

The deep grooves and blotched color of my skin weave a tale of my ancient life. I am old and I have lived. The memories of my past are like diamonds sparkling behind my eyes. I have held the heart of a dragon, hot and fiery, in the palms of my hands; I have stood on the peaks of heaven in the icy cold wind staring down at the fragility of mortality. These tales are stories of who I have become. My favorite story, however, is not an epic tale of my own heroic exploits. No, it is of when I was a small boy. This story is the reason why. It is what inspired me to become an adventurer. It is the reason I have journeyed to the far reaches of the world and experienced the perils and graces of life. I saw through my young naïve eyes, the righteousness of a fearless hero who saved all the land from a most terrible fate.

My part in the story doesn't come until the end. To hear the beginning we must go deep into the eastern kingdoms. Long ago when war tore apart their countryside, a boy was born in the hills in the kingdom of Andarva where the iron mines burrow into the mountains. His name was Enwyl. Enwyl's mother thought him safe from war in the distant hills, going about the toils of an iron miner. Enwyl accompanied his brothers when they took the iron from the hills to the blacksmith's shop in the town twice a week. Carrying loads of iron about made him strong.

Enwyl was twelve, his brother Donwyl fifteen, and the tallest and strongest of the three was Rowl who was eighteen years old and like a father to Enwyl. Their real father died suddenly in a mysterious episode of violent convulsions when Enwyl was five. This was how people were taken from the world Enwyl thought. Rowl took Enwyl by the shoulder and said to him, "This will not be our fate. This is not how we will die. When we die, there will be such fanfare and joy will rain down from the sky." Rowl was only eleven when he said this, and it seemed to cheer Enwyl. From then on Enwyl looked to Rowl to learn how to be a man. This meant never complaining, always walking with his head high, and always looking the person you are talking to in the eye. Years went by and life was good again. The three brothers were inseparable and they looked out for each other.

The blacksmith they sold the iron to was a good man. He would always bring them into his shop and show them the things he was working on. When Enwyl was nine and first started coming to the town the blacksmith worked on all sorts of things: drawer handles, horseshoes, spurs, or the occasional ornate sword for a wealthy customer. These days it was all swords.

"This is what they want from me. Swords," The blacksmith said to the boys one day, "I am making swords in my sleep now."

"What for?" Rowl asked.

"The wars are worsening. These small skirmishes across the countryside are growing." The blacksmith's voice dropped. "The king is preparing for battles. The old weapons won't do, they say. They want freshly forged weapons. Old Brock's shop in Harbarrow is a shield factory, and the Garvel boy has been commissioned for armor. I am making swords."

"Will we have to fight?" Donwyl asked.

The blacksmith's face softened and he let out a breath. Looking at the young men that he had watched grow up. He did not want to scare them but he couldn't lie either, "If matters don't get sorted out shortly, yes, you and Rowl will go to war," He paused, "A company of the king's men will ride this way and they will gather the young men. They will then be brought to the castle for training."

"What if we refuse to go?" Donwyl asked.

"They would kill you," The blacksmith said coldly. "There is honor in such a life. To be called on for war is not a death sentence."

"Would Enwyl have to go to?" Rowl asked.

“No, no, he is too young. Do not take too much concern with the war, boys. You have your duties that you perform well. With your duties is where your concerns should lie,” The blacksmith advised them.

Enwyl meanwhile was eyeing a sword. The blade shined brightly and the handle was wrapped tightly with leather; he could not help but reach out and touch it. His fingers grasped the handle. He picked it up and his other hand moved to assist, supporting the full weight of the weapon.

“Enwyl! Put that down!” Rowl barked from across the room.

“It is quite alright, it has yet to be sharpened,” The blacksmith said.

Enwyl did as he was instructed and placed the sword back down but he still felt the weight of it in his hands and the leather against his skin. They left the blacksmith’s shop with new coins. Some they would spend here in town for supplies that weren’t available in their little village in the hills. Some of the coins would go in a special lock box in their house where they kept their savings.

Rumors of the war continued to grow worse. Finally three years later, the blacksmith’s warning came true. The sun had already set when a loud knocking on the door was heard from inside the boys’ cottage. Rowl pulled the door open. It was the blacksmith. Rowl and the blacksmith were happy to see one another. Rowl had stopped going to town the year before when his responsibilities shifted entirely to mining ore. But Rowl quickly realized that there was a reason to why the blacksmith had come.

Rowl invited the aging craftsmen into their little shack. There was a soft dim glow from the fire and the smell of hot soup that filled the cottage. Their mother ladled a bowl for their guest who graciously accepted. He took a seat at the sturdily built table laying down a long package on the dirt floor.

“The king’s herald rode through town today to deliver a message,” The blacksmith said spooning soup into his mouth, “He brought official news from king’s court. The kingdom of Val Jinwar is on the verge of falling. And with the fading of their power the alliance between Borudon and Pelute is failing. Our king says now is the time to strike; he is mustering the forces of the kingdom, calling on all young men to fight.” He paused looking down at his bowl.

“When will they come?” Rowl asked.

“Tomorrow. They are going to go to all of the villages in the hills and you will have one day to gather your belongings and meet in the town. Then the lot of you will go to the castle.” The blacksmith reached down to the floor and picked up the package he brought with him. He untied the string and pulled the cloth away. There lay three swords, “I made these for you. I have no boys of my own. If there is one thing that gives meaning to life it is making new life and if I cannot do that I can at least do my best to preserve the lives that your mother has made.”

“When I was a young man, just a blacksmith’s apprentice, I was called to war. They will tell you to fight for your king, and your country. When you are out there and the cries of war envelope you, fight for the things you hold most dear. Those are the things that will keep you three strong when death stares you in the face and fear embeds itself in your gut.” The blacksmith said standing up. The young men said their goodbyes, thanking him for the swords, the blacksmith thanking their mother for the soup, and their mother thanking the blacksmith for dispensing his advice to her boys.

The next day the king’s men came for all able-bodied men in their village. Twenty men the village yielded to the crown. They were given one hour to gather their belongings and say goodbye. Less than the blacksmith had rumored. The band of men was led to the town where

they met with men from other villages. Here hundreds of men gathered from the villages in the surrounding area.

By nightfall a thousand men had gathered and the company made for the castle by torchlight. The town's people who were staying behind gathered in the streets to watch their brothers and fathers stride to battle. An anonymous voice in the crowd began singing. At first the voice was alone but then others' voices slowly joined it. The song filled the air as the men solemnly walked out of the town.

Two days they walked. When they arrived at the castle they were brought to a barracks where they would be living for the next four months. Every morning they awoke to a rhythmic beat as a drill sergeant walked through the barracks banging a spear and shield together and shouting out. All day they engaged in regimented military training. Here Enwyl learned how to fight. He trained closely with Donwyl and Rowl each pushing the others to their limits.

At the end of the four months Enwyl felt like he could take on the world. They marched out to support a group of soldiers pinned down at the kingdom's border. With their forces bolstered by fresh blood they drove back the armies of Val Jinwar and within days beat the kingdom into submission.

The night Val Jinwar fell, there was such celebration in Andarva. People thought the war would come to end in days with their worst adversary now a compliant vassal. After nearly a decade of constant fighting there would finally be peace. Days later there was word of forces from Borudon and Pelute marching for Val Jinwar. The people of Andarva surely thought they were coming to surrender.

Andarva's armies waited on the battlefield for Borudon and Pelute to arrive. When the enemy appeared over the crest of the far hill it was clear that scouts had underestimated the size of the approaching force. This wasn't an army coming to surrender. This was an army coming to slaughter.

Enwyl, Donwyl and Rowl stood side by side in the ranks. As their leaders rode to meet in the battle field to discuss terms of engagement Rowl spoke to his younger brothers. "This looks to be the last battle we fight together, live or die."

Enwyl swallowed his doubts and felt the familiar agitation of war in his muscles. The march began. As the two armies clashed cries rang out and the stink of death burnt the nostrils of the living. The brothers found themselves separated from the army with just a small number of Andarvan soldiers around them. They fought with a beast-like ferocity, striking down their assailants. The bodies of Borudonian and Pelusian soldiers piled up. Enwyl swung the sword the blacksmith wrought in his furnace cleaving shields and helmets until he found himself alone with nothing but bodies about him. "Rowl, Donwyl!" he called out. He looked at his feet and to his horror saw his brothers' faces staring up at him. Rowl had a Borudonian sword protruding from his chest and Donwyl's throat was cut. Enwyl fell to his knees, the breath stolen from him. His head hung low and he knelt there until a Pelusian soldier came and took him as a prisoner.

He was stripped of his armour and thrown in a cage on a cart with other prisoners where he was taken to Pelute to become a slave. On the road to Pelute, he contemplated his existence.

The cart shook and bounced down the bumpy road making the stomachs of the men weak. Some men succumbed to motion sickness and the smell of vomit consumed the cage. When Enwyl thought he could take no more and had nearly forgotten his recent loss the cart came to a stop. Three soldiers appeared at the front of the cart to bind the slaves with rope. One man resisted his restraints. He lashed out at the soldier swinging a flurry of fists and knees but ultimately received a sword to the gut for his rash attempt at freedom.

Enwyl was submissive, as were the remaining men. In a single file line with rope connecting one man to the next, the captives were marched into the public square of Mauven, a Pelusian city, where they would be auctioned to the wealthy class. As the men were marched passed the carts belonging to the caravan that brought them here, Enwyl noticed a cart filled with swords. The distinctive pommel of the sword the blacksmith had made for his brother, Rowl, caught Enwyl's eye. His heart jumped in his chest. He decided then and there he would not live out the rest of his life as a slave.

Each slave was individually marched on the stage to be made a show of, like livestock. Enwyl's turn came and much like the men who preceded him an auctioneer sang his praises, "A strong young lad. You will certainly get your money's worth out of this one! Any bidders?" The man shouted and the crowd was placing bids. They finally quieted down and Enwyl was sold. When all of the men had been sold the auctioneer said, "Thank you all for coming and for your generous purchases. Your gold pieces will be instrumental in the funding of a Pelusian victory and in the decimation of the Andarvan kingdom."

Enwyl was taken with two other captives to a large private dwelling where they stood before the master of the household along with two guards. "Welcome to my home," the man said, "You may find my life style here a bit grandiose but so long as you do as you are told you will be treated well—" Enwyl cut him off.

"Treated well? You call stealing us from our homelands and usurping our dignity being treated well?" Enwyl said with a fiery bite to his words.

The master revealed a sleeping demon of his own, "Do not dare speak of the injustices of war to me! You will know your place in this house!" The master was a bit taller than Enwyl but Enwyl returned the man's gaze even as spit flew from the ferocity of his words.

The guards approached Enwyl from behind ready to stabilize any outburst. "You will not steal me as you stole my brothers." Enwyl's voice was low and his annunciation deliberate. He grabbed the master of the house by his shoulders and drove his knee deep into the man's gut. As the master doubled over clutching his belly the guards made to deal out punishment.

The two men bought by the master came to Enwyl's aid. They fended off the guards while Enwyl continued his engagement with the man meant to be his lifelong master who now was on his knees before Enwyl. He began to rise and deliver insults but Enwyl would not allow the completion of either task. Enwyl's fist collided with the now beleaguered man's temple knocking him out cold to his lavishly ornate floor.

Enwyl turned to assist his companions. The one guard overpowered Enwyl's ally and delivered a fatal swing of his sword. In the split second that the guards swing had cleared its target Enwyl was on top of the guard, disarming him of his sword and killing him with his own weapon. The second guard also won his engagement but did not survive the onslaught of Enwyl.

With both his countrymen and two Pelusian guards dead, as well as the wealthy master of the house in a heap on the floor and a commotion building outside the doorway as other attendees of the house came to see what all of the racket was, Enwyl left through the window. As he ran down an empty ally way, he heard the screams of people finding the bloodbath of Enwyl's escape.

In a risky move Enwyl found the cart of weapons stolen from the battlefield and reclaimed his brother's sword. He left Mauven and headed high into the mountains. For many days he moved deeper into the mountains. Finally he found a place where he stopped running. There he sat. In his solitude he thought about the war and his loss, and how little value was placed on the lives of his brothers. He thought about returning home to Andarva and seeing his

mother. This was something he did not yet want. Returning home meant going back to a war that did not yet make sense to him.

He survived meagerly off of the land for months until one evening a caravan of merchants stopped to make camp for the night. Enwyl was frightened that their allegiance may lie with Pelute or Borudon. He speculated, until he couldn't wonder anymore.

The merchant called Maer took out his purse and grabbed a fistful of coins, "This is where our allegiances lie," He said, "Come let's watch the sport." The sport was hand to hand combat, "What is your name young man?" Maer asked.

Enwyl thought for a second and then answered, "Rowl." He was never called Enwyl again.

"Do you have any experience in fighting, Rowl?" Maer asked.

"I was in the Andarvan army for a short time." Rowl answered.

"Ah, a soldier. You may take part in our evening sport if you would like." Maer offered.

"I have no more taste for fighting," Rowl said, although he could not take his eyes off of the match going on before them. The two men were very skilled and their movements had as much grace as power.

"Something troubles you. I can see it," Maer turned his attention from the match to Rowl, "You are young to have such heavy thoughts. What is the noose that tightens around your heart?"

"My brothers died in the war. We were very close, my brothers and I." Rowl paused. Maer made no move to interrupt him. "I was taken captive and in my escape four men died. I have been out here for months thinking, trying to decide if me surviving is worth the cost of four men's lives."

"I suppose you will see when your time to die comes if your life was truly worth that of four men. But for now I can tell that you do have a taste for fighting. You are an active observer. Your muscles tense not when a punch lands but when the opportunity to land a punch arises." Maer said to him. Rowl was silent.

Maer entered Rowl in the next bout. The man he fought went easy on him. Even so Rowl was outmatched. After the match ended Rowl shook hands with the other fighter. Maer approached Rowl, "That was very good. You have natural skill."

"But I lost," Rowl said.

"Yes, you did. Treg fights every day and has worked for a long time to get to that level. I see the same skills in you." Maer said walking across the camp, Rowl following.

"I bet I would beat him in a fight with swords," Rowl said.

Maer made a noise of exasperation. "You are young, I am old," He started. "I have beaten and I have been beaten. I have learned that fighting is not about beating. It is about growth. When you are fighting your goal should be to learn, not to beat."

Rowl went with the merchants in their travels and for years he performed the duties of a merchant and at night they fought. They fought with swords and staffs and empty handed. And Rowl grew as a fighter. One day word reached the merchants of a massive battle between Andarva and Pelute and Borudon. For a brief moment Rowl was Enwyl again and he thought of his brothers.

Rowl felt he must do something, that it was his duty to his brothers to put an end to the war of nothing. So he bid farewell to the band of merchants whom he identified with and rode for the battlefield.

He arrived, clad in green, between the two armies that marched towards one another. The leaders rode to discuss terms of engagement and there in the middle of the battle field they met with Rowl.

“I am Rowl and I have come to resolve your petty squabbling,” Rowl projected his words such that they echoed from the sky.

“What business of yours is our dispute?” A general asked him.

“My brothers died in battle. Countless families on both sides have been fractured and broken with no reward. The fighting must end here,” Rowl said.

“That is not your decision to make,” The general answered.

“It is a decision that needs to be made and no one else will make it,” Rowl said.

“We need not listen to you and we will ride to war against one another none the less,” The general delivered this final word and the other generals agreed.

“Then I challenge each of you to duel to the death,” Rowl said. The generals faltered. Rowl had ignited a flame, “If you are cowards, ride back to your ranks in disgrace.”

“Killing you will not change the tides in this war,” The general said.

“When I win, then the war will end. Those are my terms,” Rowl said.

“We cannot consent to those terms; we do not have the authority,” The general said.

“Send for the approval of your kings. We can wait to kill each other until then,” Rowl said.

The responses from the kings were of overwhelming excitement. They rode to the battle field with royal companies. The first general of Andarva stood up to Rowl to duel. Rowl grinned wide and started laughing, “I am sorry,” He said. “I meant for all three of you to face me at once.”

Although they were baffled by this revelation the generals agreed to the proposal and the audience delighted in the twist. Rowl drew his sword and stood tall against his three adversaries. In a flurry of steel and the clang of swords Rowl felled his opponents to the astonishment of the audience.

In the wake of Rowl’s impressive display, the war ended and all of the soldiers lived out their full lives in peace. Rowl went home to the hills. He spent some time there but did not stay long for it did not feel like home without his brothers. He took to traveling the countryside delighting in what adventures found him.

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In the elven kingdom of Gelduland the halls are grand. The elves are a symbol of hope to the world for they are fair and few. The long lived elves are gifted with a timeless life and possess other talents that ordinary humans lack. The mere sight of an elf, so tall and fair is humbling in itself. There is an elf so imbued with beauty, grace, and cunning that she is unequalled in all of elvendom. If the sight of an ordinary elf is humbling then the mere sight of Seraphene, Princess of Gelduland, is breath taking. Her pointed ears are barely visible beneath her smooth golden hair. Her deep blue eyes are like sapphires set in ivory. A gift, unique to Seraphene that resides deep in her elven body, is the ability to feel another creature’s emotions as though they were her own.

Seraphene, being the princess of Gelduland was trained as warrior. Every day she trained with the elven men using short knives and two handed swords. Seraphene’s true weapon was her

bow. When she shot an arrow from her bow she was a blur of gold, always making her mark. She earned the name the Golden Archer for her prowess in the art.

When she grew old enough, she left Gelduland in search of adventure. All over the world she travelled, from the caves of Rudwa to the high forests of Headendale. She met with lizard folk in Izkel and was carried aloft by the bird men in Assendru. She learned much from her travels and those she encountered learned much from her. The decades passed like pages in a good book and her face showed no reflection of her advancing age.

The day came when she found herself returning to Gelduland. During weeks of travel across tundra and desert a warm feeling grew in her heart. She was going home. When she arrived in Gelduland, the golden realm of the elves, the warm feeling turned to ice. Her kin were enslaved by a demonic evil that poisoned the elven heart. She looked into the eyes of her father; they were black as tar. Her mother, all of the teachers she had as young elf, they were all the same – listless and absent of all their elven purity.

Seraphene sank to the floor overcome by the pain she felt from those around her for inside they were suffering. In this moment as the phantom enemy crept towards her body to reap another soul she called upon the strength within her, the strength that made her the most magnificent elf in all of Ambyria. She took a deep breath and felt the power of Gelduland still fighting against its invaders. Her chest expanded feeling all living things in Ambyria. She dug deep, into her very being to call upon her elven life force. She had it tenuously in her grasp. Her arms raised and her eyes closed she focused all her energy on this one moment in time. For the many moments she had let pass this was the one that counted. Her eyes burst open. She let her breath out and a blinding, golden light burst forth from her body.

The parasitic phantoms fled from the light. They left the bodies of the enslaved and as the light spread across the kingdom they left Gelduland, never to challenge the power of the elves again. As her father awoke and shook the fatigue of infection he was quickly thrown into another nightmare, seeing his daughter lying lifeless on the floor before him. He rushed to her side. “Seraphene,” he said, his words choked beneath his breath.

He took her to his healers where the elves worked their mystical art. They could not find a remedy that would wake her. There she lay, her father ruling Gelduland from her bedside waiting for the day she might wake. In his dreams he saw her. They would talk and she told him of all her adventures. He told her he loved her. Then he would wake and grief would run like water over him drowning his hopes.

One night in his dreams Seraphene said to him, “Stop mourning; it brings me pain.”

“All of Gelduland mourns for their princess.” He told her.

“That too, brings me great pain,” She said.

“What can I do to make you come back to me?” He asked her.

“Tell them I have awoken. Hold a celebration for my return and I will be there.”

Seraphene instructed.

“They will think their king as delusional! Your doctors will say that you are still sick in bed.” He insisted.

“Have faith in your rule. You are their king. They will follow you.” She said.

The king took her back to the royal hall in Gelduland and put Seraphene into her own bed and told the healers that she had awoken and he took her home. The news exploded spreading like wild fire. A great feast was held and fireworks were launched. The cheerfulness was palpable. Everyone was joyous. A moment finally came when the people realized they had not

yet seen Seraphene. Wasn't she to come to her own celebration? People were beginning to grow anxious. They wanted to see their princess! The king silenced them for a word.

"Seraphene is still feeling very sick and will not be joining us tonight," He announced.

The crowd went silent. In all her beauty, grace, and cunning, she appeared behind her father. She was never more a princess than in this moment when elf in the kingdom laid eyes upon their dear princess whom they almost lost.

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A baby girl washed up on the shore of the Valdwishkin Sea. There on the beach a fisherman named Hyble found her. He looked about and saw no one at all.

Out loud he said to the baby, "Who would leave a precious sweet thing like you out here all by yourself?" He picked her up and carried her home to his wife, Gella.

They voiced their concerns in the privacy of their home. "Where in the world did she come from?" She asked her husband.

"I haven't the faintest idea. If I hadn't found her she would have died out there." He said, "She is a blessed little girl."

"She could be Korgu's spawn," She said bitterly.

Hyble made a sound of exasperation, "You and your superstitions. This is certainly not the lord of the underworld's doing. Most likely a young woman didn't mean to get pregnant and when the baby came she abandoned it." He rationalized.

"It doesn't sound likely to me." Gella continued, "But I truly think this little girl is a gift to us. She is a gift to the world."

After that conversation they named her Yvera and never spoke of where she came from again.

The years went by and Yvera grew into a beautiful girl. She would go as often as she could with Hyble to the beach where he would fish and she would play in the sand. When he had his catch for the day she would help him bring the fish to the market in Vaulin where they would sell them. But it was at the beach while her adopted father was fishing that she discovered her gift. She had dug a hole and was so proud of it. But then a wave came and filled the hole with water. It made her upset to see her work ruined. She smacked the puddle of water and the water jumped.

Her frustration turned to intrigue. She waved her hand over the top of the water, without touching it, and the water sloshed back and forth. She waved her hand harder and the water flew out of the hole. She looked over at Hyble to make sure he wasn't watching. The next wave came up and she swept her hand over it and pulled some water back into the hole.

It felt normal to Yvera to be able to control water with a wave of her hand. It felt as normal as getting out of bed in the morning or coming to the beach with Hyble. She never saw or even heard of anyone interacting with water like this. Yvera decided that she would keep it a secret.

She grew older and as she did she also grew more precise with her manipulation of water. She could keep the rain from hitting her body. She could separate water from the sand at the beach. She was able to hold water aloft, suspended in midair. She would often challenge herself to purge the sea water of salt. But it was hard. Though she couldn't see the dissolved salt, she could feel it. The water in the sea did not feel smooth like the fresh water in the river.

As she grew into a teenager and needed space to think she would go into the forest to the river where there was so much moisture. She would lie on top of the river bank juggling beads of water on her fingertips. A longing feeling was growing inside of her. It was a deep desire to learn what she was.

As she pondered this she stepped on to the surface of the water and glided down the river. She was getting better at riding on top of the current; although, in some of the rougher parts she would lose her balance and concentration and fall into the flowing water.

After one of her soul-searching afternoons by the river she resolved to ask her parents if she was really their daughter. In her heart she already knew the answer. When she asked the question, Hyble and Gella suddenly looked deflated. They looked at one another and Gella asked, "How did you –" She paused searching for the right words, "What makes you think you are not our daughter?"

Yvera was tentative, "I have noticed some differences between us."

"It's the nose isn't it?" Hyble asked, "Our noses just don't look anything alike. That's how you can tell if two people are related."

Yvera couldn't stifle a small laugh. Her father was full of foolish wisdom like that, "It's not the nose, Dad." Yvera assured him, "How did I come to be your daughter?"

And Hyble told the story of how he found her on the beach and Gella talked about when he came home with her for the first time. The joy that they experienced on that day rekindled in their eyes and Yvera could tell that they truly loved her. She trusted them and felt safe exposing her secret power to them.

"I can do things that other people can't," Yvera said. It was apparent that it was taking a lot for her to say this.

"I know mommy says no one else could spend as much time with me as you do, but it really isn't that peculiar," Hyble assured her.

"It's not that either, Dad," Yvera said, "I can talk to water." She didn't know how else to put it but that is how it felt to her.

"So can we, but it doesn't say anything back," Gella said.

"No, it doesn't say anything back, but it listens," Yvera explained, "I can show you if you promise you will still love me afterwards."

"Of course," Hyble said, "You could stop the rain from falling and we would still love you."

Yvera reached her hand out towards her father who always had lots of moisture in his clothes and hair from fishing and being near the water. She had to focus. This was still a difficult task for her to find the water saturating the fibers of his clothes and pull them out. However, in a few seconds his clothes were dry and above her hand floated a small sphere of water.

Her parents' eyes were wide with astonishment. Hyble felt his clothes which were no longer damp at all. He reached out and touched the little sphere of water expecting that he would be able to grasp it like a ball, but his hand passed through like normal water. Yvera dropped her hand and the water fell splashing over the tile floor. She began sobbing and ran into her father's arms. "You have no idea what I am," Yvera cried.

"You are my daughter, Yvera," Hyble said.

Gella came over and hugged the both of them, "It will be alright my little kitten."

"Why, is no one else like me," Yvera's sobs lessened.

“You came to be our daughter as a gift from the sea,” Hyble said, “This ability you have, it is a blessing. There are many peculiar things in this world, and you will find things far more peculiar than this.”

“Like what?” Yvera asked.

“Like your father,” Gella said.

Yvera smiled and suddenly, all of the weight she had been carrying lifted. From then on everything seemed so simple. It was as though what she was didn’t matter. As long as the people who loved her accepted her for who she was, she was happy.

And the years marched on as they do for everyone in Ambyria. Things for Yvera and her family stayed much the same. Yvera would go with Hyble to the sea and to the market in Vaulin.

On the eighteenth anniversary of Hyble finding Yvera on the beach, there was the most beautiful rainstorm, or so Yvera thought. Hyble and Gella thought it was miserable. Yvera danced in the rain swirling the drops about making them dance with her. It was like a gift of joy from the sky to her.

Days passed by and the rain did not stop. Water was streaming into people’s houses steadily. From Yvera’s village to the nearby Vaulin the word spread that the storm was coming to purge the coast of all life. As the waters rose and panic spread Yvera looked to the horizon. She didn’t understand, the water had always been her friend. Now, it was becoming a terror.

She straightened up tall and stalked out into the storm towards the sea. She commanded the flowing streams in the streets to come with her. The water bore her aloft. And as she moved it she built a massive wall of water that went beyond site or sound. She could feel for miles the weight of the water she pulled. Her heart pounded as she commanded the storm to the sea.

Hyble and Gella watched as the rain left with their daughter and they feared that this was more than she could handle. Meanwhile atop a great pillar of water Yvera’s vision blurred from the strain. Finally, she got to the beach. She stared out beholding the vast endlessness of the sea. It was here where she could no longer fight and she fell into the water and sank like a stone.

When she awoke the sun was on her skin and the wind was soft. She propped herself up on her elbows and looked about. She was on the beach, the water washing up over her feet. She blinked the fatigue from her eyes and stood, feeling drained but happy.

She looked down at the small waves that crashed about her feet. The surf drew back. The waves stopped breaking. A tower of water formed, scraping the sky, casting a shadow over Yvera.

A voice shook the ground, “What do you call you, Maiden?”

“Yvera, daughter to Gella and Hyble, the fisherman,” She answered, doing her best to seem formidable.

“Did you drive back our storm?” The voice asked.

“I did,” She replied proudly.

“Years ago I lost my daughter to the land and for years I have searched the shores casting storms upon the land dwellers, hoping she would hear my call.” A tongue of water emerged from the great mountain of the sea. Atop it a man rode to shore.

“I have answered your call,” She said, struggling to keep her composure.

“I am Salrin, King of the sea folk. And you are my daughter,” He paused, “Will you come back to the sea with me?”

“Forgive me, Sir, I love the sea,” She broke his gaze and looked at her toes in the sand, “But I also love the land.”

“You have ventured farther outside of the sea than any other of our people and for that I am proud,” Salrin said.

“I want to stay,” Yvera said.

“I understand, Yvera. That is a beautiful and powerful name,” Salrin reached his hand and lifted Yvera’s chin. She returned his gaze. “You can always come home to the sea. You will know in your heart where to find us. Take this token of our people. May it bring you strength, though none on the land will recognize its significance,” He pressed a ring of coral inlaid with pearls into her palm.

As Salrin retreated into his liquid tower he called out, “Remember always, you are a child of the sea.”

Yvera examined the beautiful ring and slid it onto her finger. Salrin was right. It did bring her strength. She removed the ring and walked away from the sea and towards the land. She had no idea where she was. The current had carried her off. She wandered for days until she found herself in Vaulin. Not quite home, but almost.

She returned home to Hyble and Gella and told them of her encounter with Salrin. “Will you leave?” Hyble asked.

“After everyone saw me move the storm away, they think I am a witch,” Yvera said, “I have to leave, but not for the sea.” Yvera said.

“Where will you go?” Gella said.

“I am not sure,” Yvera squeezed the coral ring in her palm. It made her strong in her resolve. “East. And beyond.”

“We will miss you,” Gella said.

“And I you.”

“When you are lost, look at the stars and they will know where you are,” Hyble advised as his brow furrowed and mouth shrunk into his beard.

Yvera packed provisions into a leather satchel, stowing the ring safely in a small side pocket. She said her final goodbyes to Hyble and Gella. Her first stop was Vaulin where she paid a caravan of performers to take her along as far as they would. Thus Yvera’s adventure through Ambyria began and her longing for the sea grew.

* * *

In the serene silence, in the still air, the wizard thrives. In the midst of tranquility a wizard can communicate with the depths of all worldly powers. The magic of a wizard is ancient, and mysterious. It takes great focus for even the greatest wizards to muster their magic. Kaldoren is as old as the mountains and his powers have been tried by many dark forces. Not without scars did Kaldoren pass these tests. In the dark corners of Ambyria he has fought for his life with vigor. And each time he has had to call on power he knew not existed.

Many have thought the great wizard, Kaldoren, was not born, but shot into existence on a beam of light. Another tall tale is that he came from nowhere and that he is some impossible infinite being. If these spreaders of false rumors had walked up to Kaldoren, as I did, and asked him where he came from he would have told them. The truth is Kaldoren was born just like the rest of us. His mother died in child birth and he was stolen from his father shortly thereafter.

He was raised by a sorcerer of darkness and as many children do, Kaldoren imbibed the knowledge as though it were water. He learned all the ways of magic and how to commune with its source. The sorcerer saw the power within him. Having foreseen his own doom, the dark

sorcerer thought Kaldoren would be a powerful successor. The sorcerer encouraged Kaldoren's affinity for magic and tried to steer him down a long and winding path of evil. The sorcerer neglected to notice that Kaldoren possessed a shining red glow deep within. There was not a drop of evil in his heart.

When Kaldoren was old enough and learnt of the horror the sorcerer had brought upon Ambyria, Kaldoren brought the sorcerer's doom unto him in great battle of magic. It was by a thread that Kaldoren did not perish in their duel. A brief moment of luck gave him the chance to strike down the terrible sorcerer. Once Kaldoren recovered, he looked at the sky and wondered. Without his teacher and his home, Kaldoren wandered the world and studied, he was not yet a wizard. Many trials lay before him before he could call himself a wizard.

For a long time he was a wanderer. And after many adventures he became a wandering wizard. He heard tales of a great wizard in the northern mountains by Rudwa. A wanderer needs a purpose so Kaldoren the wandering wizard traveled to Rudwa in search of this great wizard. He followed leads from the local people of Rudwa.

This endeavor proved very difficult. The local people told all different stories. Some said the great wizard was enormous and towered above the tree tops. Others said he had cured their children of incurable ailments. And few said the mysterious wizard didn't even exist at all.

Kaldoren sifted through the information he got, figuring what was real and what was not. After much searching and no wizard found Kaldoren stood alone in the mountains. He was bereft. The great wizard had eluded him. Kaldoren turned away and headed down the mountain, destined to be a wanderer without purpose.

As he stepped and his foot shifted the loose ground a thin voice from far behind him spoke, "Ah, Kaldoren, the magic of Rudwa has told me of you, as I am sure some magic has told you of me," the great wizard stood many paces higher on the mountain side. He was very old and frail. His skin was set with wrinkles and his bony fingers gripped his staff feebly.

"What is your name?" Kaldoren asked.

"But, don't you already know?" The old man said matter of factly, "I guess your magic was not very revealing. I am Rendilor, once a great wizard, now old and faded." He paused which was something he often did as he in his old age. Again he spoke, very slowly, "You may not know it but you were sent here."

"I was? By who?" Kaldoren asked, bewildered.

"By me!" Rendilor exclaimed, "I need a young wizard to tend to me as I die." Although Kaldoren was not young by our perception, Rendilor thought of him as spry and youthful.

"Die?" Kaldoren paused, "What ails you?"

"Time, Kaldoren, I have been alive for a long time, and a wizard can see the end before it comes." Rendilor explained, "Do you accept this task?"

Kaldoren accepted with pleasure and for years he tended to Rendilor learning much of old magic that would have died with Rendilor otherwise. Kaldoren for a time thought he and Rendilor would spend decades in Rudwa together, but one morning after a seemingly short decade Rendilor did not rise from his bed.

"I will not stand this day," Rendilor said. Kaldoren knelt by his side and Rendilor continued, "Have I ever talked to you about my staff? It is very old, older than I."

"Tell me about it." Kaldoren urged.

"Aurilignus, that is what it is called. 'Light of fire.' Every wizard needs a staff. It is fate that Aurilignus needs a wizard, and you, Kaldoren, need a staff. Take it." Rendilor steady and strong raised the staff from where it lay beside him in his bed and passed it to Kaldoren. With

two hands Kaldoren grasped it. Its weight, too much, one would think for an old dying man to heft off the ground. "It will get lighter," Rendilor said.

He died moments later with a soft, relaxed smile on his face. Kaldoren was once again a wandering wizard but now with a powerful companion, Aurilignus.

Kaldoren's status as archmage came when he responded to a twinge of magic in his beard. The volcano in Ismahele called to him. He saw it in his dreams. Torrents of smoke and lava waylaid his sleeping mind. For weeks he travelled to Ismahele and each day the yearning to be there grew until each day was utter torment.

When he could take no more of the nightmares he travelled through the nights not getting even a wink of sleep. In the town of Mendi less than a day away from the volcano, he passed out in the street. And in his sleep the great mountain spoke to him. "Kaldoren," it rumbled in his mind, "I await your arrival!" And it shot a stream of lava into the air.

Kaldoren responded, "I know not why you torment me!" He was shouting in his sleep at an incorporeal volcano that only existed in his mind.

"Come to me, Wizard," The volcano answered.

In the morning Kaldoren awoke with the towns people gathered around him, watching to see the mysterious visitor rise from his slumber. "Are you okay, Sir?" A girl child asked.

Kaldoren got to his feet, struggling to keep his balance, "Yes, I am okay," he wiped his mouth with back of his hand and leaned on the staff that became taller and stronger as his powers grew. "I am going to the mountain," Kaldoren said absent mindedly.

"Why would you go up there? No one goes there," The girl said.

"I must," he began to trudge on, "And I am almost there."

"Be careful!" the girl called after him as he pushed through the crowd of people.

Kaldoren left the town of Mendi and began to climb the steep mountain. The ground rumbled beneath his feet. He felt feverish, his sight clouding with dizziness. In his mind he heard the volcano's voice again, "Climb," It taunted, "Climb, Wizard! It is here that you will learn of your true self."

Kaldoren felt as though he may collapse on the mountain side, and there he would lay until the crows came for him. He sucked the air through his mouth, drinking it in, unable to get enough. Onward he marched until he reached the top. In the ashen clouds, Kaldoren stared deep into the volcano's caldera. He hadn't yet made it. Down he scaled into the abyss of the volcano.

He was chasing a glowing red light. And the glowing red light chased him. As he approached the lava he saw that his test of wizardry was coming. The lava splashed at him landing on his clothes. He focused his magic and flung the lava away. "Why have you brought me here?" Kaldoren shouted in desperation.

A great current of lava exploded from the pool. It sought to envelop the wizard. With lightning like speed, Kaldoren responded to the lava thrashing it back down. He wiped the sweat from his face and exhaled from the effort.

The volcano was not done with him yet. An even greater tide of lava washed over him. This time it achieved its goal, wrapping him in a cocoon of fire. Before the lava touched him Kaldoren wielding Aurilignus produced a spherical shield of magic about himself and there he struggled to hold out against the fire. "You have brought me to show me my death, Mountain," Kaldoren shouted.

"Breathe in the fires, Wizard!" The volcano bellowed, lava surging and swirling about the magical barrier.

“I will not give in to my weaknesses. I will hold fast against your fires!” Kaldoren responded.

“Your little stick and your long beard are no match for my reservoirs of flame!” And with that the lava crushed Kaldoren and he descended into darkness. “Aurilignus has come home,” the mountain whispered.

This is how the volcano of Ismahele taught Kaldoren of the powers of fire. Kaldoren rose from the flame and the wandering wizard found a new home on the mountain side. He was from then on known far and wide as the Archmage of Mountain.

* * *

The winged people in the Eunimne Mountains are a curious folk. It is said they are descended from the elves and their wings originated when an elven prince was cast out by his people. He went into the mountains and lived among the great birds of prey. He grew so close to them, that he himself sprouted wings.

This of course is ridiculous; no one really knows where they came from. And long ago, a woman whose sense of adventure was so overwhelming that it took her atop the air currents and far away from her people. In her travels she fell into a romance with a most despicable man. He was truly evil, but she had fallen in love with him. She flew him to an island where they could be together in solitude.

He was awful, but her love did not waver. There on the island she became pregnant. When the man learned of this he revealed himself as the demon he was. He stole her wings and used them to fly back to where ever it was he came. She carried that child until birth and raised him alone on the island. As the boy grew she found that he was worse than his father. One day he killed her and flew away from the island.

He searched the world for others of his own kind, others who would share the evil in his heart. One dark night he found the small ghetto of demons his father was from. The other demons marveled at his wings. It was not long before he was the king of the small group of demons.

One day an outsider appeared. He was looking for their demon king. The outsider knew immediately who this young demon was still he asked, “What do you call yourself, young King.”

“I am Ingduhl,” He introduced himself.

“That is a fine name,” The stranger said, “Was this name given to you?”

“No, I chose it,” Ingduhl said, “The moon spoke it to me. It is for power, and for death at that power. It is a great name.”

“Yes, and how is your mother,” The stranger asked.

“I killed her,” Ingduhl said, “Why do you ask?”

“I knew your mother before you were born.” He said, “And I am your father, a demon, and your mother a winged maiden of Eunimne.”

Ingduhl approached the filthy demon claiming to be his father. “Give me one reason not to kill you where you stand,” He paused, “Father.”

“Give me one reason why you would kill me.” His father said.

“It would bring me pleasure,” Ingduhl responded.

“Then you should probably do it, although I cannot say that being murdered will bring me much pleasure,” His father said.

Ingduhl did not falter. He spread his wings as he did often when he exerted effort and lunged at his father with a knife. His father dodged, and their conversation went on, “I was

testing you,” His father said, “To see if you had your mother’s soft heart. I can see you do not. That is good. I have a great plan for us to rule the world as father and son.”

He paused to hear Ingduhl’s response. It did not come. Instead Ingduhl plunged his knife into his father’s chest and killed him. For decades after this, he rallied demons using them to terrorize mortal folk. His monstrous wings and darkened persona implanted fear in those who gazed upon him. Finally, the elves took a stand and sealed him way in a magical prison in which there could be no escape.

Again there could be peace.

* * *

The centuries passed and Ingduhl remained locked away. It was not counted upon that he was not a pure blooded demon, but a half breed. This hybrid nature had endowed him with powers not held by most demons. In his prison he developed these powers. And one day he broke loose.

Now, with new anger in his heart his acts of malice were directed. His days of mischief were over. The days of true terror began.

* * *

Ingduhl swept the land. He was able to materialize agents of his will from thin air. And his armies of monsters covered the land in a poison shroud. The world no longer had sunny days or happiness. As he spread his wave of destruction, people challenged him but to no avail. They could not stand up to Ingduhl.

He earned the name the Shadow Demon for the way he seemed to materialize from the dark.

There was one thing that he could not touch: The Ember Stones. Mysterious in origin, the Ember Stones’ light could not be snuffed out by Ingduhl’s wrath. It was said they originated in the embers of Ambyria’s creation and possessed deep power.

In four separate corners of the world, Seraphene the Golden Archer, Yvera the Water Master, Rowl the Swordsman of the East, and Kaldoren the Archmage of the Mountain set out to find the Ember Stones and lift the shroud of the Shadow Demon once and for all. Their journeys will be fraught with grave perils. Many obstacles lie in their way.

Who will find the magic gems and defeat the nefarious Ingduhl and let the world live free again?

In the event that Rowl wins:

Rowl, having collected enough Ember Stones to stop Ingduhl, returns to the blacksmith from his childhood. Now very old, the blacksmith forges the Ember Stones into Rowl’s sword and shield.

Rowl strides into the lair of the Shadow Demon. There they engage in a battle so gargantuan that the tremors can be felt by all in Ambyria.

After a long and harrowing battle, Rowl emerges, exhausted but victorious.

In the event that Yvera wins:

Yvera having struggled to obtain the Ember Stones of legend, is weary. Even standing is a task difficult to accomplish. Clutching the ember stones she finds the strength to stand.

As Ingduhl stands over her, about to erase Yvera from existence, she makes a shield of water spinning between them. In the water she dissolves the Ember Stones. Ingduhl tries to reach through the wall of water and ember but it stings to the touch.

He calls upon the shadows to fight with him. As they wield their whirling weapons against one another the shadows begin to fade. The shadow demon is left without any defense.

Yvera seizes the opportunity and drives a torrent of liquid bane down his throat. In a cry of anguish the Shadow Demon crumbles to dust and is no more.

Yvera sighs with relief and lays down on a placid lake for a much needed rest.

In the event that Seraphene wins:

Skilled elven craftsmen fashion special arrows made of the Ember Stones that Seraphene worked so hard to procure. Armed with these arrows she seeks Ingduhl in his darkened realm. Sneaking passed his minions, she finds him.

She does not cower at his immensity. He attacks with terrifying weapons of wind and shadow. Seraphene nimble and swift evades the onslaught. As the wings of the Shadow Demon beat the air, Seraphene deftly shoots an arrow into the heart of the beast.

A grin spreads across Ingduhl's face, for where a normal human's heart would be is an empty void. The Golden Archer however wields a quiver of many arrows. A swift release of three more slender soaring spears wipes the smile from Ingduhl's horrid face and fifth arrow removes the scourge of the Shadow Demon from the land of Ambyria.

The elven princess returns home to Gelduland in victory.

In the event that Kaldoren wins.

Through a veil of flame Kaldoren appears to face Ingduhl. The wizard to Ingduhl is just another adversary for the Shadow Demon to crush. The two engaged in battle. Kaldoren displays impressive skills in magic.

Ingduhl thinks victory to be within his grasp but then Kaldoren reveals the Ember Stones. Kaldoren's eyes glint, the flames flickering behind.

Using his magic with fire and the Ember Stones, Kaldoren singes the wings of Ingduhl, steeling flight from the immense demon. Lashing out in anger Ingduhl shows himself to be vulnerable and Kaldoren coats the Shadow Demon in a film of molten Ember Stones.

Ingduhl falls to his knees and Kaldoren returns to his mountain for the Shadow Demon is no more.

* * *

I was there when Ingduhl fell and the shroud receded. I felt hope and happiness return to Ambyria in an instant. That glorious hero standing tall when all was lost to the ruthless demon, inspired me. I was but a small boy, taken by the shadow demon, doomed to die. I owe my life to the hero that felled Ingduhl. I promised myself I would repay that debt. And I have paid it many times over. But no longer do I take to the countryside, nor do I scale mountains. Now I am old and I tell stories, hoping to inspire others as I had been.