with fiery hair and a red face to match, angrily swatted their table. "Knock that off! This here's a family place!" She nodded to the girl sweeping across the room.

The patron slowly stood and slipped on her top.

The innkeeper eyed Neer suspiciously while scrubbing a tankard with her dirty apron. "Need a room?"

She nodded silently, purposefully averting her eyes to better hide her identity. "And a bath."

The innkeeper turned to the sweeping girl. "Lizzie! Show our guest to the downstairs rooms."

The young girl happily came to Neer's side and took her hand. She was led down a narrow staircase behind the bar. They entered a small basement where deep wooden tubs sat behind long curtains. Barrels along the left side wall dripped fresh ale and left the place reeking of southern mead.

"You can stay 'ere." The girl opened the door to a small room. Inside was nothing but a bed and dresser. "Why're you so filthy?"

Neer glanced at her filthy garments. With a huff, she stepped into the room and sat on the flat feather mattress. "I like dirt," she said flatly while removing her worn boots.

She stepped closer and touched Neer's sword. "Where'd you get this? Looks real different."

"A friend."

"Women aren't supposed to be carryin' such weapons. You can get in big trouble should the Order find out!"

Neer scoffed in offense. She watched the girl inspect the twisted hilt. "What's your name?"

"Enid."

“I used to be a kitchen wench, too. When I was about your age.”

“Really? Did you like it?”

“No. Not really.”

Enid shook her head. “Me either. I want to be an adventurer like you. I’ll bet you’ve seen all kinds of stuff.” She sat on the bed and twirled her fingers. “Ma says I’m not meant for such things. Said I’d best get used to cleanin’ the inn.” Neer was silent as she fell into her memories. The long nights waiting tables and cleaning the filthy, sweat-stained sheets of the grimy Sword and Sheath* patrons. How she wished she could go back and tell herself to take another path. To find a home and never let go of those she loves.

Her thoughts broke when Enid slowly stepped to the door, and Neer, though desperate to help her, was at a loss for words. “I’ll fetch you some hot water for that bath, miss. For three bronze we can clean the filth from your clothes.”

“No thanks,” Neer said. The girl stood silently for a moment and then skipped away.

Neer closed the door and leaned onto the mattress. The road would’ve been comfier, and it was free, but she couldn’t complain. At least the inn was safe.** Sitting atop the bed, she pulled a weathered note from her boot, where she’d safely hidden it. Lying back, she unfolded the page. It was a page from Loryk’s full adventure book. Of all the stories, poems, and ballads, this was the only journal entry, and one she couldn’t part with.

“We’re still in this bloody cave,” it started, “Neer’s unconscious from the rune, and I’m stuck in this house with ~~Avlock Evalork Avvahl~~ the blond one. He’s okay enough. Seems to really care about Neer. He won’t stop looking at her and making sure she’s okay. I hope she’s alright. Never been to no place like this... we may not make it out. If anyone’s holding them back it’s me. I should’ve just stayed back home. I’m no fighter. I’m nothing, really. This place has been hell.

I don’t know why I’m writing this. Feels foolish. But I guess I can feel it coming. The end, that is. We aren’t all going to make it out of here, and if it’s me that falls, I just hope that my stories can live on. I never had much in life, but I did have family. The brotherhood was always good to me, and I’ll always be grateful.

*The Sword and Sheath was a famed high-class brothel along the border of Llyne and Styrr. Known for its wide selection of the most astute men and women, patrons would visit from all across the country to get a taste of what the Sword had to offer. Situated in the center of the ever-growing city of Raeg, the brothel was a central hub for travelers, and many believe it was the reason for the creation of the High Road Pass, which connects western Styrr to eastern Llyne. Eleven years ago, the prized establishment inexplicably caught fire. And while many residents of Raeg sought the culprit, they were never found. The Sword has since been rebuilt under new management, though it’s but a shadow of what it once was.

**Safe as could be, so long as no one suspected her of being the sorceress that she was.

Neer, if you're reading this and I'm gone, just know that I love you. Always have. You're my best friend. My family. You can do this, and you aren't alone. That evae over there cares about you. I can see it in his eyes. He's good, Neer. Plenty of people are. Don't go getting all cynical and crazy like before. Whatever happens, we'll always be together. You'll never be alone.

Go send the High Priest and all those blasted people of the Order to the farthest reaches of hell. I'll be waiting for them.

Guess this is it. I'm getting sleepy anyhow. Not sure how to end this thing right.

Farewell."

She wiped away her tears as she scanned the page multiple times, though she didn't need to. The words were engraved in her mind. Nearly two months had passed since she left home. After a reunion with Reiman and Gil, and a beautiful ceremony for Loryk, where he was laid to rest in the crypts beneath the Tree of Porsdur, she set off on her journey to Ravinshire. Reiman and Gil would've come along, but she wanted to be alone, and they had other matters to attend to.

Chills covered her cold, aching body as she dipped beneath the warmth. She exhaled a deep breath as her muscles relaxed. Lying within the water, which had turned murky from her filth, she heard hard footsteps race across the ceiling.

"Mariah!"* a man exclaimed. "Have you heard?"

"What is it?" the woman asked, seemingly unenthused by his outburst.

"Priest Ealdir** is here!"

"Truly?" She was more alert. "What could he want with a place like Morinth? We're naught but a logging village."

"Word has it they've found a sorcerer nearby."

Neer's stomach dropped. She lifted from the water to listen closer.

"Sorcerer?" Mariah asked. "There ain't no sorcerer here."

"They got word of one living around here. Said a neighbor saw them creepin' around in the night using their magic."

"That's enough, Hank. Fetch some water and clean the glasses. There'll be no more speak of such blasphemy."

Footsteps echoed away and then disappeared behind the creak of a heavy door. Neer slipped quickly into her clothes and gathered her things. Upstairs, she

* *The Innkeeper*

** *Not to be mistaken for the High Priest, who is Neer's most formidable foe. Priest Ealdir is one of many Priests that reign over Laeroth. When his temple in Llyne was overthrown by the brotherhood, Ealdir settled into Ravinshire, where he was welcomed with open arms. The people of Ravinshire, who are fiercely against the Broken Order Brotherhood, or Rebels, built the Priest a temple at their own expense to show their devotion to the Order and Divines.*

handed the innkeeper a silver coin. The woman raised her brow. "You ain't stayin'?"

"Change of plans."

With a raised brow, the barkeep shoved the coin in her pocket, which Neer then apported back into her palm. Pulling up her hood, Neer headed to the door. Outside, hundreds of soldiers sat atop their horses. They came to a slow stop as residents gathered along the streets.

The innkeeper stepped outside with a mug still in hand. The horse's parted as a priest rode through the crowd. His dark hair was short, and tan skin revealed his nationality of Llyne where he had been forced out of his temple when the Brotherhood took siege of the land. His silver cloak and golden robes revealed his deadly position as a Priest of Order.

Neer stood alone as everyone bowed to their knees. Dust swirled beneath his robes as he leapt from his steed. Two knights, wearing thick plated armor with golden scapulars, followed close behind as he walked down the street.

"Simon," the priest said in a smooth accent.

The smith stood and bowed. "Your grace."

"I've received word that your village is harboring a sorcerer."

"I'm sorry, Priest Ealdir, but if there was such a person here, we would never—"

"I understand." Ealdir placed a hand on Simon's shoulder. The smith's large stature shifted under the priest's touch. Ealdir turned with a nod hardly noticed.

Harsh light reflected off newly forged steel as the knights unsheathed their swords. Neer covered her eyes as it glinted in her face.

The smith faltered. "These are good people. We follow the teachin's and do naught a thing out of line!"

"Simon, friend, we aren't looking to shed the blood of the innocent. A demon walks among you. Do you want your children to be influenced by a sorcerer? One with a soul so twisted and foul that only the Divine Nizotl himself could have created it?"

Simon shook his head. Ealdir nodded in approval while his men scoured the town. Neer stepped back as they walked into the inn. The stillness of morning was quickly broken by the throwing of furniture and frightened screams.

"That's her!" a patron shouted. "It's the innkeeper!"

Knights rushed to the porch with their weapons drawn. "What? No! You're mistaken!" she cried. The butcher and smith rushed to her aid. Three knights quickly blocked their path.

“Please!” the smith begged. Tears carved clean trails down his red cheeks. “It isn’t true! You’ve got the wrong person!”

“Simon!” the innkeeper called to the smith. The villagers watched without a peep.

“This demon is your wife!” Ealdir said. “You know the penalty for such treason!”

Enid whimpered as she was dragged to their side. The family cried and begged while the villagers stood by mutely. Some wept and covered their faces with their hands, while others wore satisfied expressions.

Ealdir waved a knight forward, and he obediently stood before the smith. “Six Divines of unity and peace,” the priest started, “protect these souls as they’re transferred into your realm from this life. Clean their spirits so they may once again be free.”

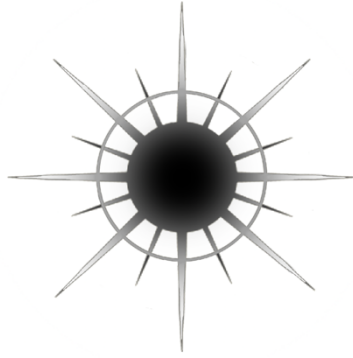
Ealdir bowed to the family, who whimpered and begged at his feet. He drew back his weapon and lunged at the smith’s chest.

With her sword in hand, Neer transported instantly behind the priest and sank her weapon deep into his chest. Blood spurted from his chest and painted the couple in red. The village fell instantly silent. Not a sound was heard as they watched the sorceress push her sword deeper into his back.

Blood-covered silver protruded from his chest. He gasped in agony. She pulled back his head. Solid black eyes overtook the prominent teal. An angry, satisfied whisper left her lips as she warned, “Send the Divines my regards.”

She pulled her sword from his body as the soldiers charged forward.

Her gaze moved to the family, who stared at her in horror and rage. Feeling uncertain of herself, she pushed away the doubt and closed her eyes. The heavy clank of metal armor filled the silence as the knights drew nearer. Strong, tingling magic swirled inside her. With a deep breath, she focused on her energy and disappeared.



CHAPTER TWO

THE RAVEN

Nerana

Sunlight cast across an empty desert, sending waves of heat rippling above its rocky surface. Not a soul would dare trek such a dangerous and unforgiving place. The place that men come to die, or so the saying goes. Their secrets kept forever hidden beneath the scorching heat of an unrelenting sun.

No one ever stepped foot into Aragoth that saw their home again. Their footprints were all that remained of their journey into the land of fire and fiends. Into the land of vengeance and rage.

The land of the lost and forgotten.

A raven's caw sounded across the plains as it drifted through the open air. Its wide shadow circled far below; a dark void scanning the empty ground. Dark eyes focused on the world as a shimmering rift rippled into existence.

Neer rolled across the ground, and the rift collapsed into itself. Sunlight reflected against the sword that fell from her grasp. The priest's still wet blood covered her face and clothes.

With a light groan she struggled to her knees and then collapsed to the ground. Her body ached with depletion as the exertion of such energy relieved her of strength. Darkness pulled the corner of her eyes as her focus wavered on the fading world.

The beating of black wings gifted her with a soft breeze as the raven landed nearby. Tilting its head, it hopped closer, inspecting her. Neer anticipated the scratch of its talons or stab of its beak as she laid motionless, waiting. The bird made

no such advance. Instead, it watched her for a moment longer, and then took flight. Its shadow distorted over the many rocks and cracks as it disappeared from sight.

With an exhausted breath, darkness pulled her into a deep, unending sleep. Unable to fight its temptation, she closed her eyes, and laid beneath the heat of the ruthless desert sun.

An aggressive voice jolted her from sleep. Her falling eyes couldn't focus as the stranger marched closer. The light faded when a large shadow crept over. She relished in the relief that it gave her burned and blistered skin.

A figure with deep red skin and a large, muscular body stood above her. She toppled aside when he kicked her over. Shrouded with delirium, she opened her dreary eyes and found it wasn't a stranger kneeling above her. Instead, it was another. Someone she never expected to see again.

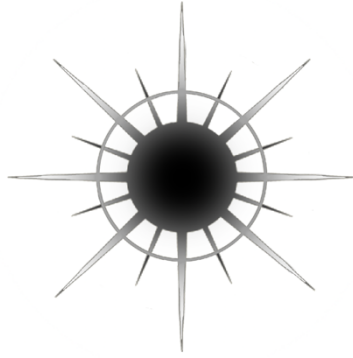
"Come on, Neery."

His voice was clear and strong. His brown eyes sparkled as light shined through his curly auburn hair. She reached up to touch his face, unable to believe what she was seeing. Her fingers caressed his cheek, and a weak smile pulled the edges of her cracked and bleeding lips. "Loryk?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Shh," he started, and leaned closer. The soft touch of his skin was comforting as he pulled her close. "Just rest now, Neery."

She sank into his embrace and closed her eyes.

The stranger lifted her from the ground and tossed her into his cart. She lay unconscious atop freshly picked fruit and animals fresh from the hunt. The desert native hopped onto the saddle of his large two-legged reptile and rode off with Neer in tow.



CHAPTER THREE

THE KEY

Aélla

Platinum hair waved in the soft breeze. A woman, with fair skin and deep blue eyes stood by the riverbed. She was alone, staring with deep contempt as the water flowed quickly through the deep canyon.

Rock and stone surrounded her at every turn. High above, stretched across the wide cavern, was a city made of thick red bridges. The suspended pathways led to various shops and homes supported by tall rock columns. Red canopies stretched over the largest of areas, allowing shade to protect their goods and wares.

Gruff voices echoed through the chasm as villagers carried on with their day, paying no mind to the woman that stood beneath them.

Her hands fidgeted as she chewed her lip. With a deep exhale, she turned to the sky. Sunlight radiated from the heavens, casting a deep warmth that stung her skin.

“Come on...” she begged in her native evaesh language. “Where are you?”

Though not who she expected, her gaze averted to a small humanoid creature as it landed atop her shoulder. The tiny creature, with large round eyes and a bright red glow around its orange, leafy skin, smiled at the evae. Standing at just ten inches tall, the creature held two beautiful translucent wings that extended high above her head, and two others that reached just beneath her knees.

“Drimil!”

Heavy footsteps thudded against stone as her friend approached from behind. He was a large vaxros man, standing at the typical seven-foot height, with large muscles and short black hair. Yellow scars were bright against his deep red skin, displaying his valor with intentional and battle-worn marks. The vaxros were

natives of the desert, moving to the land five-hundred years past, and were unforgiving in their hatred of any that didn't share in their history and home.

While many would be intimidated by such beasts, who are oft regarded as the most brutal and courageous in battle, this young woman was unafraid of their reproach. Her lineage gave her amnesty, and with it, she chose a path which led her through their home and into the forsaken realms of her ancestors.

Her shoulders slumped and her head shook. "What is it, Y'ven?" she asked. Her voice carried the despair evident in her posture.

Y'ven straightened with purpose. Glowing yellow eyes peered to the friend that refused to meet his gaze. "You are alright?" His evaesh was broken and hard to understand. "Why do you come here alone?"

With another glance to the sky she admitted, "He hasn't returned. It's been days."

"He will return." His shadow engulfed her small frame when he stepped closer. He placed a large hand onto her shoulder and smiled with an ugly, sympathetic grin. "Show faith, Master Drimil."

Her sorrow faded into a breathless laugh at his attempt to console her. It wasn't typical of the vaxros to show kindness or empathy toward others, but Y'ven was different. In their weeks together, she came to learn there was more to some of the brutish desert beasts than meets the eye. Speaking a foreign language, for instance, was such a rarity she believes that Y'ven may be the only vaxros to have learned.

The coolness of the river's wind was overtaken by dry heat when they stepped away from the water. Moving closer to the suspended village, they held a quiet conversation. "Enough with the formalities," she said with a smile. "Call me Aélla."

"I cannot."

Her lips scrunched into a playful grin. Y'ven paid her no mind as he led her up a spiral incline to the base of a tall pillar. They stepped to the edge of the city and walked across the taunt canvas bridges.

The scent of tanning leather and charred meat swirled all around. Aélla's stomach growled and ached at the mouthwatering aroma. Baskets of leather clothes, armor straps, and the occasional half-eaten vegetable were stacked messily across the platforms. While some open areas held clothes and wares, another had racks of weapons that were thrown together as if in a hurry.

She plucked a green spotted vegetable from a basket. Sour juice dripped down her chin as she enjoyed her late morning meal. The resident's, each with deep red skin and bright yellow scars, sneered as they walked past the evae. The vaxros were

not a welcoming or forgiving people. Known for their brutality and strength, they honored themselves with valor. While Aélla had done nothing to warrant such disfavor, she was an outsider, and the natives in all their resentment and distrust did not accept her arrival.

Aélla kept her chin high as she looked into the eyes of each passerby. Though they outmatched her height by nearly two feet, she wasn't afraid. The desert natives were none too thrilled at having an outsider within their lands, but it was her right to be there. Should they put up a fight, she wouldn't back down.

And more importantly... she wouldn't lose.

Ignoring their silent glares and spiteful growls, Aélla walked alongside her friend with firm demeanor. "Were you able to summon a meeting with the düل*?" she asked.

They slipped through a thick crowd and onto a large, blood-stained pillar. Unlit torches created a barrier around the platform. A wide circle was drawn close to the edge, creating a perimeter not to be overstepped.

"This is a *gaelrog*?" she asked.

Y'ven nodded in quiet response. As they stepped across the blood soaked ring, Aélla became lost in her wonderings of the brutish and fight-ready race. She had heard tale of the *gaelrog*, or *fighting rings*, which were used in ritualistic acts of strength between two warriors. No weapons are allowed, and only once a combatant could no longer fight was a victor announced. There was no submitting or abandoning the dual once it had started, lest the defeatist sought to lose all their honor and respect as a warrior.

She peeled her gaze from the overlapping blood stains and followed Y'ven through the dense village. The wide path eventually broke off into smaller sections attached to doorways carved into the canyon wall. Each of the doorways were stacked in rows of three as far as she could see. Voices and shadows overlapped the windows as families gathered inside.

At the edge of the suspended village, they came to a large rock platform. Staring out into the open canyon their journey was at an unexpected end. The doorways glowing with firelight were far behind, and the many overlapping bridges had turned into one narrow path.

A single torch stood across the platform. Its flames waving endlessly beneath the beating sun. Beautiful, swirled patterns were etched into the stone beneath their feet. The blackened crevices extended along the outer reaches of the platform and came together in the center.

* A düل, in simple terms, is equivalent to a shaman. Typically, the düل lives in seclusion within their shelarr, or tribe. They are regarded as the most valued member of their shelarr, as they've earned the right to their title through blood, loss, and sacrifice. A düل can be either male or female, as both sexes are considered equal in all regards among the vaxros. The düل is the oldest member of their shelarr. Düل'muirin of the grenghat'shelarr is the youngest ever at 319 years.

Y'ven stepped to the torch and cupped his hands around the flames. The glowing heat transferred from the torch into his palms as he stepped to the platform's center. Taking care to keep the flame alive he knelt atop the stone and pushed the flame into the ground.

Aélla jumped back when the flames erupted throughout the blackened design. Bright orange light flickered atop the ground, sending waves of heat and embers through the air.

Rocks shifted along the canyon walls. Its deep, crumbled grinding reverberated through the canyon. The bridges shook as the world rattled. Aélla steadied her balance as rocks as large boulders extracted themselves from the canyon walls. They floated slowly toward the platform and aligned themselves into a floating bridge. The fiery platform slowly snuffed out, leaving behind the blackened remnants of the shallow designs.

"Come," Y'ven said, and stepped across the newly formed bridge. Aélla stared timidly at the new formation. Her wide eyes were fixed on the vaxros as he strode across without hesitation.

She followed behind, taking care not to slip or fall beyond its untethered edges. Relief washed over her when they came to a hidden alcove within the canyon. A large archway surrounded beautifully detailed doors that were carved into the wall. A battleaxe rested within the stone above them. Wilted flowers, woven baskets, necklaces made of smooth rocks, and incense were laid outside the entry.

Y'ven knelt in front of the door and whispered a sacred chant. Orange light brightened the creases of the doorway. Aélla stepped back when the doors shifted, and the fires burned out.

Y'ven heaved as he pushed the doors open, and together they stepped inside.

A deep rumble shook the air when the door closed. Small fires burned brightly within large goblets along the walls, keeping the large cavern alight. The dome-shaped ceiling glowed red designs that led to an enormous chandelier. A bright flame circled within the metal constraints of the beautiful fixture.

Standing in the center of the room was an enormous statue of a scaled beast. Its long tail curled around the pedestal, while its winged arms were stretched out to the sides. Fire glowed from its open mouth and wide nostrils.

Four large horns extended back along the length of its head. Spiked scales lined the edges of its spine. Sharp fangs rested within its wide-open mouth. Aélla had never seen a creature so fierce or intimidating. Even in the presence of its statue, she was frightened. The serpent-like creature stood atop a ten-foot pedestal. Its

body extended to the ceiling, where its open mouth hovered beside the glowing chandelier.

“What is this?” she asked while gazing upon the creature whose smoothed stone scales glistened in the firelight.

“Draak.* Born of fire and power. First rulers of Erolith.”

“The rulers?” Her face twisted as she turned to Y’ven.

“Vicious. Bloodthirsty. First magic users. Men learned to harness magic. Used it against them.”

Her gaze returned to the statue. Cold, glistening stone laid beneath her fingers as she touches its tail. Fear trickled through her as its glowing eyes bore into her own. With a half-step back, she put space between them. “I’ve heard of the draak from First Blood text, but there are so many stories and legends that it’s hard to tell truth from fantasy.” She paused. “My old friend, Thallon, used to say they were just the imaginings of parents who wished to keep their unruly children from sneaking out at night.”

A deep thud echoed through the quiet chamber. Aélla gripped her chest with a gasp, while Y’ven turned sharply to the east. A vaxros dressed in dark, layered robes and a headdress of bones stood atop a large stairway. Her bare scalp showcased beautiful yellow scars that trailed across her forehead and cheeks.

Aélla followed as Y’ven and Dru knelt at the base of the stairs. While they focused on the düL standing above, Aélla’s eyes moved back to the statue, which was just as fierce from behind as it were in front.

A rumbled voice came from the stranger. Heavy footsteps echoed down the stone steps, getting heavier as they approached. Aélla stiffened when düL’Atyana stood before them and spoke in her native language. Y’ven responded, and she placed the end of her staff to his chin. He slowly lifted his face to meet with hers. The düL nodded subtly, and Y’ven’s broad shoulders relaxed.

“Blood of evae, faeth, and vaxros,” düL’Atyana said in broken evaesh. “Why have you entered these sacred chambers?”

Y’ven tensed. His orange eyes were wide as he focused intently on the stairs and spoke his native language. “DüL’Atyana. I bring Aélla: blood of the First. Drimil of light. She wishes to speak with you about her journey.”

“Drimil’Rothar...” The woman stepped to Aella, and the evae bowed. “Your arrival comes at the brink of war. *Shadosälaan*** have risen. Naik’avel is near.”

Y’ven translated as the düL spoke their native language, which Aélla could not understand.

* Roughly translated: dragon, though the ancient word has become lost as the myths and legends of such a race have been wiped from Erolith. The evae, with all their knowledge and wisdom, were mostly ignorant to such magnificent and deadly creatures, only finding mention of such a powerful race in ancient texts.

Only the rët’grugnah, or sun-blood, still tell the stories of the ancient and powerful aldar.

** In the language of the humans, Shadosalaan are referred to as creatures of darkness.

“Dül’Atyana,” Aella began. “It is an honor to be in your presence. I have come to the desert to enter *tre’lan Aenwyn*.”

“The *tre’lan** are forbidden Master Drimil. The doors have been sealed for many centuries.”

“I must find the key.” Her intense gaze met with the dül’s. “And you know where it lies.”

Dül’Atyana stepped back. Her jaw agape and eyes wide, she stammered over her words. “For you to come to this sacred place. To demand such atrocities—!”

“This is not a request, dül’Atyana. Without my magic this world will fall into chaos. You know as well as I the strength of *naik’avel*.” Aélla brought herself closer to the woman thrice her size. “But you do not know the strength of a true drimil.” The dül hardened as their gaze lingered. Her muscular arms were stiff at her sides. Aélla hadn’t the patience to wait for her dispute as she explained, “Once I’ve found the staff that can unlock the *tre’lan*, I must collect each of the four elements. I need your guidance in finding them.” She carefully took the dül’s hand and looked into her eyes. “Please, dül’Atyana. I will not disrespect your customs. I will *not* desecrate the ruins.”

The dül’s eyes softened. Her shoulders relaxed as she turned to Y’ven and spoke to him in their common tongue.

“Forbidden pillars you seek,” he translated, “not for hearts of weak. Fires flow beneath your feet. Mount atop a winged beast. Water flows like blood unknown. Mountains quake and take you home.”

The dül’s eyes met with Aella’s. “You will find the staff within the ruins of Koehevar.” Straightening her back she gripped tighter to her staff. “*Rema’üklahg*. Good luck, Master Drimil. May the spirits guide you.” Her lip twitched as she glared to the evae.

Aélla bowed respectfully, and swiftly exited the temple.

Outside, she closed her eyes and breathed in the fresh air. The weight of misunderstanding was lifted as she now understood her path. Her journey into the desert wasn’t made without preparation, yet she hadn’t the tools needed to achieve her goals. With no help from the natives, her last hope was dül’Atyana.

“Where is Koehevar?” she asked.

Y’ven rubbed his face with a heavy sigh. “Two cycles** north.”

Aélla nodded. Her gaze set on the ground as she came to a sudden realization. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I did mean to be rude. Your people do not respect my kind. Had I not been firm... she wouldn’t have helped.”

* *Tre’lan* are gateways to the magical realms. Hidden within the continent of Laeroth, their origins are unknown, though it is believed they were constructed by powerful *Ahn’Clave* scholars.

Tre’lan Aenwyn is the Realm of Elements. Any being born of elemental magical energy may enter its doors and obtain the power inside.

** A cycle, or sun cycle, is a vax term meaning day. Each cycle is one day on Erolith.

“Dül are great warriors. Esteemed. Admired. Do not make them your enemy.”

She met his gaze, and with a gentle nod she silently agreed to do better. Y’ven lifted his head with newfound confidence.

The silence was broken when the caw of a raven echoed from above. Aélla turned to the sky, staring anxiously at the heavens as she awaited her friend’s arrival. As its shadow moved across the sky, Aélla’s heart raced with excitement. Her smile widened as the raven swooped down and landed softly on her extended arm.

“Altvára.” She greeted the bird while rubbing its neck with her finger. “I was so worried about you!”

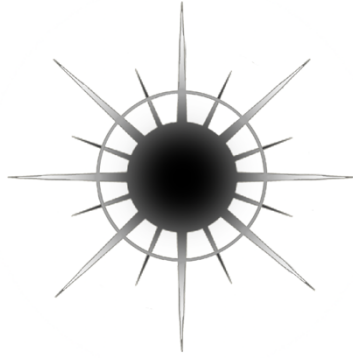
The raven ruffled its feathers and shook its head. As their gaze met, Aélla’s smile faded. Altvára spread his wings and lifted into the air.

“Master Drimil,” Y’ven started. His eyes focused on the raven that circled high above. “What is wrong?”

“Follow Altvára. He will guide you. Make haste, Y’ven, before it’s too late.”

“Drimil... I do not understand.”

She watched the animal soar through the air. Her lips were dry, and face was pale as she met Y’ven’s gaze. With a subtle nod she explained, “She’s here.”



CHAPTER FOUR AWAKENING *Nerana*

Neer laid asleep atop the cold desert floor. She twitched and whined as nightmares of darkness and pain flashed through her mind. Visions of Loryk lying beneath the Tree. The emptiness of the cave. The betrayal of Avelloch's disappearance. Deep, thunderous growls and the vicious shrieking of monsters clawed at her sanity. They tore into her skin, ripping and shredding as she laid helpless on the ground, watching from above as her life was taken.

A flash of light broke through the darkness, and she jumped from her slumber with a frightened gasp. She gripped her forehead with an exhausted groan.

Cold air kissed her skin and the smell of damp rock lingered in the air. As her vision focused, she found herself within a dark, empty cave. A single torch flickered across the chamber, casting waves of light against the jagged walls and uneven floor. Shadows the size of men shifted her delirium into panic.

Her boots slid across the smooth ground as she scurried back. Pressing against the wall, she watched as five figures emerged from the darkness. Their long faces held deep scowls as they stared down to her. Black markings covered their skin with intense, sharp designs.

They spoke a variation of evaesh she didn't understand. Their eyes bore into her with unrelenting oppression.

A man with dark hair and a long marking across his temple strode across the room. She pressed herself further into the wall. Staring into his eyes, she was crushed beneath the weight of his power. Cold fingers gripped tight to her chin as he leaned closer, peering intently into her wide, frightened eyes.

Unable to muster even the weakest of energy, Neer was powerless in his grasp. The effect of her teleportation still lingered within, leaving her depleted and weak. She pushed his hand away with a feeble swipe of her wrist.

“*Nizotl vek’Drimil,*” he whispered.

Her eyes widened at the mention of the deceitful and cunning divine. He placed a finger to his chin and stared to the distance.

A harsh voice cut through the silence when a woman strode forward. The man became tense. His eyes hardened as the woman drew nearer. Her angered, relentless voice sawed through the air as she continued speaking in quick, growling outbursts.

When her hand touched his shoulder, he grabbed a rock and smashed her head. Neer jumped with a loud gasp as blood sprayed through the air. The woman fell to the ground. Her cracked skull leaked with thick blood that pooled around her. Lifeless eyes were left unblinking and dull.

Neer shuddered when the man turned to her. Her throat was tight, and breaths were quick as she met his gaze. Not a shred of remorse or shame was present in his calm eyes. Something far worse stared back at her, something that she feared more than the man himself.

Confidence.

Confidence born of pride and strength. The cave drew silent as the man focused on Neer. She pushed him back when he drew up her sleeve. He paid no mind to her frail attempts of freedom as his fingers slid up her shoulder. His eyes glistened as her branding was revealed. Chills covered her skin when cold fingers stroked the marking.

She pulled away and spit at him. He turned sharply. A haunting gaze overtook his expression. Neer fell aside when he smacked her cheek with the back of his hand. Tumbling to the ground her head slammed against a rock. Blood trickled through her dirty hair as specks of white flickered in her eyes.

Hurried footsteps paraded through the cave, drawing nearer with every step. The man hissed sharply, and the cave fell instantly silent. He leaned over her, examining her face and clothes, before slowly turning away.

Firelight illuminated the cave as a stone door opened. A shadow enveloped the bright doorway when a vaxros warrior stepped inside. He stood nearly seven feet tall and wore thin leather armor*. His black hair was pulled back into a waist-length warrior’s braid. Thick red skin pulled tight across his muscular arms and chest. Yellow scars etched his body in beautiful designs.

The evae curled their fists and snarled as he approached.

** The legends of the dangerous and fight-ready race were true. No one who had ever visited the desert returned, but their stories survived. Tales of enormous brutes with deep red skin that stood tall as the sun were more myth than truth to the people of Laeroth.*

His orange glowing eyes landed on Neer. With a deep inhale he broadened his wide shoulders. A low growl emanated from his throat as he looked to the evae and pointed to the door.

The man with the facial markings held a calm, relaxed expression as he stood against the intimidating guard. Without the slightest hesitation, the evae calmly stepped from the cave, and the others quickly followed.

Thunderous footsteps thudded to Neer.

“Oölak mēgrove,” he growled in a deep, raspy voice. She sat unmoving as the sharp blade of his enormous battleaxe touched her throat. He leaned closer and brought his face inches from her own. A bitter smell on his breath filtered into her nose as his fiery yellow eyes pierced into hers. A menacing growl left his throat.

With a hard snatch he gripped her hair and pulled her forward. She yelped and slid her burned fingers slid across his, never able to fully grasp his hand and free herself from his hold. Her feet fumbled across the dirt as he dragged her to the village center. Half a dozen leather wrapped tents surrounded a large fire. Embers sprayed into the air, drifting through the darkness as the flames roared below.

Several dozen villagers gathered around as she was thrown to the ground. The men, women, and children all bore yellow scars across their thick-skinned bodies and wore naught more than thin loin cloths around their waists.

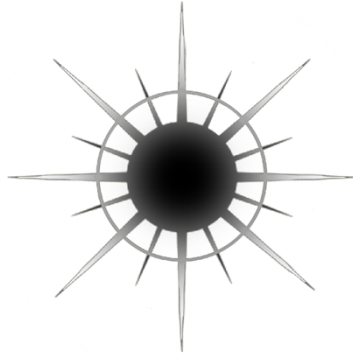
Neer was shoved forward and forced to her knees, completing the short line of prisoners that had been taken from the cave. Their tan skin was covered in dark tattoos, and their deep scowls reminded her of the warriors that massacred the villages of Vleland and Llyne long ago.* Memories of her time in Vleland with Loryk and Klaud filled her mind. The sadness of her loss outweighed the anger she felt when she thought of the man that betrayed her. Klaud wasn't one she thought of often as her grief kept her consumed in thoughts of sorrow and despair, but when she did think of him, there was nothing but rage and hatred.

Her thoughts broke when her captor lifted his arms and spoke to his people. His voice was assertive and rough. The villager's confused expressions faded to anger as they stared at the sorceress. She glanced between them, uncaring of what may happen. Not a twitch or snarl interrupted her permanent sullen expression.

The villagers chanted and cheered as the man lifted his axe above his head. He turned to the first elf with a menacing snarl and swung his weapon. The elf snarled and cut a harsh phrase before the axe sank deep into his chest. Blood sprayed across the ground and the crowd cheered with satisfaction. The vaxros kicked him away as he retrieved the weapon from his body. He lifted the axe above his head and let out a roaring war cry that echoed far throughout the empty desert.

**These men were followers of the Nasir, a great leader whom cursed Klaud and Avelloch's friend, Azae'l, and forced them on their journey through Nhamashel.*

Blood shimmered the purple moonlight as it dripped from the edge of the blade and rolled down his chiseled arm. The crowd cheered valiantly as the man stepped to his next victim.



CHAPTER FIVE
SIN'LOHAI
Aélla

Standing at the base of the cliff, looking down at the quiet suspended village, Aélla was torn. Altvára stood on her shoulder. His head twitched as he looked through the darkness. Dusk crept over the land hours before, leaving them in the stillness of night.

“Drimil,” Y’veen started. “What shall we do?”

Aélla gulped through a dry throat. Her gaze fell to her feet as she became lost in thought. In all of her imaginings and visions, she never thought this one to be true. Another sorcerer walks among them. Another soul cursed with power and responsibility.

“You must find her,” Aélla said. “Follow Altvára. He will guide you to her. I will go to the ruins and wait for you there.”

“You cannot go alone! The others—”

“I will be fine, Y’veen.” She smiled up at her friend. “Who are we to oppose what is already fated?”

“But Drimil—”

“Please,” she touched his arm. “Do this, Y’veen. Take Dru and find this sorceress. We cannot make it alone.”

With a silent nod, his shoulder slumped. “As you wish, Master Drimil. We will return.”

As Y’veen stepped away, Aélla quickly pulled him back. She carefully retrieved a woven trinket from her pocket and placed it firmly into his hand. Wrapping his fingers around the old, fragile object, she looked deep into his eyes. “Give this to her. She will understand its meaning.”

Y'ven bowed. He tucked the trinket safely into a pouch on his waist. Dru perched atop his head as he followed Altvára into the desert. The small creature turned to Aélla. Tiny fingers curled as she waved goodbye to her friend.

Aélla smiled as she returned the gesture. As they disappeared, she was left alone. Staring into the void where the horizon and rock met. Traveling during the night was dangerous. Creatures of Darkness lurked in the shadows, becoming ever present after the sun hid itself beyond the reaches of the sky. But the creatures she could handle. The sun, with its blazing, incurable heat, was far worse than any monster she would face in the darkness.

The first step was hardest as she trekked alone. With naught but her wooden staff she wandered the forbidden, lonesome plains. Holding an old, indecipherable map, she worried of losing her way.

Beautiful streams of light danced across the clear sky. Colors of green and blue illuminated the snow peaked mountains in the distance.

She walked until the sun crept over the mountains, bringing with it a gentle warmth that soothed her chilled and aching skin. Her boots dragged against the dirt as her legs grew weak and tired. Looking at her map, she concluded the village must be nearby. With no road or signposts to guide her, it made the trip long and unbearable.

Golden rays filled the sky in a kaleidoscope of orange and pink as morning overtook night. The mundane silence of an empty world was lifted when an angry, violent shriek came from above. Shadows passed as two dozen *glynfir** flew overhead.

Aélla ducked behind a large rock as the riders shouted with war cries. She watched them with a careful eye as they headed north, in the direction of the ruins. To the place she was meant to be.

As the creatures swooped down and out of sight, Aélla ran after them. Not many would subject themselves to the grueling task of riding such temperamental and aggressive beasts. None but the klaet'il, who were strictly forbidden from the desert at all costs.

To know they were there, that they were seeking out the ruins, struck her with pain. Their presence could propel the vaxros and evae into another vicious and bloody war.

And she feared this may be their goal.

Growing closer to the ruins, the shattering sounds of desperate cries filled the air. The clink of swords and iron axe's echoed above the screams as the klaet'il attacked the village.

**Large, winged beasts used for transportation. The glynfir are notoriously aggressive and have been known to throw their riders mid-flight out of defiance and opposition.*

The flyers take years to tame, and their unpredictable behavior has made them a less than desirable ally for many of the residents of the forest.

A vaxros warrior growled as an arrow landed deep in his shoulder. He looked to the sky, where an evaesh warrior nocked his bow from above. The vaxros lifted his spear and tossed it furiously to the evae.

The evae pulled the reigns of his glynfir as the spear flew through the air. He spun aside, missing the attack by inches. A deep snarl pulled the vaxros' scarred face. With another spear in hand, he met the gaze of his attacker, who drew back an arrow.

From behind, an evae leapt over a broken wall and aimed his daggers for the vaxros' neck. The vaxros hurled his spear as the arrow was released. With a quick swipe, he grabbed the evae from behind and used his body as a shield. The evae gasped when the arrow struck through his chest.

The glynfir squealed as the spear struck its side. Leathered wings flailed as its blood rained over the warriors below. It landed across the village with a deep crash.

As the vaxros was pulled into another battle, Aélla noticed an evae fighting with the natives. He wasn't of the klaet'il, that she knew for sure as not a mark covered his pale skin.

A loud roar disrupted her trance. She leapt over crumbled debris and drew her staff. With an upward spin she caught the face of the klaet'il charging a child. As the warrior tumbled aside Aélla struck his back with her weapon, and he fell into the dirt.

Turning back the staff spun quickly in her hand. Her weapon quivered when it struck against a blade. The klaet'il pulled their weapon back and slashed at Aélla's head.

Ducking beneath their swing, and feeling the air against her scalp, she reached forward with her palm open. A powerful blast of energy rumbled through the village as the klaet'il was thrust into a building. Their skull cracked as it met with the stone wall.

Blood and brains splattered against the wall as their body slid to the ground.

And injured vaxros laid on the ground nearby. Dark blood dripped from his abdomen. He was powerless against the klaet'il that approached. The evaesh warrior licked the blood from her lips as she drew closer, holding tight to her dual swords.

Warm energy swirled within her palm as Aélla reached out to the vaxros, prepared to heal him, when a voice disrupted her concentration.

"Don't!"

In her distraction, she turned, curious to find the voice that had stricken her. Her gaze fell to the evae who once fought against the klaet'il as he raced closer. He

dodged an arrow and swiped his sword through the gut of a passing klaet'il. Blood sprayed across his robes as he continued onward, paying no mind to the dying man he'd left behind.

A light wheeze came from the injured vaxros. The klaet'il leaned over him, watching as the light left his eyes. When his body slumped further into the ground, the evae pressed her boot against the vaxros' chest and pulled her sword from his body. Aélla stumbled back, unable to believe what she caused. What she could have prevented.

"Do not heal them," the evae warned. "To give them aid would dishonor their valor."

"He was defenseless!" Her voice was sharp as glass.

"He was a vaxros warrior. Now grab a sword or fall behind, but do not give them aid."

The evae ran back to the battlefield. Aélla, stricken by her morality, became angry. Her heart thumped loud in her ears as she watched their blood stain the ground. Overwhelmed by her desire to help, she was forced to step aside. Fighting now would only lead to the consumption of her rage, and with that power she could shift her fate. Transforming it from one of purity and peace into chaos and fury.

Unable to quell the anger and confusion, she knelt to the ground. Shimmering magic formed a circle around her. Its iridescence climbed upward into a dome, sealing half a foot above her head. With her fists together and eyes closed, she meditated.

Focused breathing allowed her the strength to eliminate the sounds of the battle. Heat rose within her, though not from anger, but magic. The calming waves of energy soothed her into a tranquil state. The madness that once flurried deep within became hollow and empty.

Sadness filled the void, but sadness was acceptable. Perspiration slid down her face and dripped from her chin. Slowly, her eyes opened, and she watched from the confines of her enclosure as the extempore battle came to a grueling end.

As the last klaet'il fell, the village was left with less than half its inhabitants. Bodies of men, women, and children laid sliced and bleeding. As a dying woman took her last breath, Aélla slumped forward in sorrowful defeat. Scanning the village, she spotted the evae lying in a pool of blood. A klaet'il warrior stood over him, speaking with vengeance and reproach.

As the klaet'il lifted his sword, ready to end the evae's life, Aélla shattered her barrier with a hard thrust of her staff. Energy swirled from her palm as it moved

toward the evae, creating a half dome barrier that shielded him from the deadly attack.

She fell to the ground with a gasp when her magic was struck. White cracks formed in the air where the sword met her invisible shield. The evae turned to her with wide eyes and watched as she crawled to her knees. With a pained cry she forced another swell of magic toward him.

As his assailant swiped downward, the evae lifted his sword to block the hit. A shockwave of pain coursed through Aélla when her magic was struck a second time. Clutching her chest, she watched as the evae struck his blade through the klaet'il's throat.

He kicked the man away and rolled to his side. Raspy, pained breaths vibrated his raw throat. Bruises and cuts littered his face and arms. She moved to his side and placed her hands to his back. Hot, tingling magic swirled within her. Energy pricked her skin as it moved from her chest and into her arms.

Deep, unrelenting pain coursed through her as his wounds were healed. The shallow cuts along his stomach and arms were made invisible as her energy converged with his. The evae struggled beneath the weight of her magic, which was painful and severe.

As his wounds slowly healed the pain disappeared. With a deep breath his head fell aside. Aélla backed away. Wiping the sweat from her brow, she eyed the village. The injured and lifeless laid in pools of blood. Vaxros healed one another with small flames, while the evae remained motionless on the ground.

“You are Drimil?” the evae asked. “One of the *eólin**?”

“I am First Blood,” she explained to the surprise of the stranger. “Which means that I’m here under protection of the *sin’lohai*.** *You*, however, are not.”

He turned and rubbed his face. “I’m here of my own accord. Word has spread that klaet'il warriors have invaded. I want to know why.”

Aélla nodded. Her eyes flashed to the vaxros as they tossed the dead evae into large firepits. Their bodies bubbled and burned within the flames. Stepping to a home, she knelt to the ground and touched a symbol painted on the stone in wet blood.

“Why are they doing this?” she asked. Fear consumed her as she stared down to the traitorous symbol. It was the mark of the *nesiat*... the lost. Such a design was used only for those who were considered without purpose or a soul. She knew of one person that carried such a burden, and to see it marked on the homes of her ancestors was mortifying.

*Those not born with inherent magical energy, yet still hold its power, are considered *eólin*, or unknown.

It's unclear how these individuals came to possess the energy of the realms, which is only attainable to those born to the First Blood, though many have their own theories and suspicions.

** A treaty made by all non-humans that grants amnesty and voyage to those who partake in matters which affect the lives of the many.

The evae stood and brushed himself clean. Blood and dirt matted his light, shoulder-length hair. His long face and dark blue eyes were evidence of his evaesh origins. Aélla knew he was of her clan, though they'd never met, his features were unmistakable.

"We cannot stay," he watched the villagers as they healed their wounds and burned the dead. "These vaxros are not like the others. They are more accepting of our kind, but we should not linger. If we overstay our welcome, they will attack."

Aélla watched them with the sting of guilt and sorrow. A man carried his wife to the large firepit. Her arms dangled aside while her lifeless eyes gazed to the heavens. Tears streamed down the man's face as he knelt into the flames, and gently placed his wife with the others.

The evae climbed over the ruins as he explained, "We will make camp near the cave entrance."

While the villagers gathered around the flames to say their goodbyes, Aélla sat with the stranger by the caves. Nestled within the rocks, they basked in the coolness of a dark shadow. Aélla leaned back with her eyes closed. It had been days since she could rest in safety and confinement.

The ache in her back absolved as she sank into a smooth stone. She peered to the evae when he cleared his throat and offered her a sack of berries.

"What has brought you to the ruins?" he asked.

She washed down a mouthful of berries before explaining, "I am to find the *rástalfür*. It is a magical staff that holds elemental energy."

"You plan to enter the tre'lan?"

Her eyes widened at his quick analogy. "It is my purpose as drimil'Rothar."

His brows raised as he examined her. "I believed the rumors to be untrue. That a descendant of the First Blood lived among us." He paused with intent. "Is that why you refused to fight? Why you meditated in the midst of battle?"

With a silent nod she explained, "As drimil'Rothar I must remain pure with my intentions, even if they are justified. I cannot taint my soul with chaos or darkness. I must remain in the ways of the Light."

He scoffed with a smile. Taking a drink from his canteen, he leaned back. "Following the philosophies of the ancients will only lead you down their path, and if I'm not mistaken, they vanished millennia ago."

"Are you suggesting that I forego the ways of my ancestors and create my own destiny?"

“Your destiny is your own, Master Drimil. Whether you choose to follow in the beliefs of those long past or carve a new way for yourself – the choice is yours. Do what you *think* is right – not what you’re *told*.”

She crossed her arms to quell the tightness of her chest. Staring at the ground, she asked, “And what if I’m wrong? What if the path that I choose leads to *naik’avel*? What if it leads to the deaths of so many that could have been saved?”

Light wrinkles cracked his ageless skin when he smiled. “What if you aren’t?”

Her shoulders slumped as she turned away. Staring into the cave entrance, she questioned her beliefs, and those of her ancestors. Her path was determined before she was born. To be last living descendant of a long-forgotten race is a privilege and an honor. Could she forsake the long existing prophecies of her predecessors and go against all she’s ever known in hopes of creating a new future... one that sees the end of the cycle of *Naik’avel*.

One that sees an end to her power and destiny.

“For centuries the world lived in peace. It wasn’t until my people disappeared that chaos returned.” She paused in despair. “There is no one left but me. If I refuse the prophecies and guidance of those before me, the world will fall.”

“I heard there is another. A *human*.”

Their gazes met, and a chill ran down her spine. She knew of this human. The sorceress with bright teal eyes and fully capable energy. Yes, she knew, but she’d never dare tell a stranger, as this human sorceress was meant to accompany her on this quest. This sorceress, who by her own people was considered a demon, was being hunted by *Y’ven* as he sought to ally her with *Aélla*.

“A human?” she asked, portraying the act of ignorance. The man narrowed his eyes ever so softly, and then leaned back with his hands folded over his lap.

“Yes,” he explained. “A *sorceress*. I’ve heard she has incredible power. If left unchecked, it can surely be disastrous.”

“Magic is nothing more than a retention of balance. Our actions guide us – not the energy we hold.”

He smiled. “Very well said, Master Drimil. I couldn’t agree with you more.”

This time, her eyes narrowed. “You don’t believe her to be a threat?”

He paused with thought. “If you give the sightless a dagger their attacks are dangerous, but non-threatening. Teach them to anticipate, and they become unpredictable. Teach them to fight, and they become powerful. Teach them to see,” their eyes met, “and they become unstoppable.”

Aélla became perplexed by his riddled proverb. She wondered if he was suggesting that she guide this human sorceress and teach her to properly control

her energy. To leave her without proper direction would leave her blinded and uncontrolled. Surely, there were no humans willing to teach her the dangers and techniques of magic, but was *she* meant for such a feat?

Her deep thoughts were broken as the evae patted his hands clean. He passed her the half-filled bag of berries as he stood. Pulling his cloak over his head, he prepared to revisit the unforgiving terrain in search of answers he may never find.

“You’re leaving?” she asked.

“My path leads me elsewhere.” He tipped his head with a respectful bow. “The world is watching, Master Drimil. Do not forsake us in our time of need.”

He gifted her a pleasant smile before climbing through the rocks and wandering into the desert alone.