

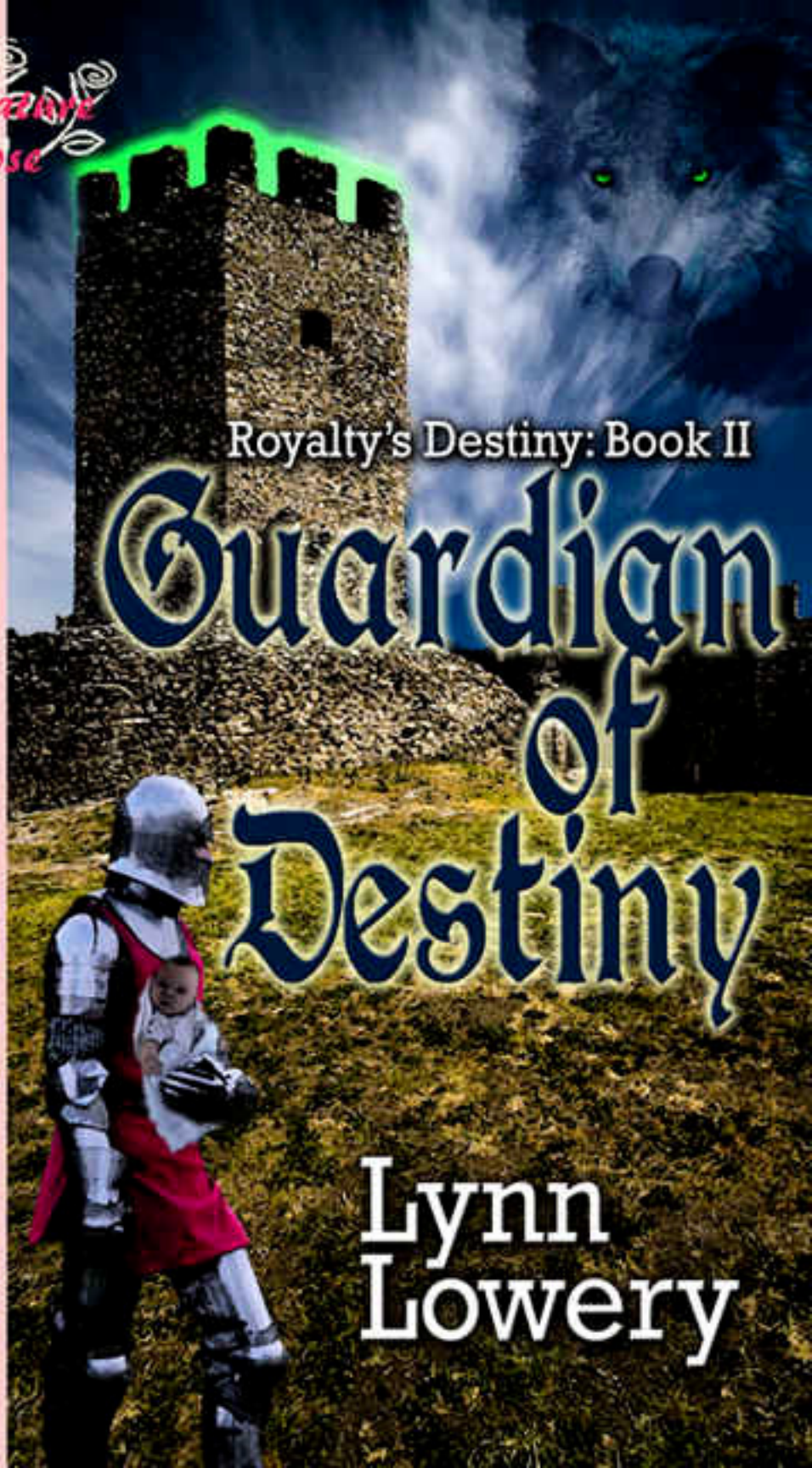
*Miniature
Rose*

Fairy Rose

Royalty's Destiny: Book II

Guardian of Destiny

Lynn
Lowery



Guardian of Destiny
by Lynn Lowery

The Wild Rose Press

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Guardian of Destiny

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Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History

First Faery Rose Edition, 2009

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Published in the United States of America

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Dedication

For Billy, my friend and support net.

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Prologue

The Baron

The crisp winter air forced Frit Longriver to pull his worn cloak around him tighter. He scuttled along the dark and winding hallways of Lightforge Keep, making sure to avoid the Royal Guard and housekeepers when possible. After all, plotting a murder that would destroy Mordavia took careful consideration. Some would say it would take more planning than a mundane scribe could muster, but Frit was different, he had one of the most powerful allies in the land on his side.

If everything went as planned, no one would know the Baron existed...until it was too late.

The halls of Lightforge, during the day lit by enough magical light to make it feel like summer, now stood empty and dark. Almost like a tomb to Frit. He carefully made his way down the Servant Tower. The very name of the tower made him shudder with revulsion. Oh sure, the other workers in the keep were happy to work for King Kail and his Queen of Trees, Lana. But Frit was different. He knew he was meant for greater things. He was meant for real power.

By becoming allies with the right people, one could gain power, but only if he didn't mind getting his hands dirty—which Frit didn't. He would be the lap dog a little while longer, until it was time for everything to happen. Tonight was just the first step in many that would one day give him his land and whichever woman he desired.

He had never been comfortable around women. Some said it was his hooked nose—which had been broken by a bully in school when he was younger—or it could have been the way he stuttered when nervous. Frit knew the real reason, however. Women were scared of the power he would one day possess. The power the baron would soon give him.

The clanking of plate armor ahead caught his attention. Quickly, he dove into a small corridor as two of the Lightforge Royal Guard, in their magnificent blue tunics, marched past. Frit held his breath as the noise of their boots against the stone floor faded down the hall. The guards had not roamed so often before that damn Patyn Brighthand took over as their captain.

The fool was a former Guardian and, since taking the position, had increased security due to the problems Mordavia had seen almost a year ago. It didn't matter now, though. Natyva was nothing compared to what the baron had in store for the Mageking family.

Frit walked on slowly, making it to a large oak door leading outside. He had thought it best to use this side entrance to not draw as much attention. He was always smart like that. Which was why he would never be caught.

The door opened silently, allowing the full assault of the winter wind to slam into his face, stinging his cheeks. He trudged out into a light snow that had fallen the night before, cursing that he would have to hide his footprints on his journey back after the meeting.

It took only a few more minutes to make his way to the meeting place—the main gate of the castle. A plaque of

bronze rested over the arch that hundreds of Mordavians walked through every day. Frit spit on the ground as he read the plaque again.

And you will find her, the kingdom's womb, when the direst of times come. She will be your love, your life, and Mordavia's Queen of Trees.

"Ancients curse you and your damn queen," Frit mumbled under his breath. And now with the new prince born, everyone was praising the new prophecy the king's old, loony mother had made on her deathbed. There was talk she had said more, but no matter how much he tried to pry, it was still a guarded secret. Evidently, they didn't think he was important enough to know. That would soon change.

"One would think you were spiteful, Frit." A hiss of a voice spoke from behind the scribe.

The rhythm of the voice, filled with danger and cold calculation, immediately caused the hair on the back his neck to stand up. He always felt as though his life was over when he was near the baron.

"H-hel-hello, Baron." Frit stammered out as he turned around.

The man known only as *the baron* to him, was tall and broad, wearing a black hooded cloak to cover all of his features. He screamed magic, and Frit had witnessed him do magnificent feats with the gifts from the Ancients.

When they had first met in a tavern in Oak Ridge, some local bullies had dragged Frit into an alley and had begun to work him over. The baron had come to his aid and had slain them with his magic. He then had asked to become friends

with Frit. Since then, they had met once a month, here at the front of the gates, in the middle of the night.

"What news do you have for me this night?"

"It is li-like you sa-said. The child was born last night and it was a boy. Da-Daven Mageking is the heir to the throne of Li-Lightforge." Frit silently hoped the baron would not be angered by his news. It would have made their plan easier if it would have been a girl.

If he was indeed upset, he didn't show it or sound it. "Very well, then it's time to begin our plans. Are you prepared to do your part?"

"Y-Yes, I w-won't let you d-down." Frit looked down at the ground as he waited for what was to come.

"I know you won't. Everything will be finished soon enough, Frit. You'll soon have your own land and servants. You'll be greatly rewarded for helping me." The baron turned to look at the plaque on the wall. "I enjoy this meeting spot, I find it amusing that the very place we plot to destroy Lightforge is in the very place its most hopeful promise lies."

"I thought y-you told me the p-prophecy was a m-myth?" Frit said, looking up at the sign.

"Oh, it is. The *Queen of Trees* was nothing but an orphaned bitch that got lucky, and her son is nothing more than a muddy mix of royal blood and forest trash." The baron's voice turned to venom. "Daven Mageking will never rest on the throne. I will."

Frit didn't have to see the face beneath the cloak to know the man was smiling. If all went well, in six months time there would be a new king, with a new banner. And he would

be lord of his own land, and have sex with any subject he wanted, maybe even a girl like the one who cleaned the Servant Tower. She wanted him he knew. Maybe the baron would give him her as a slave.

The arousal in his pants almost made him forget where he was until he heard the icy voice continue.

"Very well, we will meet again in three months from this day. Make sure you've done what you must do by then." The baron then turned to leave.

"I-I will, Baron. Don't y-you worry," Frit stammered as the cloaked figure disappeared into the darkness.

Excitement filled him as he returned to his chambers that night. It had begun. He was now on his way to the fortune he deserved. Because of his actions, Daven Mageking would not reach his first birthday.

With a small smile, Frit Longriver found his bed and laid down for a good night's rest. He dreamed of the ample breasts of the Servant Tower maid and how he would have her repeatedly, the first day he received her from his new king.

Winter in Tunasia Valley was different than most of Mordavia. There was a light snow but for the most part the air stayed comfortable, thanks to the Elven secrets of magic and their ability to blend with nature. The rolling hills of grazing land held many types of livestock, cows, sheep, and even Meep, a large bird known for its luxurious purple and blue feathers. It was a beautiful place, one the Elves loved and protected at all cost.

Brylla Ramika continued her ride along the southern border of Tunasia, letting CiCi, her large riding dog, stop every few hundred feet to smell for danger, or most likely in the dog's case, food.

She eased one of her slender gloved hands off of the reigns and pushed a lock of hair from her eyes. Her frail facade and the fact she was only a few inches over two feet, had surprised many of her enemies.

After all, she was no pixie. She was a Tunasia Marshal, the protector of the Valley, and first line of defense against the atrocities of their enemies in the land of Scrag Fang. The war between the barren lands of Scrag Fang and the beautiful Tunasia Valley had raged for centuries. The Elves had tried to keep peace but their enemies, the dreaded creatures known as Werelings, had done nothing but try to destroy and conquer the peaceful Elves.

So once again, Brylla found herself on border duty with CiCi. Normally, she would have been a part of a group, but they had split up today. Her best friend, Nala, had seen some strange tracks that morning and had left to check it out. Neither of them was worried. Tunasia Marshals were fierce fighters and could hold their own against the larger humans and dwarves of the realm any day.

Her dog carried her on around the edge of The Tra'ynal, the largest lake in Tunasia, where she headed north along the border. At mid-day, CiCi caught a whiff of something and went ridged.

"What's wrong ol' girl?" Brylla said soothingly, patting the dog's neck. She reached down and unstrapped her crossbow from her saddle sling. Her dog did not spook easy.

Her eyes peered out over the hills, looking for hidden danger, analyzing each dip of the rolling lands for escape routes and ambush points. She had only been a Marshal for ten years, and as long as Elves lived, that wasn't long, but she knew how to survive. She knew how to stay alive.

Then she saw it, a small dark form running toward her as fast as it could. She immediately knew it was an elf, and moments later her magical senses realized it was manipulating the land with magic to run faster. Brylla threw the dog into a sprint taking off toward the elf. CiCi's long legs stretched out to their capacity leaping yards between each pounce. It took only moments to reach the Tunasian, which was male and worn from days of travel. His green tunic, with the waterfall of Eagle Buff on it, told her he was a Marshal.

He looked up at her and smiled for a moment. "I...finally made...it," he said, and then collapsed to the ground.

Brylla slid smoothly from her saddle and ran to the Marshal, lifting him up in her arms. His blood covered her hands. She immediately tore his tunic off, seeing the deep gashes of bladed weapons and the gnaw marks of teeth and claws. Only one group of creatures would use both attacks—Werelings. She knew her magic was not strong enough to heal him, but she might be able to stabilize him enough to get him back to the city.

The elf saw her looking over his wounds. "Don't worry about me, it's too late. I used all my life force getting here."

He coughed up blood, proving to Brylla his wounds were mortal. "I have news, you must take it to Eagle Bluff, the council must know."

Brylla wiped the blood from his mouth and channeled her magic to make his body more comfortable.

"Thank you," the elf said with a painful smile. "The Werelings have struck an alliance with someone hell bent on destroying Lightforge and the humans."

A year ago this would not have any effect on the Elves. They had been in silent protest of the Humans of Lightforge, before Rey Kantada had allied with Kail Mageking. Since then, both the humans and Elves had lived as friends.

"You must warn Kantada," he said, fading fast. "There is a traitor in the castle."

"Do you know their plans?" Brylla channeled her magic stronger, trying to let the elf live a little longer to give her his message. "What is the danger?"

The elf looked up at her and croaked out two words that would forever be in her head. "Murder...war."

He then faded away.

"I'm sorry, brother of Tunasia," she said, kissing his forehead. Using quick magic, the ground buried the elf beneath it and she leapt onto CiCi's saddle.

Danger was coming to Mordavia, her land was threatened. It was time to ride.

"Okay, girl, get me to Eagle Bluff."

As the dog sped off with her toward the Elven capital, Brylla's stomach locked with queasiness. Whatever was

coming would come with a force that could bring the land of Mordavia to its knees.

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Chapter One

The Longest Patrol

The sun was preparing to make its decent into the green rolling hills to the west of Wardrick. The blue sky showing it was only hours from its transition from red-pink, to gray-black, when Melisha Nightsbane pulled up on the reigns of her mare. The valley stretched out below her, spanning past the good farmlands of Southbank toward the River Ralia, its waters appearing in brief glimpses in small clearings and thinning spaces of woodland.

Melisha studied the valley, her green eyes watchful of any danger. She was becoming restless, too long without any signs of life. Her face burned from the day of patrolling, though years of training kept her rigid in her seat.

The air had not released its heat, forcing Melisha to summon a small portion of her magic to stay comfortable under her chain mail armor and purple cape. Her journey had started before dawn, the normal north patrol, leading her from the Tower of Wardrick and around the west portion of the territory. It had been a quiet day, no major problems occurring but that was normal. This was the quietest of all of the patrols and always had been.

The Guardians of Wardrick had been protecting Mordavia since the time of the Ancients. It was said they were at one with them, descendents of their great practices and because so, had been given the gift of magic. Melisha wasn't sure

about how they came to be but she was certain of one thing. The life of a Guardian was one of solitude.

It was a destiny surrounded by loneliness and heartbreak.

That had not always been her viewpoint. In truth, she had once believed her charge was the greatest in the world. However, that had been before the duty she loved forced the only man she had ever loved away. Since then she had been alone, well at least in her heart. It wasn't all for the bad, however. She had quickly risen through the ranks and was now the Hand of Wardrick, a title given to the second in command and the person with the duty of overseeing the missions sent throughout Mordavia. It was an important duty, which she gladly accepted, but still, sometimes late at night she longed to be in his arms once again, even if he had abandoned her.

She cursed herself for thinking of *him* once again and turned her thoughts back to the day's patrol. She could easily let her guard down here, so far away from the dangers to the south. But she had to continue to remind herself there were still bandits around, as well as the occasional orc band. As a Guardian, she was always to be prepared. It was hard to do if she was thinking about men who did not deserve her thoughts.

Stillness came over the entire valley before her. No familiar sounds of insect buzzing or bird chirping, all were missing. A nervous tingle hit the back of her neck. The deep silence was unsettling. Her hand immediately rested on her sword.

Melisha channeled more of her magic. The purple glow of the Ancients surrounded her faintly as she used the magic to amplify her hearing in hopes of discovering some form of sound or movement. She was only disappointed with more silence. Her mare shook its head, uneasy.

"What is it, Meena? Are you feeling as uncomfortable as I am?" she said, patting the horse's neck softly.

She had already stayed on patrol longer than she needed, and it would be well after dark before she made it back to the Tower. Whatever was here would wait until morning no doubt. She could come back or send a group to explore the valley. *One more time just in case.* She channeled a little more magic to hear just a little further.

The sound she discovered was faint, even with her amplified hearing, but the noises were unmistakable. A battle raged in the valley somewhere.

She kicked the flanks of Meena and sped down into the valley. The mare, highly trained, easily maneuvered down the uneven terrain and hit full gallop when she reached the basin. The hot wind slammed into Melisha's face as she rode toward the sound, which was harder to hear with the air rushing by her ears. She squinted trying to concentrate on the direction of the battle, steering the reigns of the horse with calm certainty as she had many of times before.

The pit in her stomach grew larger the closer she rode, as if the Ancients themselves were leading her to her destiny. She pulled back on the reins, slowing the horse to a walk and allowed her senses to steady once again. The struggles of battle were now gone, all that remained was the sound of

movement through the overgrowth ahead. The purple glow around her gave her comfort as she silenced the sound of her blade drawing. She channeled her magic, warmth filled her as the familiar purple glow of its presence enveloped her, to muffle the sound of the horse, edging into a small clearing beyond.

The green grass of the field was now tainted with blood splotches from the battle. In the middle of the field lay a woman staring back at her with sightless eyes, and a figure in a brown cloak with a large, pulled back hood, kneeling over her.

Not sure what she had ridden up on, Melisha gripped her sword tightly and let go of the silence she had created. The figure immediately went rigid and spun faster than any opponent she had faced in a long time. It took a moment for realization to set in. As the man now faced her, his dark brown eyes full of danger one minute before immediately falling to a softness she had not witnessed in over two years.

"Melisha?"

She held her breath, biting on the inside of her cheek as she sat there in silence. She wanted to ride in the opposite direction as fast as she could. Okay, so maybe she wanted to run up to him, kick him in the face, and then flee. Instead, she did nothing; her body was having the same problem as her mouth. She analyzed his shoulders that spanned a yard, supporting a ruggedly handsome face she had stared at for hours at a time. His sandy blonde hair was cut short now, though it once fell right above his shoulders. She fought to deny this was happening. After two years, the man that had

walked away from her and broke her heart now stood in front of her, in the middle of a battlefield, over a dead woman.

Finally, she found the courage to speak. "Patyn, what happened here?"

Paytn Brighthand relaxed his grip on his sword. He turned his back to her again and knelt down beside the woman. "I need to get to Wardrick, and fast."

"Why?"

"Enough Guardian! I have no time to sit and discuss my reasons for my actions. I'm tired, and hungry, and have no desire to be here after dark. Now are you going to do your duty, or do I have to do things my damn self?"

A deep pain in her heart rose with his words. The excitement of seeing him again faded, and once again, it was replaced with the numbness that had been present since he left. She was a Guardian, and he was not one any longer. If he needed her help she would give it to him.

"Very well, I'll take you there."

He spun back toward her, delicately carrying a bundle of rags. His mood had softened as he looked up at her.

"I will need you to take us with you."

He cleared away some of the rags to reveal a small baby beneath them. The child was beautiful. Its big blue eyes, as bright as the sky, looked up at her as it yawned softly.

She wasn't sure what to say, it had been years since she had seen Paytn, had he moved on and married another? "Of course, I..."

He stuck out a hand to silence her as he tilted his head to listen into the underbrush. He then moved toward her at a sprint. "Here, we have to move now!"

She reached down for the child and held it in her arms as he climbed up behind her and grabbed the reins. She heard a limb break followed by the crunch of movement.. Something was coming. Years of being a partner with Patyn told her it would have to be something big to unnerve him.

"Hold on to the child. If we want to survive we must flee." He kicked Meena into a sprint and headed back toward the valley edge.

Melisha looked down at the child, trying to concentrate on protecting it instead of the tingle in her spine from feeling Paytn's arms around her. Memories flooded her of how those powerful arms had held and caressed her body in the most intimate ways, so long ago. She looked back down at the child and felt jealousy creep into her. Some woman had healed what she couldn't. He was complete again, not in pieces like when he had left her to become Captain of the Lightforge Royal Guard. Now he was a father.

They traveled hard, deeper into the borders of Wardrick before pulling back to a pace easier for Meena. It felt like hours before she had the strength to ask the question that had been plaguing her for so long. "How old is your child?"

He let out a short laugh. "That's not my child."

Relief flowed over her like water as the words left his mouth.

"That's Daven Mageking, the Prince of Mordavia and heir to the throne."

The shadows of the now empty clearing began to darken with the coming night. The bloodstains would soon be lost and covered before the sun's light touched them again. The Assassin grunted in disgust as he padded out of his hiding place. He stood on all fours, his large snout taking in the irritating aroma of pine and oak. This was nothing like his homeland. He shook his stone gray head in disgust. He had watched his minions battle the ex-Guardian, underestimating Brighthand's skill. Vorgon would not make that mistake twice. If not for the sudden appearance of the woman, he would have taken care of his mission right then. He had not lived as long as he had by being rash. One of them he could have killed, but two was a risk he refused to take at this time. Not when there was still time.

He sniffed into the air, his summoned creatures had been destroyed too easily, and he would have to recruit real creatures of the forest if he was going to accomplish his goals. All of Scrag Fang was counting on him. He chuckled at the thought. The Council was now weak. Long ago, they should have eradicated the Elves and moved to conquer the humans. They had let them get too powerful now. It would be a long process but inevitable all the less. The Werelings were unstoppable. The Ancients could not even do anything this time.

Vorgon sprinted south, his paws gracefully bounding him forward with a speed that rivaled any other creature in the forest. His mission was simple and as he had in the past, he would find a way to complete it. Daven Mageking would die by week's end.

The valley gave way to the rolling hills of the southland. The land was rugged and if not for his keen eyes, he would have trouble seeing much with moon light alone. He let his mind roam back to the barren land of Scrag Fang, its rigid cliffs and sandy soil. Soon his people would be able to leave the wasteland if they wished and take residence in their newly conquered lands of Tunasia Valley.

That had been the bargain struck between the council and their new ally. He would get Lightforge and they get Tunasia Valley. He knew what would truly happen. However, the Werelings hated humans as much as Elves and they would conquer all of Mordavia eventually, just as they had done centuries ago.

As he made his way toward his temporary base of operations, it occurred to him he had not heard from his spy as of late. No matter though, the Baron would take care of his side of the bargain, as long as Vorgon did his part.

Vorgon didn't trust the Baron, even though the human's magic was very powerful. He was still a human, and worse he was a human who wanted to destroy his own species. He spit into the ground at the thought. What kind of race tries to destroy their own kind? They should all be caged. They would be soon.

He smiled as he continued to run. Tomorrow would be a new day, one closer to him coming out of hiding and doing what he was the best at. Tomorrow was one day closer to him being an assassin.

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Chapter Two

Of Wardrick and Men

It took more than an hour for Melisha to come to terms with her current situation. Daven Mageking was in her arms, and the man she had not stopped thinking about for the past two years now pressed himself against her back. She could feel his strong build against her. The rhythm of the galloping horse caused the friction between their clothing to instigate a heat that crawled to other areas.

She was worried, not just for Patyn, or the baby. But she realized if the child was in so much danger he was taken from the safety of Lightforge Keep, then most likely King Kail and the Queen of Trees were in danger as well. Had someone like the Black Chantress—or worse—once again emerged?

A shiver ran down her spine at the thought. The tingling sensation did not fade for a while, though she knew not to ask any questions. If Paytn had orders to tell her anything, he would have already. Most likely, he was to talk to the Warder of the Tower and no one else. Paytn Brighthand always followed orders. The idea of that meeting sent lead straight to her stomach. She attempted to push those thoughts away for now.

The large oaks soon gave way to groves and scrubs, telling her they were closing in on the southlands of Mordavia. The tall prairie grass swayed in waves, seen only because of the moonlight, which gave them a silver glow. The hot, late summer wind allowed it to point in the direction they were

heading, like a beacon of fate giving them a direct path to Wardrick.

Paytn pulled Meena to a trot, giving the swift mare some much-needed rest. The Elves held magic that increased the speed of their travel. That would have been helpful at this particular moment. Not that she understood what moment this actually was.

It was almost an hour more before they finally reached the small hill known as Last Stand, so named because of a battle between Werelings and Guardians a hundred years ago. Many songs had been written about the battle, how fifty Guardians held off a thousand Werelings. The Guardians had died to the last man, but had allowed the rest of Wardrick time to organize troops and successfully destroy the attacking army. Now the hill was a landmark for the north patrol, telling them that from here it was only a few more minutes before the Tower would enter view.

"No matter how many times you see it, it's still amazing." Patyn said bringing the horse to a halt.

Across a mile of fields rested the Tower of Wardrick. Created with a secret ancient magic, the walls of the square structure were sleek and crafted from a single rock. A green glow emitted from the top of the Tower. This was from a magical flame and known as the Watcher, because of the protection it allowed from attackers. Before they reached the half-mile mark, the lookouts would have already spotted them.

"Yes, it's a marvel. One of the last structures from the Ancients." She looked down at baby Daven, who was still fast

asleep. "You will be safe soon," she whispered as the horse started forward once again.

It was nearing midnight by the time they made it to the tower walls. Normally, Melisha felt at peace once she returned from a patrol but too much had transpired on this journey. She needed sleep, to think, and to figure out what Patyn wasn't telling her.

Saying his name again in her mind caused a heat to spark once more. He was here. In truth, he was not here because of her, but he was still there in the flesh. Unfortunately, he was about to discover more about the life she had lived since his departure than she had ever anticipated.

A figure awaited them on the long stairwell leading up to the main entrance. He was tall and broad, his leisurely stance held arrogance only one of nobility or leadership could have. His dark hair was cut short, like a soldier. Piercing gray eyes studied them with cold calculation. Still geared up in armor and sword, the man started walking down to them, each calm, graceful step held an explosive bounce, as if he were ready to attack at a moments notice.

Melisha held her breath as she dismounted with the child, dreading this moment the entire night. She heard the gentle thud as Patyn landed near her, the heat of embarrassment replaced the warmth his touch had given her moments before. Why had she not told him on the journey here? Surely, he would have understood. It was too late now. The world stood still, leaving her there with two soon to be enemies who had once been best friends, in a showdown that was all her doing. In front of her was Cade Wrathmore,

Warder of the Tower—best friend of Paytn and the man she had shared a bed with since his departure.

"You're late." Cade said coolly to his second in command. "I had expected you back hours ago."

He had been cold to her since she had told him their relationship was over. Melisha forced herself not to laugh at the thought. A relationship to Cade had meant sharing a bed and nothing more, as she had found out on several occasions when he had spent time away in the local towns. It had turned out he had many relationships as he called them and she was just the one for when he was at Wardrick. At first, she hadn't cared, because she was really using him as well to fill a void Patyn's leaving had created.

"I ran into some trouble," she said shortly. "We need to get inside and we can discuss matters further." To prove her point she unveiled the baby in her arms.

Cade looked puzzled, his eyes growing stern as they found Patyn. "And it looks like you found a civilian as well."

Patyn stepped forward. His stance was half-battle crouch and half-relaxed, as if his body and his mind were sending him two separate signals.

"Actually, I am the official guard of the prince in her arms. The king has given me full jurisdiction."

"Well then, Captain, let's discuss things inside. We have an audience room for civilians to meet with Guardians in. You remember it well don't you, Brighthand? You know, before you ran away from your duties."

The bait Cade had thrown at Patyn seemed to fail as the once Guardian only smiled in return. "You should be thanking

me. It's the only reason you have that sword." He motioned to the beautiful silver blade strapped to Cade's back. He brushed past his verbal attacker, a little harder than required, knocking Cade slightly off balance.

The sword was a symbol of the Tower, given to the Warder of the Tower as a sign of his rank. What Patyn said was true. It had been he, not Cade, who had been next in line for the position of Warder. Had Patyn stayed, Cade would be nothing. In Melisha's opinion, he pretty much was anyway.

The darkness of the night dissipated when the group entered the common area of Wardrick. The large room was filled with an array of tables. Most nights there would be a lively group enjoying fine drink and food. They were all in bed now, most likely to wake up with a hangover Melisha would have to deal with in the morning. Cade called for one of the serving women to take the baby up to a protected chamber and sent a dozen Guardians to keep watch. He then led them into the guest meeting chambers. Melisha knew it was a stab at Patyn but it didn't seem to faze him in the least.

"So, out with it, Brighthand. What brings you to our doorstep with the heir of Lightforge tagging along?" Cade sat in a chair and poured some ale from a nearby pitcher. After he made no effort to pour anyone else some, Melisha helped herself and poured a mug for Patyn.

Patyn took a long draw from his mug. "One of the servants in Lightforge was caught trying to rape a young servant girl. When we took him into interrogation he started spilling on about a conspiracy to kill Prince Daven." He stopped for a moment and studied Cade's face. No matter how big of a

horse's ass Cade was, he still took his position seriously and was proud to serve Lightforge.

"You believe this servant is telling the truth?"

Patyn nodded. "At first we thought he was just crazy, but he knew too much, and mentioned a deal with someone known as the Baron."

"The Baron? There are no Barons in Mordavia. Our Code of Laws specifically did so to keep the King and Queen from danger of violent uprising," Melisha said. The more she learned tonight, the more a deep fear began to emerge from inside her. Something was not right.

"Yes, this must be a made up title." Cade rubbed his chin in thought. "This will make finding him harder."

"There is more, and the news gets worse." Patyn lowered his head, worry stretched across his weary face. "It seems this Baron has allied with Scrag Fang. An assassin is already near on a mission to kill the boy. I ran into an ambush and the nursemaid traveling with me was slain. Luckily, Melisha came to my aid."

Patyn gave her a warm smile that sent heat roaring inside her once again. She silently cursed herself. She would have to stop letting her feelings get in the way if she was going to do her duty.

"So what's your plan of action?" Cade said, his voice still held disdain but only barely. It seemed saving the kingdom meant more to Cade than petty arrogance.

"I will leave the child here under the protection of the Guardians. In the morning, I will start searching for this

assassin, kill him and hopefully we will learn more about the Baron." Patyn finished his mug.

He tensed at the idea of battle. His tree trunk arm muscles rippled as he placed the mug back on the table.

Cade nodded his agreement. "In the mean time, I will send scouts to Tunasia. The Elves were supposed to send an emissary a week ago but he has not arrived. I am now wondering if that has something to do with the present situation."

Melisha barely heard the last. She breathed in relief knowing that as of tomorrow morning, Patyn would be gone and she would be left with her duties. She took him in once again. By the Ancients, he was adorable, even after such a hard journey. Staying close to him much longer would only lead to trouble. *It looks like Karma is on my side.* She smiled as the thought entered her mind.

"I feel like I should send a Guardian with you as well. Take Melisha. After all you too should get reacquainted." Cade gave a sly grin to her.

She could only glare.

"Now Patyn, you take care of her. After all she was my bed mate."

The words slammed into her like a ton of coal. The air in her lungs refused to move as she stood there. Patyn turned to her, his face expressionless but she knew what was hiding behind those eyes. Her mind went blank except for one thought that repeated itself repeatedly.

Damn Karma.

Patyn Brighthand knew better than to trust a bastard like Cade. After seeing Melisha in the woods that evening, he had kept his guard up. He had been gone too long for her to still have feelings for him. A woman as beautiful and intelligent as she would have men crawling all over her. Nevertheless, he had made the mistake of letting his guard down in that small room in Wardrick. For a moment, it was as if he had never left, the three of them together planning to save the kingdom. Cade had baited him well, and had hit him so hard with his words Patyn now had trouble breathing.

He sat in silence, unable to hide. The lamps lighting the room acted like a signal fire of his heartache.

Cade only smiled and rose from his chair. "I will let you two discuss your plans for tomorrow. Good journey to you both."

He shut the door behind him, leaving Patyn in the room alone with the only person he didn't want to be alone with now.

"Patyn," Melisha spoke, her voice more like a whimper.

"It's fine, you don't owe me any explanation."

"Yes, I do. I should have said something earlier." Her voice grew a little stronger.

He looked at her then and almost lost it. A rush of emotion flowed through his veins as he thought of how many times he had woke up next to her, smelling the jasmine in her deep brown hair. If he closed his eyes tight enough, he could still feel her slender hands touch his bare back like velvet on steel. She would always give a soft moan when he placed his hands on the small of her back when they were in bed. He

wanted her even now. Even knowing she had bedded his supposedly best friend. What a joke. Cade had befriended him because of Patyn's rank.

No, she had made her choices and he could accept them, even if it did destroy him. His duty was to his king and he would finish that charge.

He looked at her as dispassionate as he could, though he knew she could see the warmth of his affection behind the glare. "It's over, that was the past."

"It's just, you left so suddenly. I..." She flinched as he hit the table with his hard fist.

"I said it is fine! Now just leave me be!" He had not meant to shout but bringing up that part of his life always angered him. Had he done his duty he would have never had to leave. If he had been a true Guardian people would not have died. He would never make that mistake again.

Tears started to well in her eyes as she continued to look at him. His pulse increased. He had gone too far. He should apologize but no more words would come from him this day. For if he broke this new found silent vow he would come clean about everything that had happened so long ago, and he could not bear to remember it all himself.

"Very well, *Captain*, I will see you at dawn."

Melisha Nightsbane, the person he was destined for, stood up and trudged to the door. He found himself wanting to rush to her and stop the tears that would surely come when she left his presence. His numb body was almost lifeless as he watched her go. This was for the best, just as it had been years ago.

You're an idiot.

He turned to tell her to stop and come back but met only the closing of the door. He was alone, just as he had been since he had left her.

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Chapter Three

The Hunt Begins

The next morning they set out west from the tower. Patyn had thought it best to start exploring the small villages first, in hopes someone had seen something. Melisha couldn't help but agree. A Wereling spotting was not something taken lightly and the two of them could use those clues to help in their investigation.

They talked little that first day. The hours of awkward silence between them forced her into her own memories. The fact they had been so close once only seemed to cut her deeper when she realized she was not just an old lover to him, she was a regret.

The discomfort of her traveling cloak did not help matters. She had thought it best not to wear the colors of Wardrick. News could easily get back to the assassin that Guardians were on his trail. Instead, she wore dull brown covering her armor, and the sword at her hip was standard issue for the Mordavian army instead of the Guardian engraved one she normally wielded. Patyn had dressed the same, yet his rugged features seemed to blend with the clothing in a way that still made him irresistible. She was uncertain if he had ever not looked good in his life. The lump in her throat grew as she returned to the events of last night.

It was true her explanation would have been weak at best, but the looks he gave her told her everything she needed to know. Those steel blue eyes that had once studied her with

soft fondness and fierce desire had grown cold with the news of Cade. No, it was best if she put such things from her mind. They had both said everything they needed too. It was time to get to work and deal with her heart later.

She finally broke the silence as evening approached. "We are still a day from the nearest border village. We should set up a camp soon."

Patyn nodded reluctantly. She was not sure if it was because he really felt they should press on through the night to find this hidden enemy. Maybe it was because he wanted to get the journey over with as fast as possible to get rid of her.

"Very well, there is a grove of trees over this next rise. I spotted it a mile back. It should work."

He led her to the grove where they quickly started a fire and pitched separate tents. As darkness began to win its battle with the sun, the two of them sat in silence watching the fire crackle. Their dinner of dried beef and tack was not the best meal by any means, but they were both soldiers and knew in the wilderness you didn't cook unless you had too. Too many predators might want a taste.

"I'm sorry I raised my voice last night." His soft voice broke the silence of the night like a lighthouse calling in a ship. "I was just a little caught off guard."

Melisha looked down slightly, her mind screaming to tell the entire story, even though she knew it would do no good. "I know."

"I knew coming back would be rough on everyone. But I have realized never knowing what could have been is what is

so tough for me." He leaned back looked up at the star filled sky. "I guess I just never imagined you had moved on."

Moved on? He thinks I moved on? She felt an anger she could not explain creep up in her chest. If she opened her mouth, she would scream at him for leaving her. Did he not understand he had broken her heart into so many pieces it was irreparable? Alternatively, how about the fact those fragments he had made still missed him? She gripped her cloak so hard her knuckles were white.

"But now I understand," he finished and looked at her. "What we had is in the past. It's better this way."

Melisha had faced danger her entire life, but nothing had cut her as deep as the words that had just entered her ears. It truly was over.

"You're right it is better this way." She almost choked saying the words. "We should get some sleep, big day tomorrow."

She stood and walked into her tent. This time she did not look back.

They arrived at the border village of Falin's Peace in the afternoon of the next day. There were only a handful of villages along the border with Scrag Fang, at least until closer to Lake Legend, where there was more protection from frequent Wereling raids. It was a resilient culture where children learned to fight young, to serve in the militia as teenagers. This tradition had been successful since the beginning of Mordavia.

The small stonewall surrounding the village stood only six feet in height, with two gates of entrance guarded by boys of

no more than 15 years of age. The four guards at the gate looked worse for wear, brandishing spears and wearing tattered leather armor. As Melisha and Patyn approached, the boys tensed up and gripped their weapons a little tighter.

"State you're business, strangers." The blacked haired boy with a nasty scar running down his cheek quivered slightly as he studied the two riders. "We don't want no trouble now, ya hear?"

"Neither do we, soldier." Patyn spoke with a kind but assertive voice, as he did when he was speaking to his men. "We simply have come for information and to resupply. We'll soon be on our way."

The boy still looked cautious. "What kind of information? We don't know much here. We're peaceful people unless riled."

"Just curious if you have heard of any strange happenings or sightings of Werelings lately."

The boys gave a slight shiver at mention of the beasts that had caused so much destruction to them over the years.

Melisha studied them for a moment. This was not an old fear, something had happened recently to put them on such edge.

"What business is it of yours, Mister?" Another boy said, this one blonde and blue eyed. "You sure are nosey."

Patyn lost his temper. "Look, boy, I do not have the time nor patience to waste while you decide if I am a threat or not! I am Patyn Brighthand, Captain of the Lightforge Guard. I am on an important mission for the king."

"Do you have any proof?" The boy backed away at the outburst.

Melisha rode forward before Patyn could explode. "I am Melisha Nightbane, Guardian of Wardrick. We need to speak to your village elder, please." Before the boys could ask for proof, she exhaled slowly as she pulled her magic out of its pocket in her mind causing the famous purple glow, a by-product of the Guardians power.

The boys didn't waste any more time and led them into the town without another word. The streets of the village were muddy, littered with muck and animal waste. She had seen towns this way before. When a town feared danger, they would forget remedial tasks in order to prepare a defense. Cleaning up after themselves and their animals just didn't seem as important when their life was on the line.

The boys took them to one of the only wooden structures in the town, a large square building with few windows. A small wooden post beside the door read *The Defender's Rest*. The inn of modest accommodation had a large common room for eating and drinking and a hall leading to the small rooms beyond. An elderly man behind the bar, at least in his sixties, seemed ancient compared to the life expectancy on the border. His thin, silver hair had a prominent receding hairline. He smiled tenderly at them and walked over.

"Welcome to Falin's Peace, what can we do for you?" His voice reminded her of a grandfather. It brought a fond comfort to her that she had not experienced since childhood.

The young boy beside them spoke up. "This man here claims to be on official business for the king, and the lady is definitely a Guardian. They wanted to talk to you, Nalon."

Nalon nodded and dismissed the guard back to his post motioning for Melisha and Patyn to join him at a table providing them a pitcher of wine. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

Having seen how badly Patyn had handled the last encounter, Melisha spoke first this time. "We are looking for a solo Wereling that could have entered your lands recently. Have you had any suspicious activity lately?"

Nalon gave a grim look. "Two weeks ago our livestock were slaughtered by a pack of wild animals. All attempts to defend against them left three of my guards dead and ten wounded." He poured them all a drink and took a long gulp from his. "I'd say we have what you're looking for."

Patyn looked at her, his eyes filled with the exhilaration of coming closer to completing his mission. "We'll want to search the place where these attacks occurred."

"Very well. In the morning I'll send someone to show you, but tonight I want you to stay here free of charge and we will have a banquet in your honor."

Melisha gave a puzzled look at the village elder. "Why?"

Nalon patted Patyn on the back. "You two are going to get rid of what has endangered this village, even if that was not your initial purpose. I would say that calls for celebration."

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Chapter Four

A Heroes Passion

The common room came alive that night at the Defender's Rest. Tables had been pushed together and were now full of platters of beef, pork, and chicken as well as an array of breads, cheese, and vegetables. The aroma of the food wisped through every corner of the village, and the inhabitants of Falin's Forge responded by filling the inn to its capacity.

Melisha had bathed and then dressed in a deep red gown one of Nolan's daughters had loaned her. It fit a little more snug than she had liked but the occasional glances she was receiving from Patyn made it more than worth it. He had cleaned up as well and changed into a white shirt and black breeches. His boots had been polished and his face shaved. He still had the rugged look that always made her toes tingle as she gazed at him but his features caused her to smile as if she was watching a childhood crush.

The villagers' music rang through the inn and pitchers of ale were plentiful. Melisha had consumed just enough to not cloud her senses but still enjoyed watching the merriment of the people around her. How long had it been since she had been around such happiness? More importantly, how long had it been since she had been this happy?

Her thoughts were disturbed as Patyn looked at her again, the electricity she had missed for the past several days hit her stronger than ever. The warmth that started inside her

the night they reunited was growing into a fire and she was helpless against it.

Snap out of this, stupid, he doesn't feel the same way anymore.

Her thoughts gave her little comfort as he continued to peer past her eyes and into her soul, as if reading how much she really still loved him. Finally, she broke off their gaze and enjoyed the rest of the party as best she could, while continuing to battle the volcano inside her.

Finally, at the end of the night, Nolan rose and began to speak. "Citizens of Falin's Peace, we have been honored to have heroes among us tonight." The crowd roared with applause and cheers cutting him off. He lifted a hand to silence them. "Now those heroes will embark on a journey to defend us from this threat. I find it fitting we give such champions a token of our appreciation."

Nolan reached into his robes and pulled out a small bronze dagger with a yellow stone in its hilt. The sheath held strange runes Melisha did not recognize.

The crowd was now deathly silent as the elder walked over to her and placed the dagger in her hand. "This is Falin's dagger, the hero of the town and for which it was named. Falin was a great hero who was able to transport himself over vast distances in a blink of an eye. This dagger was said to be the source of that power. I hope it serves you well."

Melisha nodded back to him. "Thank you for your kind gift, I am sure it will help protect us from the dangers of our journey." She then tucked it into her belt to examine later. She could instantly tell when touching it the dagger held

magic but she was unsure of its capabilities and would remain so until she could study it.

The party began to wane after that, the villagers realizing morning would come early and work would not wait. She waited until almost no one remained before excusing herself to her room, a small twelve by twelve chamber with a modest bed and washstand. She began to remove her dress, and was assaulted with memories of Patyn watching her from across the room, those beautiful blue orbs staring at her with a reckless abandonment. The idea of what that look meant sent warmth inside her she had not experienced in a long time. It was a need, a yearning for him she could never shake. The battle inside her raged now, like it had on so many occasions before.

A light rap on the door caught her attention. She stepped to the door and cracked it open. The creak of its hinges hid the small squeak that escaped her as she came face to face with Patyn.

"Do you have a moment to talk?" His voice was full of the strength a warrior. "I think it is time we do."

Unable to speak, she opened the door for him reminded by his stare she was clothed in her shift. His hungry gaze caused her body to stiffen in intimate areas immediately. He radiated of a raw power that told her he could take her in his arms and do things to her that would send her into planes of ecstasy never explored before.

The warmth in her belly had now grown into a fire.

"I think it's time to tell you the truth." Patyn walked over to the bed, his body straightened as he prepared for what he was about to say.

"Look Patyn, I know you've been through so much. You don't have to do this." Melisha tried to reassure him. The massacre of Hillsbriar, the home of his family, had destroyed him. It had ruined everything they had shared because of the madness and grief it had brought him.

"No, it is time, Melisha," he said walking to the corner of the room as if to protect himself from an unseen danger. "After the incident, I didn't know if I would survive. Not because of fear of death, but because of failure." His voice wavered slightly.

Melisha wanted to walk over and reassure him, to hold him in her arms but knew better. He was fighting inside and needed to do it alone.

"I was afraid that because I could not protect my family, I couldn't protect you." He stared at the floor as he continued. "But I couldn't go on without letting you know that not a day has gone by in these two years I haven't thought about you. First when I wake up in the morning and last before I go to bed. You are my dream, and though a most likely unattainable one, you always will be."

He looked up then and their gazes locked in an embrace. She wanted to say something as powerful and as beautiful as he had but no words would come. He loved her. He had always loved her and did not blame her for anything. He had been in a battle with himself over his duty but never over his love for her.

He loves me.

She moved toward him as he took his first step toward her. Her heart pounded with the excitement of being so close to him, so ready to touch those soft lips she remembered with her own. He took her up in stride and pressed his mouth to hers, a strong kiss that ached with a need that only being apart for so many years could stir.

She wrapped her legs around his powerful frame as she parted her mouth and instantly found his tongue locked with hers. His hand moved to her bottom for support, his fingers gripping her tightly, sending jolts of pleasurable pain throughout her body. Her legs pulled him closer, feeling his manhood harden.

The burning she felt on her skin would not fade, nor did she want it to. Instead she wanted to stoke it further with his kiss and touch, hoping his strong hands would never leave her body. His kiss deepened as he backed her against the door. His mouth left hers and moved to her neck, nibbles becoming bites of passion. He let go of years of frustration and she loved every minute of it.

One hand moved from her backside, up her shift to her bare breast. His fingers rubbed softly, enticing a pent up moan from her lips.

"I want you now." His gruff voice was harsh with animalistic hunger, making her quiver with excitement.

"Take me. I'm yours." She barely finished the statement before he moved her to the bed and forcefully removed her shift.

The power of the man would cause many women to grow fearful, but not a warrior like Melisha. Instead she welcomed his aggression. After all, it needed to overcome her own, and the way she began tearing at his clothes told her that would be a feat in itself.

They paused for a moment, both their bodies naked in the lamplight. The hunger in his eyes had subsided, like an eye of a storm that would soon rage again.

"I've been waiting for this moment since I saw you in that clearing. By the Ancients, you're beautiful."

She looked into his eyes, her hand moved out to rub his bare chest, lightly touching that chiseled, smooth skin. "I've missed you too."

He moved into her again, his mouth locked with hers teasing, caressing, until her heart slammed against her chest. His mouth moved to her bare breast, his nibbles and suction made her moan louder and louder with the rhythm of his mouth. Her legs parted as a strong hand moved between them and started to massage her. The heat from his actions raged across her body to the point where her skin broke into a light sweat. She could taste the salt on her mouth as she licked her lips, feeling the way his hand explored her. He slid a finger in her entrance and she moaned louder, encouraging him to never stop.

Then it hit, like a flash of lightning in the storm that had been brewing between them for days. She clinched as ecstasy's tingle enveloped her to the point she had to bite the side of her mouth not to scream. She pulled him into her, the penetration enhancing the tingling aftermath of her orgasm.

The pulse that continued to run through her quickened with each thrust. His lips moved to her neck, his hot breath on already heated skin fueled the ebbing inferno of desire.

The partnership seemed to go on for hours, his rhythm unwavering, his endurance strong. Patyn's breathing heightened as she continued to pull him deeper and deeper into her.

"Let go, baby, it's ok, let go," Melisha whispered in his ear, feeling him getting closer and closer to climax. His answer came moments later, an explosion of euphoria that almost caused her to black out from the pleasure.

She closed her eyes and smiled feeling him move over to her side and wrap his arms around her. They pressed closer together, almost as one, letting the night take them on a new journey of peace.

"Thank you for tonight," she said, feeling the wash of fatigue beckon her to sleep.

"Well, thank you for the last five years. Without meeting you, who knows where I would be," he said in a light whisper holding her even tighter.

As she dosed off in his arms, Melisha could only make a silent prayer to the Ancients if they made through tomorrow alive, they could start over. Maybe, she could have the life back she thought had been lost so long ago.

Patyn was the first to open his eyes the next morning. He couldn't help but smile as he looked at Melisha's soft, bare skin snuggled up against him. He had wanted her his entire life. Now that once again she was in his arms he could not get the past out of his mind. Not her relationship with Cade,

which was over he was certain, but more importantly, he was still ashamed over what had happened to cause him to leave.

Hillsbriar had been the village he had grown up in. The place he had one day wanted to retire to and live the rest of his days in peace with Melisha at his side. A village should have meant nothing to the Werelings. Yet on that day something had changed, because they had poured into the village overwhelming its citizens almost instantly. They had left no man, woman, or child alive. All of Patyn's family had died that day.

Why had he been so quick to leave everything behind, especially the one woman he loved more than anything? The answer was clear now as he lay there watching her sleep. He had been punishing himself. After allowing such pain to come to his village he felt he had didn't deserve to be happy.

All that had changed last night.

Now, he knew if they made it through this mission he would have to be close to her for the rest of his days. Cade would most likely not allow him back into the Guardians, and if that was the case, so be it. He would retire close to Wardrick, farm if need be as long as he was able to stay close to her.

As she stirred, he knew his moment was over. She would wake soon and they would prepare for the battle that was coming. A confrontation that could cost both of them their lives.

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Chapter Five

When The Last One Falls

They set out as soon as they had eaten and saddled their horses. Melisha couldn't help but smile after last night's events. The thoughts of feeling the power of the man riding beside her caused desire to build in her all over again. She was certain if not for her mission at hand she would have not allowed him to leave that inn room for a week. Not after the intense rush she had felt in his arms.

However, she was on an important journey and such luxuries would have to wait. The kingdom was in danger and she would not allow her urges to get in the way. She was a Guardian first, a woman second.

They made their way across the rolling plains southwest, searching for any strange tracks or dead animals. By noon they had found nothing, but were closing in on the place where the livestock had been slain. The herders had cleaned up the area. Seven large mounds stood next to each other, fresh graves for the mutilated beasts of burden.

Patyn dismounted, a look of disgust on his face. "With all the work done here it's going to be hard to find a trail at all."

Melisha scanned the area. He was right, somehow they were going to have to find this assassin, and waiting around for the next livestock massacre was not going to cut it. There would be too much time wasted and no one knew when the attack on the prince would actually occur.

A familiar purple glow enveloped Patyn as he knelt down to look at the different tracks on the soft earth. His magic was weak, she observed, but he had probably not used it much in the past two years so that was to be expected. The Guardian magic was a gift from the Ancients and if not used, it slowly faded. He had once been one the most powerful wielders and he could be again with practice.

After a few moments, he stopped his channel, and sweat beaded on his forehead from the exhaustion of wielding magic. "There's nothing here, this looks like a wasted trip."

Sighing, Melisha turned toward the south, a small grove of trees rested on a plain of rolling hills. The grove was the closest cover for miles. *If I wanted to ambush someone that would be an ideal place.* It would provide an attacker with the cover needed to hide numbers and because of the open field gave no cover. It seemed smart. Too smart for a normal animal. Something or someone was leading them in attacks.

Her ideas were confirmed as the movement of a dozen speeding objects caught her eye. They were spread out in a wide formation and heading toward her at a rapid gait.

"We have company, Patyn." She dismounted and slapped Meena away, not wanting to get her mount injured in the battle coming. The horse bucked off only because she followed orders. Meena had been in many battles before and was not happy to leave her mistress. Like Melisha however, the horse was from Wardrick and knew to do her duty.

The creatures came into focus a few moments later—a strong wolf pack, animals whose rhythmic charge would bring sharp fangs and strategic attacks.

Melisha heard the sound of Patyn's sword slide from its sheath.

"And so it begins." He calmly walked past her preparing to meet the creatures head on.

The purple glow of magic surrounded her as she stepped up beside him, her own weapon finding its way to her hand. The wolves came hard, closing the distance in seconds. They did not appear rabid, but instead held an unnatural intelligence that told her these were the creatures they were looking for.

They were twenty feet away now, and she knew they would attack in unison, attempting to bring their enemies down with sheer numbers. They would most likely succeed. Channeling her defensive magic, she created an invisible barrier on both of her and Patyn's flanks allowing only one way to attack them, straight ahead.

"Focus on the front!" she yelled, bracing herself for the impact coming.

They came in a rush, their growls showing fang and saliva, just as she had thought they would. The four on each flank slammed head first into the barrier, they'd never seen it coming. The sounds of yelps and the crack of bone told her they were slowed down for the moment, but she had no time to know for certain as two of the wolves attacking from the front leapt at her, their maws open and ready to rip out her throat.

She took a step back and swung her sword at the first one feeling the sickening thud as it cleaved into the creature's mid section, ending its fight instantly. The second attacker struck

her in the left shoulder, and flashes of pain crashed into her as its teeth dug in deep. She fell with the creature slamming what weight she did have on top of it, saving herself from more injury. The creature was stunned for the time. She quickly stabbed it in the heart.

She stood and spun, watching as Patyn gracefully finished off the last of his two assailants, his blade slicing through its throat followed by a stab to end its misery. The barrier she had created dropped and the rest of the pack was quickly finished off. When the battle ended, twelve wolves lay lifeless on the ground. Patyn had fared better than she, his scratches not nearly as deep as her shoulder wound.

Patyn was immediately at her side, his strong hands moving along her shoulder checking her wound. "Well the good news is you will live. I wouldn't arm wrestle with that arm anytime soon, though." He smiled at her, a warm loving smile, causing a fluttering inside her, even with the deep throb of her shoulder.

As Melisha stood and walked back to Meena, the horse nuzzled her to make sure she was ok. "I'm fine girl. It will take more than a mere bite to get rid of me." She reached into a saddlebag and produced some linen strips to dress her wound.

Patyn stood a few yards in front of her, his sword still out, gazing into the grove bellow. His stern face scanned for any more attackers. "Most likely the assassin sent everything he had at us in hopes of killing us out right, or to at least weaken us." He looked at her shoulder. "I would have to say he accomplished his mission on that one."

She put the rest of the bandages up, her shoulder hurting but manageable. She walked over slowly and picked up her sword from where she had dropped it after the battle. She grew cold, as if nothing in the world could affect her. This was her battle mode, a place where her senses were on edge and her reflexes keen. It was strange to her that this time she wasn't completely battle ready. The hardness that usually came was a little softer when she thought of the handsome man beside her. That fact scared her a little. Would she be thinking about him, when she needed to accomplish her task? More importantly, if one of them had to die in order to bring safety to the kingdom, could the other one allow it?

The thought sent a shiver down her spine as she peered out into the hills. The moment they had been preparing for was almost at hand. Adrenaline mixed with concern pumped through her veins. "We should probably leave the horses here," she said. "We can go in much quieter on foot."

Patyn only nodded. Obviously, he was preparing himself for what was coming as well. His blue eyes were steel, his jaw set. The sword in his hand was an extension of his arm as they walked toward the grove. His long strides held a grace only heard of in the legend books. Patyn Brighthand truly might have been the greatest warrior in the land. His legend as a Guardian was still told, much to the jealousy of Cade.

They entered the small grove, weapons drawn. The trees around them were tall and forbidding with a silence that held a thick gloom. In the center of the grove, a small natural cavern had formed leading underground. It was a small opening, barely large enough for a man to get through.

Around the opening littered piles of carcasses. Most of the half-eaten animals looked to be weeks old, the others more recent. They looked at each other with silent agreement of what they had concluded. Who they were looking for was in that cavern.

A purple glow surrounded Melisha as she used magic to light their way into the cavern. Patyn went in first crouching low into a defensive stance, preparing for what he might find inside. She followed him in suit, her senses already screaming of the danger ahead.

The cave was only a single chamber shelter, probably created by centuries of rain flow to a low indentation in the grove. The quarters were tight, only twenty feet in diameter. Dried blood stained the floor and some of the walls, most likely from the carcasses outside.

Movement from the back corner of the chamber almost caught them both by surprise.

"And so they finally come to face me."

A large wolf emerged from the shadows. His dark gray coat made him almost impossible to see even with the light from her magic. His eyes glowed green, proving he was not natural. He was a Wereling.

"You should have stayed in your homeland, dog breath." Patyn took a step forward, the anger in his voice rising with each syllable.

Melisha could tell this was not only about saving the kingdom. This was a personal encounter with a race of creature that had taken everything from him years ago.

"I am Vorgon, Assassin of Scrag Fang." The wolf's eyes began to glow brighter, a sign he was channeling some of his magic. "We are all warriors on a mission. Let's not insult ourselves with threats."

Without another word, a green bolt of magic shot from the Werelings eyes toward Patyn. A small shield of protection shot up in defense, but the faded purple glow told Melisha it would be too weak for such an attack. The bolt slammed into his chest, slamming the once-Guardian into the wall.

Melisha wasted no time. She charged the creature, sword in hand, her own magic prepared to defend her if need be. Vorgon turned to face her, his paw darted at her faster than she had anticipated pounding into her armor with a force that almost knocked her off her feet. She staggered as the large wolf opened its maw to snap down on her neck, she knew she would not raise her sword in time. This would be the end for her.

From the corner of her eye she saw Patyn, leaping into the scene, sword in hand and onto the back of Vorgon. A large scorch mark marred his chest. He winced in pain as the Wereling forgot about her and tried to shake Patyn off his back. Grabbing a hand full of the creature's mane steadied him, gave Patyn enough balance to plunge his sword straight into the back of the assassin, knocking both of them to the ground immediately.

Melisha regained her senses and went to Patyn. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah." He smiled as he stood, it was a smile that could warm the North Mountains. "Is he dead?"

Vorgon opened his eyes weakly, blood from his fatal wound flowed like a river out of him. "Well fought warriors. Well fought. Too bad your heroism doesn't matter. My mission is accomplished."

Both of them stood over the Wereling wearing puzzled expressions.

"Your mission failed. The prince still lives and you don't for much longer," Melisha said glaring at the creature. Her words took new meaning as she realized her mission was complete.

Vorgon tried to laugh but instead he winced in pain. "My mission was never to kill the prince." The creature smiled, showing its deadly fangs. "My quest was to get you away from Wardrick so Wrathmoore could."

The Wereling took one deep rasping breath and closed his eyes, never to open them again.

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Chapter Six

Falin's Dagger

It took Melisha a few minutes to let it all actually sink in. The Wereling had just accused Cade Wrathmore, Warder of the Tower, and leader of the Guardians of Mordavia, of being a traitor. If that was true, the prince could already be dead.

She didn't want to believe it was true. Cade was a pompous ass, but to be involved in a plan to destroy Mordavia? Then she realized her error. Cade was not Patyn, duty did not always come first. True, he was the leader, but it had been Melisha over the past two years that had held the Tower together. Yes, Cade had given her missions and acted concerned but now that she really thought about it, he had not acted as he should. She couldn't explain it but she somehow knew what the assassin had said was true.

Patyn kicked a rock in the cavern. "Dammit! This is my entire fault." His face held mortal horror, knowing they had been fooled.

"No, Patyn, you were just doing your duty. How could we have known?" She wanted to hold him, to ease his pain. He had made a promise to the King, and he would die trying to keep that promise.

"It is my fault, dammit!" he repeated. "Don't you see, if I had done my duty in the first place and stayed with the Guardians, Cade would never have become Warder. Because of my failure this has happened and I can't stop it!" Patyn

shook with a fury she had never seen. He was ready to take on an entire army.

"It may not be too late" she said, her voice weak and unsure.

"It is at least a day and half back to the tower. Therefore, unless you have the ability to be in two places at once, we are stuck. Cade wins and the boy dies." His anger took over again as he kicked the corpse of the wolf with all his might. "Damn you, Wereling."

Melisha was no longer paying attention. Instead, she focused on his last words. She couldn't be in two places at once. She pulled the dagger out of her belt the villagers gave them. Falin's Dagger. He was known to have the ability to travel at unbelievable speeds. Could the dagger be the key to this? She channeled her magic, probing the dagger to discover its use. She found it quickly, a powerful magic that told her it would help her. All was not yet lost.

She looked over at Patyn, if she told him about what she had just uncovered he would want to be the one to use the dagger, but he would die. Cade was powerful and it would take someone with a strong use of the Ancient's magic to have a chance against him. It would take her.

She walked over to Patyn and wrapped her arms around him, wincing as her shoulder stretched in its bandage. He met her embrace with his own. As she pressed her lips to his she felt warmth inside her, not the fiery heat of passion she had felt before, but something different, something everlasting. Destiny was telling her if she survived the rest of this day

everything would be all right between them. They would be together forever.

Patyn must have felt it to, because as he backed his face away from her and stared into her eyes there was nothing but pure love in them. "I love you, Melisha Nightsbane, and I am sorry I failed you."

She kissed him harder, silencing anything else he was going to say. He loved her and that was all that mattered. She then pushed him back from her hard. Her eyes locked with his now puzzled look. "I love you too Patyn, and I always will. I am going to save your honor and our kingdom. When this ends we are going to be together, I swear it,"

Then she embraced her magic again, channeled it into the dagger, and was gone.

It took Patyn a moment to realize what he had just witnessed. *She used the dagger.* Heart trying to pump out of his chest, he surged out of the cavern and headed for the horses. He knew there was no possible way to get to Wardrick in time. Melisha would face Cade alone and there was nothing he could do about it. He whistled loudly, both Meena and the other horse came to his command. Without thinking further, he mounted his horse and grabbed Meena's reigns, the horse looked confused as she looked around for her rider.

"I know girl, I am mad at her too. All we can do is ride as hard as we can now." He broke into a gallop. He would switch off horses midway, allowing him to push harder by letting them share the burden. With a little luck, he would be at Wardrick the next day.

Guardian of Destiny
by Lynn Lowery

The wind hit his face, its cool breeze alerting him to a coming storm. He just hoped by the end of it Melisha would be beside him to watch the rainbow that would follow the rain.

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Chapter Seven

Legacy of a Prince

The trip for Melisha was instantaneous. One minute she was looking into the eyes of Patyn, yearning for one more kiss before she left him, and the next she found herself in the main hall of Wardrick. The room was quiet, which was very unusual for midday. Outside the window she could see the dark clouds rolling toward her, rain was coming soon. Feeling urgency in her heart, she broke out in a jog for the stairs. Where were the other Guardians? Why were they not on duty?

She was so deep in thought she almost ran over one of the laundry women coming down the stairs. The woman's eyes were full of weariness and fright.

"Where is everyone?" Melisha asked.

"You must have just returned, Miss. The Warder discovered a traitor in our midst today and ordered all Guardians into their rooms." The woman's voice cracked with uncertainty as she continued. "Master Wrathmoore is in the Prince's room now to protect him."

A sickness formed into Melisha's stomach. She ran past the woman and up the stairs. "Get out of here!" she yelled back. "Get any others out that you find as well! Go!"

She never looked back to see if the woman took her advice. Her mind exploded with the fear of what she would find when she reached the circular room at the end of the hall on the second floor—the room where Prince Daven was

supposed to be safe. She wanted to spit in disgust at the thought she had been the one to agree he would be most safe in the tower, playing right into Cade's hand.

That bastard has been playing you from Day One. Anger tried to take her over but she held it at bay. Giving into the rage would cloud her judgment and could be the end of her. She had to be battle ready, remain calm and take on each adversary with the same calculation. There was no time for emotion now. Besides, Cade would use any feelings she showed against her. He was an excellent manipulator.

A moment later, she was running down the hall, close to her destination.

Fifty feet.

She made the decision to go for surprise and wouldn't slow to open the door.

Thirty feet.

She channeled her magic, feeling comfort in the purple glow now surrounding her. She pumped the magic into her veins taking in the strength it gave her. The burning in her shoulder numbed.

Ten feet.

Her mind flashed to the look on Patyn's face when she used the dagger. She made a silent promise to make sure she survived this day. They would be together again if she had anything to do with it.

Door.

Melisha jump kicked the wooden barrier, her natural strength and magical enhancement working together in unison. The door flew off its hinges splintering on impact

against the far wall. She didn't even pause as she turned to face where the baby should be.

Her plan of attack had worked. Cade, a long dagger in hand, looked up at her startled. The polished oak crib beside him held the scared baby prince who quickly began to wail. She couldn't help but smile at the sound. *He was still alive.*

She took a step forward, her sword gripped in her hand. "It's over, Cade. I know the truth as so does Patyn."

Cade's grin held an evil she had never seen in him before. "Damn those Werelings." He walked away from the crib toward her, his free hand pulling his own sword, the other still holding the dagger. "The problem with those beasts is they think they are the Ancients themselves, but in truth they're just idiots. No better than Elves."

Melisha started to circle Cade, knowing if she could get between him and the child she might have a better chance of the boy's protection. "Why do this, Cade? You were the Warder. You had everything."

Cade's laugh was full of mock and hatred. "Everything? I want the crown. I am the one who should wear it anyway. Kail has no magic, just a bloodline." He kicked a wooden stand over in rage. "I am the one who spent his life learning the ways of the Ancients. I hold their magic in my veins!" He circled with her, allowing her to create the barrier she desired.

"You have the magic of the Ancients because you are a Guardian, not because you are special." She knew she had only a few moments more. He would come at her hard and fast. The power he wielded would most likely overcome her.

"You are a fool, Cade. You had everything handed to you after Patyn left, why abuse it?"

"You really are just a stupid little girl, Melisha. Who do you think organized the destruction of Patyn's village and his life?" Cade stepped closer toward her. "It was easy. The Werelings were more than pleased to assist me. Patyn was a weak fool who cared too much to be truly powerful. Moreover, you are just his little slut. Though I must admit you did feel good in my bed."

Anger boiled inside her, a fury from hell that demanded to be released. *That's what he wants. He is just baiting you.* She took a step back toward the child. "You will pay for what you have done to this kingdom and to Patyn."

"I am afraid not my dear. Even as we speak, an army of Werelings is preparing to invade the Elves, after that it is only natural, they will turn on Lightforge. With the death of the prince, the king will show his true weakness and the people will look to a new leader. Who better to be the new king than the man known as the Baron, a wielder of Ancient magic, and the leader of the most powerful army in the land, the Guardians?"

It all made sense to her now. Cade Wrathmoore was the Baron and had been working for at least the past two years to overthrow the king. What a surprise it must have been when the King found love and proved the prophecy of the Queen of Trees was true. Now, he was close and if she didn't find a way to stop him, he would win.

But you are no match for him.

He took another step closer. Time was running out. This was the moment she had to make her decision. Her magic still flowed through her from the door escapade, the glow around her as strong as ever. Cade was not using his magic yet. This could give her the half of a second she needed to try to make a break for it with the baby. This was the moment in her destiny she knew would change everything.

Letting instinct take over she summoned all the magic she could hold inside her, formed it into a shield around her, and sprinted for the child. She knew Cade would react fast but she also knew this was her only chance. She reached the crib and grabbed the prince before she felt the attack slam into her. It was the strongest magic she had ever felt. It wrapped around her like a constricting snake and attempted to crush her. The baby in her hands wailed further, whether from fear or pain she could not tell.

Cade's laugh echoed once again through the chamber. "Seriously, you thought that would work? I had hoped you were braver than to turn tail and run."

She struggled to break free of his hold, the only thing keeping her from instant death was her own magic. The child continued to wail and tears began to form in her eyes. She had wanted to protect him not endanger him.

"I am sorry you have to die, Melisha. You truly would have made a great toy for me to enjoy for years to come."

She could feel the force crushing harder against her. There would be no way to defeat him. She was just not strong enough. A tear ran down her cheek then dropped from her

chin to baby Daven's forehead. "I'm sorry I failed you, my Prince."

The baby looked up at her and stopped crying immediately. A grin broke out on his face. She felt a tingle in her fingers, a strange sensation she had never felt before. It held strength, and assurance, and a raw power that would have scared her had she not been looking into the baby's beautiful, sky blue eyes. The feeling flowed into her arms as a white glow began to emit softly from the baby.

What the...

There was no time to think anything else as a surge of power shoved itself into her body, ripping through her own magic at an almost painful speed.

Cade's magic didn't stand a chance either. She felt the hold on her fail instantly and heard the crash of him being thrown through the air and slamming into the back wall.

Melisha kissed the baby softly on the head and placed him back in the crib. "Perhaps it is you who were to save me on this day, Your Majesty." She then turned to face Cade as he staggered onto his feet.

"How did you...? What did you...?" He couldn't seem to find the words. He looked at her, his eyes mad with anger, a weak purple glow surrounded him again but only for a moment before snuffing out of existence. "What did you do to me?"

"Nothing, Cade, destiny took care of it for me." She smiled then, and circled him. She had summoned too much of her magic in the fight before to risk it now. This would have to be a fight of skill. The grip on her sword tightened, each step she

made was surer than the last. She had a chance to win this battle.

Her opponent said nothing; instead, he readied himself, sword in one hand, dagger in the other. Their eyes locked, daring each other to make the first attack. Cade moved first, sprinting in low. Melisha stepped back and parried each blow, waiting for an opening to strike back. He forced her through the door and down the hall. Guardians opened doors as she passed, watching their leaders battle to the death, not certain whose side to take as she continued to defend herself and give ground.

Cade was an excellent warrior but he was too aggressive thinking he could overpower her with his strength. If she could just keep her defense up until he gave her an opening she could defeat him. He lunged at her again, each time she could tell he was exerting too much energy. He was playing right into her trap.

The rest of the Tower now followed them, murmurs between the Guardians starting to grow with every continued thrust by Cade. Their eyes narrowed as they put clues together of what was happening. She knew by now they would come to her aid if she asked, but she was their leader and if she could not defend the Tower then she did not deserve the respect she had earned the past several years.

Cold rain fell as she backed out of the entrance to the Tower and onto the training yard. Cade was weakening now; his breath had become heavy even though the fire in his eyes had grown to an insane degree. That look of bloodlust warned her if he didn't kill her he would die trying.

Just a few more minutes, you have him.

Her muscles ached from the strain of his massive blows. Pain had consumed her left shoulder from the wolf bite. No doubt, from the relentless jarring that had come with this battle.

Her opponent swung hard again, but this time his guard was a little wide from fatigue. She wasted no time. Letting the warrior take over inside her she parried his blow out wider and spun hitting his blade a second time with all her might. This time he staggered. Her next spin slammed her sword straight into his ribs, the sound of flesh tearing rang through the entire yard. A look of shock covered Cade's face, his eyes lost their hatred. He slid to the ground.

Melisha stood over him and spoke to the Guardians surrounding her. "Cade Wrathmore is a traitor to the kingdom. Arrest him and see to his wounds. The king will judge him as is written in our laws."

She looked down at the man that was once her lover. He had dropped his sword and held his side to slow the blood flowing freely from him.

"So...you will let me live?" he said weakly.

She smiled down at him. "I am a Guardian, Cade. It is not my job to be an executioner."

He nodded and staggered to stand. Over one hundred Guardians drew their swords in unison around him. It seemed they had weighed what she had said and had chosen their side.

Cade laughed bitterly. "Well I guess you have saved the day then haven't you?"

"At least for now." She turned away from him and began walking toward the doors of the Tower. "At least for now."

The sound of gasps from the crowd followed by a sickening thud caused her to spin defensively, her sword ready. It turned out there was no need. Cade had dropped his sword but not the dagger he had held before. He had lodged it in his heart. A tormented grin crossed his face as he fell to the ground lifeless.

Pity gripped her chest as she stared down at Cade. The same power that had given him the ability to be a hero in this world had destroyed him. Silently she wished for the Ancients to still welcome his soul into their midst.

"Have the body disposed of and take the prince to my chambers,," she ordered wearily as she climbed the steps of the Tower.

The burn from her wound and the fatigue from the battle were beginning to take its toll. She would not be conscious much longer. She made it to her chambers, fighting sleep long enough to see the physician walk in and the baby's crib placed beside her. Her last memory was a gentle giggle from the crib followed by a heavy sigh from her own mouth before blackness overtook her.

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Chapter Eight

Guardian of Destiny

The storm had passed by the time Melisha began to stir. Her shoulder had been dressed appropriately but still throbbed forcing her to stay immobile and keep her eyes tightly shut for as long as possible. She tried to think of other things, but mostly of Patyn's deep blue eyes and massive build, laying beside her and stroking her hair as he used to. She couldn't help but think of the way he felt on top of her in the inn. The soft words he had spoken to her and the way he had said he loved her before she forced herself to leave him.

She could almost feel him in the room with her. His heart beating for hers, as she now knew it always had. She wanted nothing more than to marry him and spend the rest of her life with him. Yes, being a Guardian would be tough on their relationship but they both understood its importance and both wanted to protect Mordavia with their life. And what better weapon than the love they held for each other.

"Are you every going to wake up, darling?"

She opened her eyes slowly, the voice so familiar it sent immediate heat into her belly at its sound. Patyn stood in the doorway, leaning against it in a pose out of one of her fantasies. He was in clean clothes and shaven and his smile showed rest of his own.

"How long have you been back?" she asked, trying to set up. Her shoulder hurt but she remained silent—it was a warrior thing, never show weakness.

"Last night. I rode pretty hard, Meena is exhausted."

"Look, Patyn, I am sorry I left like that but I didn't know what else to do. I didn't want you hurt. "I—" In the midst of her rambling Patyn rushed to her and kissed her deeply, his mouth warm and sweet. Her body reacted instantly. He finally released her mouth allowing them both to take in air.

"Look, I know why you did it and most importantly it worked. The king is coming to appoint you to Warder. He sent a letter already claiming you as the Guardian of Destiny." He smiled at her. The warmth in his eyes told her how proud he was and how much he loved her. "The Prince is safe, Cade is defeated, and the assassin is dead. I would say it's a job well done."

"Almost. The Werelings will be mounting an attack on the Elves if we don't do something."

"I already had a battalion readied to send to Tunasia Valley at your command. I have a feeling they will change their mind when they realize Wardrick stands united with the Elves against them."

Melisha gave him a mischievous grin. "You know, as Warder I am going to need a second in command with some experience. Do you know of anyone who might want the job?"

He put his hand on hers, his eyes gleaming with interest. "I might know someone, but he would want something in return."

"Like what?" she asked cocking her head to the side.

"A wife perhaps?"

A few days ago, the idea of Patyn Brighthand beside her in her bedchamber asking her to marry him would have been

crazy, now it felt like fate. "That sounds like a perfect arrangement."

His smile widened, his hand moved up to caress her cheek. "I love you Melisha."

"I love you, too." She moved in closer, their lips only inches apart. "How long before the king arrives"

"Another day at least. Why?"

"Well that gives us time to get started on making a family doesn't it?"

She moved in to kiss him, her body heating up once again as he laid her back down and began to remove her nightgown, careful not to hurt her shoulder. The man she loved had come home finally and Melisha loved her life once again.

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Excerpt for Sister of Stone

A Legacy Reborn

The time had come.

The mountains of Ubelterra jutted around Zorbrak, surrounding him like a shield from the cold north winds as he traveled toward his meeting place. He was small for an ogre, standing only seven feet tall,, and was thin from his hours of study in his chambers instead of participating in the physical exercises of other ogrelings. He wore deep red robes that boasted his status as a mystic, a position that held power and leadership in all of the clans. He was even more special, however. He had studied some of the Ancient texts and even uncovered some of the magics that did his bidding.

The ring on his finger was one such artifact. It allowed the wielder to lift things by will alone. He chuckled slightly to himself at the thought of the look on the faces of his kinsmen when he had first used the power. They had immediately placed him at the head of the Mystics. If the fools only realized there was more power around them than they could ever imagine. However, that was ok. It would soon be time for everything to reveal itself. If his plan went as expected, he would change Mordavia forever.

He walked on, his boots moving over the snow easily due to his size. Most thought his race was stupid and brash, many had no knowledge of the pride and honor involved in their daily life. One day they would though, he kept reminding

himself. One day everyone would realize the truth behind the ogres, including the barbaric dwarves.

The very thought of the mountain creatures who had invaded his lands centuries ago caused him to shudder slightly with rage. This had been ogre land and should have stayed that way. The dwarves were parasites, plaguing on others' success and claiming it as their own. Yes, they would pay for their actions. Lightforge and Tunasia would pay as well if they interfered. First things first, he had to unify his people. War was coming to Ubelterra, a war that would change everything. It was time.

Movement up ahead caught his attention. A loud crunch mixed with the squeak of heavy metal. He relaxed at the sound. His ally had arrived. Seconds later his eyes fell on one of the largest ogres he had witnessed in his lifetime stepped out from behind a cliffside. He was vast, almost ten feet tall, with heavy plate armor that had seen countless battles. Large spikes protruded from the shoulders held an impaled skull of one of his last victims. A massive double bladed axe rested at his hip. Warlord Grox was not a creature to take lightly.

"Greetings, Mystic Brother." Grox spoke in a deep voice that held power and intimidation.

"Greetings, Warlord," Zorbrak said, making sure to keep the formalities up. There was a rule of honor and if he insulted the honor of Grox in the least bit, he could find his head on that other spike quickly. *You need him. He is the key to everything.* "Everything is as planned. The chosen one is coming. My spies have told me."

"Good." Grox smiled, revealing a mouth full of cracked and broken teeth. "I will make sure to dispatch the mercenaries to intercept them. He will be ours soon."

"And they know to not injure him?"

"Of course. If they do, they know what will happen to them." The warlord turned to the cliff and looked down on Mordavia. "I have agreed to this because of what you promise, Mystic. We do this; I become ruler of all of this."

You're a big dumb fool. "Of course Master Grox, your army will be crucial in the final part of our plan. War is coming. You will be the hero of it." Zorbrak gave his strongest smile.

Grox had the strongest band of ogres in some time. Now was the time to let him think what he will. Either way, the secret would be unlocked and the power would be all his. Let the giant oaf think he would be king. Most likely he wouldn't live through this anyway.

The big ogre took the bait. "Very well. My troops will do their tasks and all of this will work as planned. You have done well, Mystic."

"Thank you, I look forward to our partnership."

"As do I."

Grox turned away and walked a few steps and then stopped. "You truly think all of this is coming to pass? After so many centuries of waiting?"

Zorbrak nodded. "I would stake my life on it."

"Don't worry, Mystic, you have. Because if this ends up being a wild boars chase, it will be the last mistake you ever make." He then disappeared into the mountains.

Zorbrak entered deep thought as the warlord left. His mind swarmed with visions of power and wealth. More importantly, he dreamed of the beginning dominance of his race.

The air turned frigid as a wind from the wet, west lands hit him. The frost clung to his face as he returned to the trail that led him toward home. Soon he would leave to join Grox's band at the Chamber. Soon it would be time for the wheels of his plan to start rolling. By nightfall, Daven Mageking would be in his grasp and the secrets they would uncover together would change the world forever.

The deep forests of World Wood held the colors of deep red and maroon, a sure sign the fall season was in full force. The man known only as Marek slowly walked with the aid of his staff throughout the forest. The large oaks were beautiful this time of year. A reminder of the wonder nature held. He gave a small sigh as he looked at the large wolf that walked beside him. Olben had been a companion for the longest of times. Now they were both getting old. The world was getting old.

He moved deeper into the forest. A decade ago, his Tree Warder would have done this patrol. However, she had a higher purpose now as Mordavia's queen. Marek knew she had a more important destiny even than that.

One day soon he would finally get to rest, an idea that had began to be more comforting over the last few centuries. Now was not that time. *There is too much to do.* A war was still in its brewing stages but it would come. When it did, if he had not helped in preparing for it, all could be lost. He knew above all else, the prophecy must be finished.

Yes, the prophecy, something most Mordavians thought to be the creation of King Kail's mother. He knew the truth, however, because he had been beside her and the others when they had found the writing on the wall. The code the Ancients had left as instructions for the future. So far, everything had happened as planned. If he could help, it would continue to do so.

The trees parted into a small clearing that served as his destination. This had been the spot where it all happened so long ago, the clearing where Lana and Kail met. The place where it all started. It was funny that this was where the meeting would take place.

He still missed her. He had loved Lana like a daughter. Sure, he had known she would leave, it was her destiny to do so. Still, those years with her had been some of the happiest of his long life. He would cherish them forever.

The sounds through the brush ahead of him caught his attention. The meeting would take place right on time it seemed. The mood of the forest changed around him. He could hear them protesting the presence of the creature that would appear in the clearing in moments. He closed his eyes and tried to comfort his forest. *All will be well friends. I promise.*

The forest died down then, trusting their eternal friend, allowing the creature to enter the clearing and face him. In front of him stood a snake as black as night, over twelve feet in length and thicker than Marek's waist. Its glowing green eyes gave away its origin immediately—a Wereling.

Marek smiled. "Hello, Slavrit."

The wereling hissed softly, as if thinking carefully before speaking. "Greetingsss, Marek."

Slavrit was an old Wereling, and extremely powerful. The creature was legendary among his kind, an advisor to the leaders of Scrag Fang, not only because of his knowledge, but because he was more than willing to use the poison of his fangs on anyone who did not share his views. "Why have you s-s-summoned me?"

Marek continued to smile. He did not fear this creature as others did. There was nothing from either of them except mutual respect. "Friend, I ask for your council only to preserve both of our people." He paused. This had to be worded just right. "I know your armies prepare to march on Tunasia even though the Guardians have said they will intervene if you do."

The snake's gaze held no surprise. "What do you mean? We make no plans-s-s to invade at this moment."

The gleam in the snake's eyes told Marek there was more to this than was being said. He hated being ill informed. When practicing diplomacy it could be the cause for failure. He decided to stand his ground.

"I know what you are planning, Wereling. It might not be now, or even in a year, but you will come. I want to prevent this." *There was no way to prevent this. I just need more time. The boy has to grow before having to embrace his destiny. Mordavia needs him to be prepared.*

"Know this-s-s, Hero of the Forest, the reign of humans-s-s and Elves-s-s are in their decline. When the time comes-s-s

we will crush you." Slavrit's eyes locked hard on Marek's. "All of you."

Marek shrugged. "All creatures of this great earth must die. It is the way the Ancients planned it." The way the creature winced at the mention of the race that cursed it brought a slight satisfaction to Marek's chest. "But this I promise you. Attack foolishly and you will find more than Elves and Guardians against you." His voice was cold and amplified. He spoke the way he spoke to the Border Province officials when they needed put in their place.

The Wereling tightened at the words for a moment then relaxed. "Do not s-s-summon me again unless you want one of us-s-s dead. I have heard your words and find them weak."

Marek nodded. "Very well, very well."

The black snake slithered back into the forest, on his way to returning to his homeland, a place of despair, greed, and destruction. Marek feared it was a land Mordavia would become acquainted with soon. The next time he faced Slavrit one of them would perish, or perhaps both of them. He just hoped his threat had sent enough warning to the Wereling to give a little more time.

He turned to head back to the Heart, his home for over five centuries. It seemed of little importance now, his years in World Wood. For all the years he had lived, never had he been so needy of a single decade. Now all he could think about was just that. The destiny of Mordavia's royalty was coming. He just needed more time.

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Guardian of Destiny
by Lynn Lowery

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