

Chapter one

The midday sky was clear and the sun was hot, of course Laura could see little of this through the thick canopy of the Black forest. Laura had always wondered why it was called the Black forest, the trees were a vibrant green even in the depth of winter, the forest was bright and airy, giving off a feeling of peace unlike other forests that Laura had entered. Today was unusually hot and Laura's clothes stuck to her in the heat. Sweat dripped into Laura's hazel eyes making them sting as well as matting her long brown curls to her head. She had just turned sixteen, and was starting to feel proud of her appearance, at just over five foot tall with a slender body; her slightly square face had puffy cheeks that all the old ladies in the village had loved to squeeze when she was younger. She was fit and healthy and could run all-day; this was useful when working for her father within the forest; where some very dangerous creatures lived. While most of them left Laura alone some of them liked to chase her just for fun. But despite Laura's life she was still worried; she had to find an apprenticeship. Her father wanted her to join him in the tanner trade, but Laura knew she could no longer help her father; she had trapped and killed her last animal. He didn't understand why and Laura couldn't explain it to him, but it was killing her and had been for the last six years.

Laura remembered the day that changed her life so well, it had been sunny like today but with a cold wind cutting through her clothes chilling her bronzed skin. Laura had woken up and ran into her parent's bedroom to wake her mother. She had promised to take Laura into the forest that day to collect some herbs for her mother's apothecary. Her mother was the best herbalist in the village often bringing in travellers from all over the Realm, Laura even remembered an Elf once coming to their shop. Laura jump onto the bed waking her father with a start. Her mother had just laid there, Laura thought that her mother was pretending to be asleep.

"Laura go and get washed please." instructed her father as he sat up in bed rubbing the sleep from his eyes, all the while she jumped up and down on the bed enjoying the feeling of bouncing. "Laura. Please?" asked her father again. Laura ran out to the yard heading towards the well to draw some water. She stood at the well watching the clouds near the horizon; the sun was just peaking over the trees giving the clouds a pink blush with gold around the edges. Her mother had always told her, on days like this the gates of heaven were open and the dead were allowed into paradise. Laura watched the sun as she lifted the heavy bucket of water from the well. That was the moment when Laura's world shattered and everything changed. Her father's scream was sudden and piercing, she heard it coming from the house, it sounded as though all the happiness was being ripped from his body. Laura dropped the bucket and ran into the house looking for her parents, she had found them in their bedroom, her father was sitting with her mother's head in his lap, and he was stroking her hair, tears running down his face falling onto her mother's hair. Laura didn't know how long she stood there; it was as if time had stopped and she was unable to move, their neighbours the Lessons; the village bakers came running in, they had heard her father's cry. Mrs Lesson looked around the room and saw Laura standing there; she walked over and put her arms around Laura trying to comfort her. "Come child." she said leading Laura from the room.

Laura went through the rest of the day with a loud buzzing sound in her ears not knowing what to do or what was happening. Mrs Lesson took Laura home for the night. When she arose the next morning she went outside to watch the sun, it was much the same as the day before but colder, winter's bite could be felt in the air despite the golden clouds still shining in the sky. During the night a pyre had been built and her mother's body had been laid upon it. Laura walked over and slowly took her mother's hand wanting to say good-bye. As Laura did this her mother hand started to glow, a feeling of happiness seemed to infuse Laura. Her father came out and Laura snatched her hand back not wanting anyone to see the

warm golden glow from their hands, as she let go of her mother's hand the feeling of happiness disappeared and Laura's grief returned, she walked over and stood beside her father. Throughout the morning everyone from the village came and paid their respects by standing in a circle around the pyre waiting for the appointed time. At noon the village bell started to ring, this was the time for Laura and her father to light the pyre with two flaming torches. For the rest of the day Laura and her father stood there watching the person they loved most leave them, Laura promised herself that she would not move until her father did. The rest of the village slowly moved away heading back to their homes and their lives leaving Laura and her father with nothing but their grief.

"Everything has changed now Laura, I don't know how it will work, but we'll get through it." said her father

"I know daddy." replied Laura as she squeezed her father's hand. From that day on everything did change, as she got older she started to help her father more and more. One of the ways she did this was to tend to the traps in the forest. At first Laura didn't mind and did the job with her natural good cheer, until the day that she found a small rabbit still alive, Laura didn't know how but she could suddenly understand what the rabbit was saying, she could hear it's struggling cries to be free, Laura's heart broke, she couldn't let the animal go, it was food and money for her and her father but to stand there and hear the creature's cries was so painful. Laura did the only thing she could think of and walked away until she could no longer hear the rabbit and waited for it to die. As time went on Laura discovered not only could she understand the animals but they could understand her, at first this made her very happy; she now had someone she could talk to and become friends with. But since that day Laura had waited until midday to tend the traps not wanting to hear the cries of the dying animals, she knew any animals that had been caught were normally dead by then, it felt like she was betraying her friends but she and her father needed the money to survive.

But today she had left the house at dawn and would be arriving at the traps sooner than normal; she needed to return to the village as early as possible. Last night a ranger had come into town and taken room at the inn, Laura wanted to talk to him about an apprenticeship and if he would be interested in taking her on, she had been saving and could pay him but didn't know how long he would be in the village for and she had to get back before midday. Laura was almost to the traps when she heard it, the sound of an animal crying the noise broke her heart all over again. Laura wanted to walk away but knowing if she did that she would miss the ranger, so she pushed past the foliage and started checking the traps; most were empty or contained dead animals apart from one that had trapped a fox cub, the snare was slowly choking the cub. Laura looked at the animal and decided that she would no longer kill animals, Laura ran to the cub trying to sooth it with her voice, it backed away pulling hard on the snare, choking itself more.

"Hold still will you." snapped Laura, losing her temper with the cub; the cub stood rooted to the spot shaking with fear, Laura slowly removed the snare allowing the cub to breath. "Now go home and be more careful." Laura demanded, running a hand over the fox checking for any other injuries. The cub slowly crept off keeping its body as low to the ground as possible. Laura collected the rest of the animals and headed back to the village, feeling better about herself.

Laura was just leaving the forest when she saw there was something wrong, black smoke was rising from the village. Laura started sprinting, a sense of dread settling over her like a cold mist, as she drew closer to the village the worse the feeling became, its icy fingers clutching at her heart. It looked like only one house was burning; the fiery smell clogging her nose. Laura thought that it might be the baker's house; maybe it was an accident one of their ovens catching fire. But that didn't explain the feeling of dread settling over her, but she

knew that it wasn't true and as she rounded the corner she stopped. Her home was in flames; her father was on the floor with two men kicking him.

"Stop," screeched Laura, dropping the string of animals that she had been carrying, "Leave him alone." she screamed, as she ran at the men trying to get them away from her father. One of the men turned laughing at Laura he grab her and twisted one of her arms behind her back. "Oh, what do we have here?" teased the man. Laura turned her face away; his breath had the rancid smell of decay, his stumpy teeth were black and yellow. Laura was trying not to be sick from the smell. He was the smaller of the two, but still almost six foot tall and very skinny with dirty blond hair. The other man had carried on kicking her father, his hair was black with a greasy shine, he was massive, clearly well over six foot tall and maybe just as wide. Laura's father looked up, "Leave her alone" he shouted at the blond man as his hands start to move over Laura's body. "Stu I think we're found something a bit more fun than that old man," sneered the blond attacker, ignoring Laura's father, Stu looked up but carried on kicking. Until Stu's foot connected to Laura's father's chin, there was a sickening snap and her father went limp.

"NOOOO," squalled Laura, sounding like a caged animal whilst trying to break free from her captor's grip. He spun her around and ripped at her top exposing her flesh. Laura let out another high-pitched scream.

An eagle flying over head felt Laura's scream as if it had been hit. When the second scream came the eagle was expecting it. The eagle saw that it came from a human girl being attacked; and reacted to this by folding back it wings and diving.

The blond haired monster looked over to his friend.

"Stu come over here and hold this little wench, while I have a better look." Stu lumbered over grabbing hold of Laura's arms. The blond hair fiend started moving his hands over Laura's shoulders and down her chest, his eyes glassed over and he was breathing hard. The eagle slammed into his face clawing and tearing, Stu dropped Laura to the ground and lunged after the eagle. Laura then heard a wet thud and saw an arrow sticking out from the back of Stu's neck as he fell onto his friend. The eagle cried out and flew away, the blond man looked down at Stu and that was the last thing that he ever saw. Laura heard another wet thud and saw another arrow sticking out from his chest as he fell onto his dead friend.

Laura looked over; as the leaves suddenly parted the ranger stepped out revealing his hiding place, his cloak blowing out behind him in the light breeze, the top half of his body was wrapped in brown leather while his breeches and boots were black. He moved with the grace of a hunting cat, every movement thought out, no energy wasted in his approach. He walked to Laura's father, a sad look passed across his face as he closed her father's eyes; slowly his gaze came to Laura, his green eyes piercing into Laura's soul.

"Come with me child." he said in a voice so soft, anyone nearby would have been unable to hear him. Laura looked at the hand that he offered. "This is no longer a place for you. Your father told me this morning that you wanted to become a ranger. Come now; let this village deal with its own. You are no longer one of them. You belong with me." Laura took his hand and as he pulled her to her feet he covered her with his cloak and the two of them headed into the forest, tears running down her face.

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Mac sat on the rooftop; the evening light wrapped around him. He watched Lord Charmin's guards leave the burning building, tonight everything would change. Mac was not scared of change but this would be the first time that he controlled the changes in his life, unlike when everything had been taken away from him. Mac had been four when it happened, he was the son to one of the most powerful lords in Samatol, some say that his father was adviser to the

Lord Regent, not that Mac was sure of any of this, his world had been that of playing in their garden, hiding from his nurse and loving his mother and father. That all changed the night before the Yule festival, he had gone to bed earlier than normal, wanting to get up early to see what gifts his parents had brought him, he had hoped that it might have been a pony as his father had promised to teach him to ride, so Mac fell asleep dreaming of the pony that he so desired, when his nurse crept into his room.

“Sssh Mackenzie, come here... I need you to be very quiet dear.” Mac had never seen his nurse act like this and it worried him, but he knew that his father would want him to obey his nurse and he hoped his father would be there soon. As the nurse starting to dress Mac, she was also putting some of his clothes into a cloth bag. Once she had finished packing she passed it to Mac, “Can you carry that dear or is it too heavy?” Mac struggled to lift the bag; it contained more than the few clothes he had seen the nurse put in there.

“I can carry it.” whispered Mac. The nurse smiled sadly at Mac patting his cheek.

“Follow me dear and be very quite.” The nurse led him out of his room into the corridor. Mac parent’s bedroom was also on this corridor, at the top of the main stairwell. His nurse led him along toward their room. Mac heard some men laughing, mixed with some grunting that he couldn’t place, as they reach the top of the stairs and headed down Mac looked into the room, a lot of men were in there all wearing red tabards with a golden snake coiled in the centre.

“Come on lads there plenty for all, I still want a piece of this wench.” At the time Mac didn’t understand, but later in life he would come to know what these men were doing. The two of them reach the bottom of the stairs, their butler Mr Anderson; lay there with an arrow in his chest. This was when Mac started to cry he made no sound but could feel the warm tears running down his face, his breath catching in his chest. The nurse led him into the dining room, to the far corner and opened the window. Mac knew that this was the only window that didn’t squeak when opened.

“Quickly my dear we have very little time.” Mac jumped out and landed in the soft snow, his nurse followed, she took him by the hand and led him across the garden, heading towards the wood. “Mac if we get separated you must head to the woods and hide. You know, where your father showed you, I will come and get you. Promise me Mac do not come out for anyone but me, no matter what they say.” Mac looked at his nurse; his eyes once again began to fill with tears. “Promise me Mac.” His nurse always called him Mackenzie never Mac, not for as long as he could remember had she called him Mac. The nurse grabbed his arms, “Mac do you understand?” Mac nodded his head, and again the two of them headed towards the wood that was at the far end of their garden.

“STOP!” shouted someone behind them, “Quick run. I will come for you.” the nurse whispered, pushing Mac toward the woods, she ran to her right leading away the men chasing after them. Mac ran as fast as he could, until he reached the den that his father had built for him, his father had told him that no one would ever be able to find him and said that he should tell no one where it was. Mac sat there for a long time, slowly his thumping heart returned to normal. Mac didn’t know how long he waited but he had begun to become hungry and so he looked into the bag that his nurse had given him, at the bottom of the bag was a loaf of bread and some apples, Mac ate all the apples even the cores. Mac’s den was quite warm and had been built to keep the warmth in and the cold out and now with a full stomach, Mac finally fell asleep.

Mac woke with a start, someone was called his name, and he listened trying to hear his nurse. But as his name was called again Mac realised that it wasn’t his nurse calling him. He thought that maybe it was one of the cooks, but Mac didn’t know them that well and he had promised his nurse to only show himself to her. The person came closer as Mac looked out of one of the peepholes that he and his father had built. It was one of the cooks but a man was

walking with her, he was wearing the same tabard as the men that he had seen in his parent's bedroom.

"Look I'm telling you he's not out here." insisted the woman to the man.

"You'd better hope he is, because you're the one who is going to tell the captain if he isn't, my life is worth too much and you will take the blame."

"Who was it that got you lot in?" snapped the woman, "Also I wasn't the one meant to be guarding the place was I." The man turned and punched the cook square in the face, the cook fell to the floor spitting out blood raising a hand to her split lip.

"Watch your mouth wench, or you'll end up like that high and mighty lady in there." The cook lowered her head. "Get up and call the boy, we have to be gone in a couple of hours." Mac stayed hidden for the rest of the day, he listened as their calling became quieter as they moved away and then sat there; too scared to come out. Finally the sun descended and it turned cold; he put on the extra clothes that his nurse had given him. He could see a fire coming from his house but still he didn't move, afraid that the men would still be there, throughout the night the sky was ablaze with fire.

Slowly Mac woke forgetting where he was and what had happened; there was a smell of burnt timber, Mac eased himself out of his den, moving toward his house. As he reached it, he decided to look around to see if he could find his nurse. When he found her he wished he hadn't, she laid face down and naked, with a dagger sticking out of her back. No tears came now as Mac had been crying too long to cry anymore. He felt dead inside. Now he looked at the remains of the house, the fire had burnt throughout the entire building, leaving nothing but a broken shell, Mac was too young to know how to deal with what was happening, he only knew that he was hungry and needed food, he decided to head for town as that was where his mother had always bought food.

Over the next four years Mac survived on the streets, sometimes he wondered how he had managed. He had started off by begging as he saw others doing, stealing food that he need when he had to, just to survive. At the age of eight everything changed again. Mac had become a loner, never trusting or getting too close to anyone especially the other street children, always afraid that he would again lose the people he cared about, should he let himself do so. But he always watched the other children on the street; he saw how they cut the purse strings of folk passing by, giving them the money to buy what they needed. Mac watched them for a long time before he decided to try.

His parents had always taught him that it was wrong to steal, but he had been living on the streets for so long now and he knew that life was not always as easy as what is right and wrong, Mac watched and waited until he saw his target. A big bear of a man, with a black shaggy beard and a purple cloak that protected him from the cold, Mac move toward him looking at the stalls but always keeping his eyes on the man. As the man neared, Mac moved away bumping into someone else, a woman who had her young daughter with her, the woman pushed Mac away with disgust. Mac fell into the big man, quickly cut the strings of his purse and moving away, it was so quick and easy, euphoria rushed through him. Mac would never go hungry again, with these happy thoughts and his heart was beating so fast it felt like it was going to burst out of his chest, he stopped and watched the big man walk away. The man stopped after about twenty paces, turned around, looked at Mac and their eyes locked. Mac ran, trying to get away as fast as he could, then everything went black.

When he awoke he was sitting in a large chair with two men on either side, while they were not looking at him, Mac knew that if he moved to get up they would be able to stop him very easily. Opposite him sat the big man, Mac could see him better now, he had pale blue eyes, and a scar that ran around his right eye. Mac could hear a fire crackling in the background but dared not look around, the man's gaze held him.

“What’s your name boy?” Mac had expected the man to growl out his words, but his voice was quiet yet commanded a response. Mac just sat there, unable to say anything. “Do not make me ask again boy, you will find that it is an experience that few survive and you would not like that.”

“Mac.” The man smiled and nodded

“And how long have you been picking pockets boy?”

“You were my first.” replied Mac, a shocked expression passed across the man’s face but it was covered up so quickly that Mac almost missed it.

“Your first. That was very well done. Do you know what your mistake was, you only made one.” Mac shook his head.

“You stopped and watched, had you kept on walking I would never have been able to make you out in the crowd.” The man looked into Mac’s brown eyes, he was thinking. “How would you like a job Mac? But be warned if you say no, you will leave here and if I ever see you again you will not live to tell of it but, if you take the job and then run, you had better hope you can run far and fast.” The man looked around the room. “But if you say yes you will be given a room, food, a teacher and one gold crown a month.” Mac sat there thinking about the offer. He could say no and go back to stealing but Mac didn’t like that, he felt he was betraying his parents. Running away he couldn’t do, he had only ever known this city, so all that left was taking the job, but it sounded too good to be true. But Mac had nothing left to lose so nodded his head. “You must say yes, you must speak no more of this nodding or shaking of your head, I will not deal with an imbecile.”

“Yes sir.” answered Mac; the man smiled and called out.

“Serlene would you come out?” a woman appeared from behind the man, one minute she hadn’t been there and the next she was. Mac watched her closely. “This one is yours, train him well,” ordered the man.

Serlene headed to the door, he was now able to see her properly. She had jet black hair tied into a ponytail, the rest of her was dressed in black, not shiny but a dull colour almost like that of a shadow, her cloak was dark brown that blended into the black, the only other thing that Mac could see was the broach that pinned her cloak, it was small and oval with the picture of two dragons circling each other. “Go with her Mac, she will look after you.” said the man, Mac got up and followed Serlene, as he turned around he saw how big the room was, it must have been about twenty feet long with pictures and armour covering every wall. Serlene led Mac from the room, once he was outside Mac felt more at ease with the beautiful stranger.

“Who is he?” asked Mac, Serlene looked down at him.

“He is The Shadow.” she replied in a sad voice. Mac stopped still, he had heard the name whispered around the streets it seemed that he had been talking to one of the most powerful men in the Realm, he controlled all of the crime across the Realm, it was said that anyone who crossed The Shadow, never saw the light of the next day. Mac could remember all of the stories. He had sat outside the tavern listening to the men talk about him. Just as Mac started to move The Shadow walked out of the door behind him.

“Ah Mac, this is for you.” The Shadow tossed a coin to Mac who caught it with ease, as he opened his hand he saw a gold crown, this was more money than he had ever seen. Before Mac could say anything The Shadow had gone.

“Come on Mac.” Serlene said. Serlene took Mac to the kitchen and got him some food; it was the best food Mac could remember eating in the longest time. “This is one of The Shadow’s safe houses; he is only here when he is doing business in the City. You are my charge now, do not let me down, any trouble you get into will come back to me and I can be a hard mistress or a good friend it is up to you.”

The next day Mac's training started. He was up at dawn for breakfast and helping the cooks if they needed it, then he was off to the training yard, where he would have to run an obstacle course as fast as he could, twice, then for the next four hours, he would have to hide in different places around the house, standing still, on one leg or another, so that the people walking by would not see him. The next four years would be the hardest of his life; this training was to be more arduous and challenging than anything he had ever experienced, just as he became good at one test, Serlene would change it, moving from the house to the streets to another house. Then lessons in diplomacy, language, numbers and writing. Sometime Serlene would spend all day watching him, at other times he wouldn't see her for a week. One day when he was ten Mac was walking around the exercise yard on his day off and he thought about going into the town; but as he walked around thinking about what he was going to do, he came across the blacksmith. The blacksmith was beating at his anvil, the sound resonated around the yard, and Mac could feel the sound vibrating in his chest. He was repairing some of the training weapons, this was all Mac had ever seen him do. Mac stood there watching him. The Blacksmith was a tall man with his long black hair hanging limply around his face from the heat of the furnace, his muscles strained as he hit the hammer onto the blade of the sword. Mac stood there watching the blacksmith for a long time, just watching and listening, when the blacksmith turned to him.

"If you're going to stand there you can make yourself useful, see that fan over there, keep pressing it down to keep the fire nice and hot." Mac was so used to being given orders that he followed them without question, and from there on whenever Mac had a free day he would spend it helping the blacksmith. Over the years Mac started to work with the weapons and the blacksmith taught him how to care for them and create new weapons. The blacksmith didn't always need his help and sometimes told him to go away, on these days Mac would walk around town or head down to the wharf, relishing the sea air blowing across his skin.

At the age of twelve, Mac started weapons training, all day everyday he would be trained in how to use different weapons. Swords, knives, staffs, throwing stars, a bow and arrows and spears, if it could kill, Mac was taught how to use it. After a little while Mac felt that he was losing some of his skill in the training yard and so in the evenings when he had a little time to himself he would go out to the yard and practice, moving as fast as he could around the different obstacles, Mac loved the feeling of moving as fast as he could. Mac received his money but never spent it. After years of living on the street and now he had food, shelter and a purpose he had little need for money so he put it away, never counting it but always keeping it. Serlene's influence in Mac's life had been very little to this point. Mac had a number of teachers over the years but Serlene had not worked with him as yet. She would watch from the corner and talk to his teacher at the end of day telling them where she thought that he could do better.

At sixteen Serlene took over his teaching, from that time on he would always be at her side, apart from his free days which he still spent working with the blacksmith. Whenever she was sent on a mission for The Shadow Mac would follow, learning how Serlene worked, Mac learned more from Serlene at that time than from all of his other teachers over the previous eight years. He learnt how she moved and spoke to others, she commanded respect from everyone. She would sometimes send him on simple missions to hone his skills.

One day when Mac was eighteen he started the day as normal, he rose, washed and dressed, and headed down to the training yard for his morning exercise, thinking about what he and Serlene were going to be doing that day. As he entered the yard, two other people were already there, they were a couple of years older than him; Mac had seen them around the food hall, irritating the serving girls, like most of the other boys. They were carrying swords and sparring with each other but they were not putting in any effort. As Mac came closer the two men turned to him.

“Hey Danny, look who we have here. It’s Serlene’s little sheep.” The lad rested his sword and retied his black hair into a ponytail. What the lad had said surprised Mac. Very few people would insult Serlene and to call Mac little was far from truth, for with all his training over the last ten years Mac had developed quite a muscular and powerful frame.

“What’s the matter boy, lost your mummy.” questioned Danny, chuckling as he rested on his sword, his blue eyes flashed with hatred. Mac knew now that there was going to be trouble, these two wanted a fight, and Mac was the only one around, his sword was hanging on the far wall, Mac could make out its slightly curved blade, he had built it himself, the blacksmith had claimed it sound enough for him to use and was a good weapon for his first attempt.

“Lads I don’t want any trouble I came here just to get some exercise.” said Mac.

“Oh did you hear that Peter, little baby doesn’t want any trouble. So this is what Serlene has taught you, how to cower and beg.” Mac’s eyes flashed with anger, he took a step toward Danny, but turned suddenly landing a punch to Peter’s stomach, Danny lunged for Mac, Mac twisted away allowing Danny to pass him, Mac jumped over the balancing beam in front of him and grabbed his sword, by now Peter had regained his breath and both men were coming toward him waving their swords.

“I don’t want to have to hurt you two; you can only get hurt if you carry on pushing me.” warned Mac. Peter’s answer was to lunge, trying to drive his sword into Mac’s stomach, Mac knocked the sword away, sparks flew as the swords met, Mac brought his elbow up driving it into Peter’s face, there was a loud crack and Peter fell to the floor. Danny meanwhile had been moving around trying to get behind Mac, Mac was very lucky to see the sword at the last moment, Danny swung the sword trying to take Mac’s head off. Mac ducked and sprinted up a climbing wall onto the high balance beam. He turned as he got into the middle, Mac was at home in high places and the beam was his friend, he knew this and as Danny approached, he could see that Danny wasn’t happy being up here. Danny start to slash at Mac trying to put him off balance, but Mac just return his strike, not attacking but defending, Mac was hoping to wear Danny down and that he would just quit, but Peter had started to get up stumbling toward them and Mac knew that he needed to finish this quickly, as he turned and ran along the beam Danny was right behind him, when Mac reached the end of the beam he jumped turning in midair and landed behind Danny, where he hit him on the back of the head with the flat of his sword. Danny fell to the ground and didn’t move, Mac was worried that he had killed him but didn’t have time to check as Peter was closing in from behind walking slowly across the beam. As Peter swung Mac stepped into the strike and brought his sword up locking them together. “If you stop now I will let you live, if you carry on I cannot guarantee that.” Mac cautioned, Peter pulled away and swung his sword low hoping to take Mac’s knees out. Mac jump back giving himself some space to move, again Peter lunged toward Mac. Mac turned and grabbed Peter’s hand and arm. He then brought his knee up and arms down; there was a loud snap as Peter’s wrist broke, his sword fell from his hand as Peter fell from the beam and crumbled to the ground.

The Shadow and Serlene stood watching Mac as he defended himself.

“He’s ready.” boasted Serlene as the two of them moved away from the window.

“Are you sure, he didn’t kill them?” asked The Shadow.

“Of course not, he knows that they are your men, and probably just out for a bit of fun. If he had killed them then he would have had to explain it to you, and I would have had to get involved.” From then on Mac started to be given jobs of his own, go and see some Duke or scare someone who owed money. Sometimes he would work with Serlene but mostly he was on his own. About a year later things changed again, Mac and Serlene were sent to talk to a Duke who owed a lot of money to The Shadow and wasn’t willing to pay up. What the two of them hadn’t expected was for the Duke to set a trap, after they had escaped and were heading back, the duke’s guards were chasing but Mac and Serlene weren’t worried, no-one could

catch them across the roof, when Serlene's foot fell through a roof breaking her leg and trapping it. She told Mac to go and bring back help, but before he left she gave him two things. One was her cloak clasp with the two dragons circling each other. The other was a piece of advice:

"Mac, live your life for yourself and no one else. Do not allow others to rule you." Mac thought about this as he travelled to The Shadow's safe house as fast as he could. Mac raised everyone he could, to go back and help Serlene but they were too late, she was dead, the guards that were left didn't live for long, and soon after the Duke was a guest of The Shadow, his screams were heard for weeks, they were a sound that soothed Mac to sleep every night as he mourned the passing of his teacher and good friend.

For the next two years Mac continued working for The Shadow until one day he saw some guards wearing red tabards with a coiled golden snake that he had seen the night of his parents murder, Mac followed these guards across roof tops hoping that they would lead him to the man that had destroyed his childhood and caused him so much pain. The guards were gossiping about things that mattered little to Mac until they came to a tavern in the better part of town.

"Ok lads, we've finished for the night," said the head guard. "I'm going in to see Charmin and let him know what happened tonight, you lot be back here in the morning we leave at first light." The guards drifted away, each going their own way. The head guard entered the tavern. The head guard was another that Mac wanted, it had taken Mac a while to remember him, and it wasn't until he heard him talking that he remembered, he was the one that had hit the cook in front of him, the one that had boasted about raping his mother. Mac climbed onto the roof of the tavern to find a way in, it was a good tavern, and no entry could be made through the roof, which only left the windows. Mac entered quietly, the darkened room had a small cot in it, a baby was asleep, and Mac could hear two guards outside. So Mac made a small sound in the room allowing the guards to hear it. As the door opened, they both walked in, Mac smiled, they had made a grave mistake; one should always stay outside or go and find reinforcement. As the second one passed, Mac lunged with his dagger piercing the guards throat, slicing his voice box, it happened so fast that the first guard heard none of this until the other's body hit the floor, as he turned Mac threw a pink powder into the guards face, Serlene had taught him the art of poisons and while he didn't generally use then he always kept a handful available for when the need arose, this particulate poison was quite difficult to create and the guard fell to the floor soundlessly, his hands covering his face, the poison clogging his throat so that no sound could be made, blocking his airways so that he slowly suffocated. Mac stepped out onto the landing. To his left there were stairs leading to the bar, one guard stood with his back to Mac, to the right there was a large set of double doors that must lead to Lord Charmin's chambers. Mac quietly stepped behind the guard drawing his dagger across his neck. The guard made a gurgling sound as bubbles of blood formed at his throat. Now that the way was clear, Mac headed to the double doors; from behind them he could hear cries of pain. Mac opened the doors and stepped in the Lord was standing over the bed in his underwear holding a long wooden cane, while a young woman lay tied on the bed, naked.

"Who the hell do you think you are? Walking in here?" shouted the Lord angrily, slightly lowering the cane,

"I am Revenge. I am Justice." growled Mac

"Really my boy, aren't you a bit young for justice?" laughed the Lord, bringing the cane down sharply onto the girl's backside. The girl cried out in pain again.

"You have killed your last family; your guards will no longer rape and kill for you." Mac's anger was barely controlled in his voice

“Oh and who is going to stop me? You, ha, I have killed bigger and better than you boy. But before we get to that, tell me for who is this revenge that you seek?”

“For the McDouglles,”

“The McDouglles, the McDouglles, oh yes, god that was years ago, one of the first families to cross me with their high and mighty ways, but then who are you, my guards told me that none survived.”

“I was their son. I heard their cries. I am the last of the McDouglles.” At this Mac drew his sword from his back, the blade made no sound as it left its scabbard.

“Ah now my boy, why do you want to go and do something like that,” Lord Charmin walked to the mantelpiece drawing his sword. Always facing Mac, “Now is the only time you have to leave boy, it was a long time ago and I have no argument with you.”

“No but you did with Lord Bidden, or was there another reason why your guards have just returned from the remains of his estate.” Mac tested the Lord with a few quick strikes of his sword.

“Well he was being a pain; I couldn’t allow that to carry on.” This time the Lord attacked first, Mac backed up to the door, returning all of his strokes. The woman on the bed let out a scream each time the swords struck together. The two of them were starting to really attack each other, the Lord had intended only to beat the boy and send him packing. Yes he knew that the boy must have killed some of his guards but if they had let him get this far then they deserved to die, but now he found he was defending his life, the boy was better than he thought he could be. Mac on the other hand had started easy on the Lord, testing him, seeing if he was any danger. Mac’s confidences grew as he discovered that the Lord was no match for him, as his sword sliced Lord Charmin’s arm, the Lord stumbled back. For the first time Lord Charmin thought that he might not survive this night. Mac didn’t allow the Lord much time to recover, he pressed on, driving the Lord further into the room, the fight was now becoming desperate, and the Lord was doing everything that he could to stay alive. Mac now stopped toying with him, his only desire was to see him dead, every move that the Lord tried, Mac returned with ease, he was only waiting for his opening, and there it came. The Lord made a lunge for Mac’s neck hoping to finish this fight but Mac ducked, lifted his sword and plunged it into Lord Charmin’s chest. Lord Charmin staggered back dragging the sword from his body, as he hit the wall his legs gave way and he crumpled to the floor, dead. The woman on the bed was crying into the pillow, seeing the Lord killed and being unable to move, she was now waiting for her own death when a guard walked in. It was the guard from Mac’s past. The guard took everything in; his Lord was dead, the naked woman on the bed and Mac standing in the corner.

“You know boy that was a mistake, and one that you’re not going to live to tell of.” The guard drew his sword and advanced on Mac. Mac advanced giving himself some room, Mac had got his revenge now he just wanted this finished, so not even allowing the guard time to move in for the attack Mac jumped forward, bringing his sword down from over his head, the guard raised his sword to block the attack, but the guard didn’t see the dagger in Mac’s other hand, Mac plunged it into the guards stomach.

“Welcome to hell.” sighed Mac as he twisted the dagger and withdraw it. Mac looked around the room; the woman was still crying and at his feet were the bodies of two men that Mac hated. Now he would have to leave. The Shadow would not be happy, and the town of Samatol was no longer safe for him, so Mac left the tavern and headed out of Samatol, he didn’t know where he was going.

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Eleanor sat in her room rubbing her arms where her father had grabbed her, he had caught her doing magic again. Eleanor was fifteen with long wavy blonde hair, and pale blue eyes, she still had the look of a child but wouldn't for much longer; people could see the image of the woman she would be. Eleanor thought that this was the only reason her father tolerated her, hoping to marry her off to some rich noble and increase his standing in the community. Eleanor lived with her mother and father, but her mother was a meek thing, having been beaten for as long as Eleanor could remember. Her father had left Eleanor alone for a long time but more often now his anger was directed at her, normally for her performing some form of magic.

Magic was forbidden for women and they were not allowed to practice. Never mind that Eleanor came from a long line of sorceress's, and had better control and understanding of magical forms than all her male relatives, she was not allowed to use her magic. But sometimes it was so hard not to; magic seemed to know what was needed before she did. Today had been one of those days, her mother had just finished baking cakes, they smelt wonderful on the light spring breeze, Eleanor had thought of how much she would like one of those cakes when it had risen in the air and shot across the room to her hand. That was when her father had walked in, seeing it all. He had dragged her by her hair into his study, where he grabbed her arms and shouted at her, when he thought that she wasn't listening he had slapped her hard around the face, knocking her to the ground. Eleanor ran into her room crying. She looked in the long mirror that dominated one of the walls in her tiny bedroom, a red handprint could clearly be seen on her face, how she hated this place and want to leave. Eleanor's eyes drifted over a small carved wooden box that had been a gift to her from her dead grandmother, she had died three years ago, she had been a sorceress, one of the last. She always had time for Eleanor no matter what, when she had died it had broken Eleanor's heart, Eleanor thought sometimes that the only reason her father had never hit her before was because he was scared of her grandmother, only once had Eleanor ever seen her grandmother angry, that had scared her. Eleanor opened the box and pulled out the little note that was inside.

Dear Eleanor.

I am sorry that I have to leave you. I am unable to help you anymore, but remember this. You are of my blood and great things are in store for you. I leave you one gift, my ring, when you are ready to start your life put this on, and it will help you.

*Always with you my darling Eleanor
Grandma*

Eleanor had never put on the ring, afraid of what would happen. But now Eleanor looked at the ring; it was a small signet ring that would fit her little finger, engraved on the ring were two dragons circling each other. Eleanor again read the letter, when you are ready. Was she? She wondered. Eleanor sat there for a while longer, looking at herself in the mirror, the hand print on her face was slowly fading, but the marks on her arms looked as angry as ever. Did she want to start her life or have her father beat her again, should she put the ring on. Eleanor found herself slowly rolling the ring through her fingers, thinking of all the time she had been beaten by her father or that she had watched her mother be beaten and never fought back, she put the ring on her finger, the mirror in front of Eleanor flashed as if struck by lightning, then she could see a swirling blue tunnel, her grandmother stood in the middle of the tunnel.

"Eleanor my darling, you have decided to start your life. I am glad, but I must tell you this. Your life does not belong in Cocrell, go out into the world, and find your destiny." The image slowly faded leaving Eleanor stunned. What was she going to do, did she really see her

grandmother, she sat on her bed thinking, after a long time Eleanor had decided, she was leaving.

Eleanor moved around her room grabbing all the things that she thought she would need, finally when she stood in front of the mirror one last time, the mirror in front of her flashed a couple of times and the blue tunnel returned, drawing her eyes in to it.

“So my darling you are ready?” Eleanor stared at her grandmother again, she was smiling.

“Grandma?” she smiled.

“That's right my dear. Now we don't have much time, this portal won't stay open for long. When you leave town head west to the Black Forest, your father will think that you will head for Samatol, and we can't have him catching you. Not now that you have shown that you are ready to find your path. Trust the ring it will help you. Practice your magic but don't rely on it all the time, once you're in the Black forest there is a small cave about two days travelling into the forest, head for there, there you will decide what you want to do with your life. Good luck my darling, I will be watching over you.” The mirror flashed a couple more times, and Eleanor was once again looking at herself in the reflection. As night descended Eleanor sat in her room, waiting for all in the house to go to sleep, only when she finally heard her father close his study door and walk down the corridor to his bedroom, she start to become nervous, she waited another hour before she dared to move. At this time of night in the village of Cocrell most people would be asleep, apart from the odd wizard practicing spells and potions.

Cocrell was one of the last wizarding villages in the Realm, spell casters from all over came here to rest and relax. Eleanor moved through the house heading to the kitchen, grabbing as much food and water as she could carry, she didn't know how long it was going to be before she would be able to find supplies again, as Eleanor was leaving she saw her father's purse sitting on the living room table. Normally he would have put it in his study, but he had been drinking tonight and had forgotten, Eleanor thought about taking the whole purse, but while her father wasn't much of a wizard, he could still do a simple tracer spell, so Eleanor emptied out the purse into her own and left the empty bag lying on the table. She silently closed the front door, headed south to Raenor and then east towards the Black forest, the moon was bright with the stars filling the sky, Eleanor felt freer and happier than she could remember being for the longest time.

Chapter Two

Laura stood rooted to the spot, her bow string drawn tight against her cheek, the arrow resting between her fingers, the rabbit in her sights twitched its ears looking around the meadow in the morning mist, there was nothing else in the world apart from her, the arrow and the rabbit. Laura released the string sending the arrow to its target, the rabbit screeched as the arrow hit it.

“Well done, you have one of the best eyes that I have ever seen.” The world came crashing back. It was a misty spring morning in the Black Forest a raven cawed behind her hopping from each foot, Laura had been with the ranger for two months, in that time she had learnt his name was Bounder, and that he had been a ranger for a very long time, he had taught her about animal tracks and herbs, some of these she knew from her mother and father, but most of them she had never heard of. She absorbed the information like a sponge. The two of them walked over to the rabbit, where Laura got down to the job of skinning the animal, she would cure the hide for sale in the next town, the meat they would cut up and cook until it was as dry as rubber, but would last for weeks. “I think that is all I can teach you Laura, you have truly become a ranger novice.” Bounder started to look through his pack, pulling out an old book and unstrapped the bow from his back. He then picked up the bow that Laura had been using and rewrapped it. “This is where our paths split. I must go west to the Mettar Mountains the master rangers meet there every year. In one year I expect to see you there, you will be tested by the masters. But until then you must walk your own path. I give you two items, as you will do when you take on your apprentice and they become a novice. First is my herb lore, read it, learn it, and know it so well that you never have to read it again. And second is my bow it was given to me and now I give it to you. Laura took the items with reverence, the book she placed carefully into her pack, the bow she held in her hand and looked it over. It was a yew bow, strong and supple, it had been well look after and Laura promised herself that she would do the same, around the hand guard was an emblem of two dragons circles each other. “To the south is the village of Sudoumor you can get supplies there and see if there are any jobs that you can do. I’ll see you in one year at the Mettar Mountains. Take care.” Bounder headed off with nothing more than a wave of goodbye. Laura was in the north of the Black Forest, she packed up her belongings and headed south, she found that she was happy with her life for the first time that she could remember. She missed her father but would not dwell on it, there was nothing she could do about it, and she knew she had done everything she could at the time to save him, not that she had thought that at the time and it had taken Bounder a long time to get her to realise that.

Laura lived off the land and travelled for three days south, the raven from that day in the meadow had become her travelling companion, it never spoke to her but Laura had started to leave him food, staying well away from her home village of Priterm. About midday on the third day she came to a clearing, looking up at the sky Laura knew that she would have to find shelter and soon, the clouds were gathering, dark and angry clouds; the ones that promised that a huge storm was coming. Laura worked it out that she was still too far away from Sudoumor, but carried on, she hoped that the storm wouldn’t break until she was closer. Her hope was in vain, the storm broke with-in the hour, everything turned black and Laura couldn’t see through the rain, she just kept stumbling forward trying to find some shelter when her prayers were answered, in front of her was a cave, and what looked like a fire glowing inside. Laura stumbled forward thinking only of getting warm.

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Eleanor walked south for a week she rationed her food and water so that she could reach Raenor a small village south of Cocrell, it is a dull village where nothing happens and every day is the same, by the time Eleanor got there she was so tired and her feet and back hurt from the long walk. In the village there were a few shops and a large inn, Eleanor thought that this must be because that this was one of the few places that had a direct route to the Capital. Eleanor wasn't paying that much attention to what was going on; all she could think about was about getting some rest. She walked into the inn and straight up to the bar, it was so much different to the one back home, there were a lot of single woman, girls some of them even younger than her, some of them were sitting with various men.

"Could I have a room please?" A middle aged woman sitting at the end of the bar, looked up, Eleanor didn't like the way that she was looking at her but all she cared about was getting some rest and carrying on with her journey.

"John where are your manners, get this poor girl some water and we'll sort out a room for her." The middle aged woman at the end of the bar had stood up and walked over, she was on the larger size and wearing a dress that covered very little of her, Eleanor thought that if she sneezed it would cover even less. As the woman walked over Eleanor wondered how she hadn't sneezed with the amount of perfume she was wearing. A glass of water was placed in front of her.

"I'm madam Honey, and this is my inn, welcome." The woman gave a low bow that failed to cover her as she did this.

"Thank you madam," replied Eleanor politely as she drank down the water savouring its sweet flavour, but which left a bitter after taste in her mouth, Eleanor thought nothing of it.

"Would you like some more miss?" asked the barman pouring another glass, Eleanor nodded, her head was spinning, she thought that it was from getting too much sun in the last couple of days. The barman placed the glass in front of her, which she drank as quickly as the first.

Madam Honey was smiling.

"Why my dear you look very tired, come we'll take you to your room." Eleanor just nodded; she was unable to do anything else feeling very tired and nauseous.

"If you touch that girl I will kill you." One of the men sitting in a booth, stood up.

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Mac headed south, he was heading for Sudoumor, a small village in the southeast, somewhere that he could hide out and figure out what to do. By heading this way he would pass through Cocrell and Raenor, while Mac wanted to avoid as many people as possible, he had to collect supplies, and he needed a horse. But every person that he met was someone who could report him to The Shadow. After his second day of travelling he came to Cocrell, he decided to sit in the local inn and have a drink, take a room and get cleaned up. He sat in the corner of the inn, it was just as he had expected of a wizarding town, it was full of old men and a few woman talking about magic and what was going on in the town, it wasn't long before they forgot that he was sitting there, he listened in as across from him sat two old woman talking.

"Did you hear the noise coming from the Baker place today, he was hitting them again."

"Yes I heard, it was Eleanor I think she was doing magic again."

"I don't doubt it, look at whom her grandmother was, as if she could control it all the time at her age."

"I know what you mean; she's the spitting image of her grandmother, with her blonde hair and pale blue eyes. It won't be long before she is out of that house, mark my words." Mac listened for a little while longer amused with the town gossip but didn't understand the people who they were talking about, he could understand why they were talking about this

Eleanor, magic was forbidden for woman and had been for the last twenty years, every since the Lord Reagent took power, something about not trusting woman with the power of life and death, Mac didn't know why, men, woman they all had the power to take a life, so why forbid woman magic, he thought it was just the Lord Reagent testing his power. Mac finished his drink and spoke to the innkeeper about buying a horse, which turned out to be very helpful; he had a number of horses for sale and took Mac out to see them. Mac bought a nice dapple mare, she was brown and white and by the look of her could run for miles if he needed her too, Mac had a couple of hours sleep then that night he left Cocrell and heading for Raenor, he had heard a lot about this village over the years and decided that he would like to find out if all the rumours were true. On the horse it only took Mac two days to get there instead of the week it would have taken walking. He soon found the delight of Amber and Sweet, because of these two lovely ladies he decided to stay an extra couple of nights to enjoy their company, at the end of the week the door slammed and both Amber and Sweet moaned loud enough that Mac heard them.

“What’s the matter?” both the girls shook their heads they were not going to tell him. “Tell me I won’t ask again.” insisted Mac, his voice cold and frightening, Amber looked at him. “The girl that has just walked in, Madam Honey will get her. She will drug her so that she falls asleep. She will then take everything that she has and make her work to get it back. She isn’t even sixteen, how can she do that?” Mac looked around the corner and watch Eleanor drink her second glass of water, Mac could tell that she was being drugged. “Why my dear you look very tired, come we’ll take you to your room” Mac stood up. “If you touch that girl I will kill you.” Mac watched the barman, he wasn’t afraid, but the barman would be the one to cause trouble.

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The barman saw the lad stand up, he was tall, and dark but he wasn’t about to have any trouble in here, he went to grab the large club under the bar, when he saw the lad move he didn’t see what he did, the barman carried on going for the club when he felt something warm running down his chest, the barman looked down, and saw some red liquid on his chest. ‘Funny he didn’t remember spilling anything on himself’ the barman touched it; it was warm and slightly sticky. He was still looking at it when his feet went from under him and he hit the floor, still wondering what the liquid was.

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Madam Honey hadn’t seen what happened to the barman; she heard him hit the floor and stared in shock. Mac walked over and put his arm around Eleanor’s shoulders. “I think that we should get out of here.” said Mac feeling very protective of the young girl but not knowing why. She just nodded not knowing what was going on around her. “You can’t do this; I’ll have the town guard after you.” shouted Madam Honey, Mac smiled at her. “Take this as your only warning, anyone who tries to hurt me or this girl will die, be thankful that I don’t kill you here and now.” Mac led the girl out of the inn grabbing his bag from the booth as he left. He took the girl out to the courtyard; there was a young boy there, who he ordered to get his horse. Mac smelled Eleanor’s breath; he quickly opened his bag and made a drink for her to counteract what Madam Honey had given her. Mac sent a silent prayer to Serlene thanking her for everything that she had taught him. The boy returned with his horse, just as he was climbing up steadying Eleanor on the horse making sure that she didn’t fall, two town guards arrived.

“Stop,” Mac looked at them, one of them was a mere boy the other one looked like a veteran, maybe from the army.

“You don’t want to try and stop me,” warned Mac looking at the veteran. The veteran looked into Mac’s cold blue eyes and saw death awaiting him and anyone who tried to stop him.

“Go, I’ll tell her something.” as Mac rode pass the young lad tried to pull Mac from his horse. He was the newest lad in his section; the veteran didn’t see what happened only that his lad was falling away from the horse holding his throat trying to stop the blood from pouring out of it. Mac didn’t even look back as he carried on riding, heading east, trying to keep Eleanor on his horse.

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The Shadow sat behind his desk at the Capital, not that anyone here knew him by that name, he was reading the latest report from Samatol, Lord Charmin was dead, he knew that he would lose no sleep over that, he had wanted a reason to dispose of him for a long time, but the Lord had always stayed away from any areas that The Shadow controlled and now Mac had done it. He had found him and killed him; The Shadow couldn’t help but marvel at Mac’s work. To get in, kill who he needed to and leave as if nothing had happened, Lord Charmin’s wife had been in the room, when the guard had found her they couldn’t believe it, it was a blood bath around her but she had seen none of it and couldn’t help, as for the rest, anyone who had seen him had died, that was why The Shadow liked him. He could understand why Mac went after Lord Charmin, but he had gone against The Shadow’s orders and that meant he had to be punished. The Shadow didn’t like it. Someone knocked on the door to his luxurious room.

“Come.” called The Shadow.

“My lord, The Lord Reagent is ready for you.” The Shadow controlled his features, he did this every time he saw the Lord Reagent, how he hated that man, the man who had slaughtered the king and his wife, taking the princess into his protection so that he become the Lord Reagent not that she would ever take power if he had anything to do with it. “My lord,” mumbled the messenger.

“Yes. Yes I’m coming.” snapped The Shadow as he stood up from behind his solid oak desk, The Shadow followed the messenger to the Lord Reagent’s chambers. The doors were opened and he was introduced.

“Lord Bannalift.” The Shadow bowed to the Lord Reagent and stepped forward.

“My Lord, how may I be of service?”

“Ah Lord Bannalift, it’s so good of you to come.” As if anyone would say no to the Lord Reagent and live very long afterwards, too many good people had said no when the Lord Reagent had first taken power. They had all ended up with their heads on pikes stuck in the front garden for all to see. While The Shadow liked making a statement, he didn’t feel that his head on a pike would be a helpful one at the moment.

“I live to serve your majesty.” the Lord Reagent smiled.

“I hear that Lord Charmin has died. This is unfortunate; he was a loyal servant, I wish for his killer to be brought to justice” The Shadow held his expression but seethed, he was hoping that the Lord Reagent wouldn’t hear of this and that he would be able to deal with it. Now he would have to make it look like the Lord Reagent was involved with this and The Shadow had to get involved, not that he wanted to, but Mac had crossed The Shadow and that had to be dealt with.

“I will get right on it your majesty.” The Shadow stood there for a while longer before the Lord Reagent waved him away.

Back in The Shadow's room he looked at who he could send, not one of the king's men could harm Mac, that was something he was not afraid of, except for The Shadow, but who could he send, he didn't want Mac hurt, however something had to be done, so he continued looking through his notes, when he came across, an interesting piece of information, Dodger had been gambling again, and ran up quite a bill that they were expecting him to pay. Thinking about it, he would send Dodger, Dodger would have no chance of harming Mac and it would let Mac know that The Shadow had no problem with Mac, all he had to do was make sure was that Mac wasn't seen for awhile. After resolving all of his problems The Shadow was feeling quite happy with himself.



Princess Alexandra sat in the courtyard, her soft golden hair shining in the sun, her light blue eyes reflecting the perfect sky. Beside her sat the Lady Jane her closest friend and probably the most successful woman in the Realm, between her and her husband they ran most of the inn's in the major cities and towns, they were all of the highest quality. Lady Jane brushed one of the loose strands of hair behind her ear, it was as dark as midnight and curled, all the men wished to be the Lord Nathan, Lady Jane had blue eyes and a slim figure, no matter when the occasion, she looked like royalty, not that this was the reason Princess Alexandra like her. No it was because no matter what question she asked her she got a straight answer, no one else did that to the princess, she treasured it.

"Where is the Lady Anne today? Hanging around Lord Colten?" asked Princess Alexandra.

"I think hanging around is not the right word." retorted Lady Jane, trying to sort out her hair, that strand was starting to get on her nerves.

"Then what word would you use, she hasn't been anywhere else for the last week, anywhere he has been you can guarantee, she would be there."

"I think I would say she is a desperate girl trying to save her family from the humiliation, of what will befall them if she cannot marry quickly and well."

"Why. What have you heard?" Lady Jane looked around; while she cannot stand gossip she could not refuse her princess a direct question.

"From what I've heard, her father has had a bit of trouble at the dice table and has got the family into a lot of trouble, they are about to lose everything, Lady Anne can't help her father, but if she can marry well she can help her mother, if anyone found out what is happening before she can get married then no one will marry her, and all will be lost. Lord Colten is her only hope."

"I don't think I could imagine marrying someone I didn't love, just because my family wanted it."

"I'm sorry to tell you this, your majesty but you are more likely to suffer that fate than anyone. I'm surprised that your uncle hasn't already chosen someone for you."

"He wouldn't do that, I know people don't get on with him, but he has never shown me anything but love." Lady Jane just smiled at the princess, not speaking what was on her mind, while she knew that Princess Alexandra wouldn't say anything, there were too many people nearby and anyone of them could report her to the Lord Regent. The two of them sat in silence for a little while, the silence was comfortable, two people walked in, as they came closer, Lady Jane could see that it was Lady Anne and Lord Colten.



The Lord Reagent sat in his throne room, rubbing his fat hands together, 'The time was almost upon him, the time that he had been waiting for, for so long.'

"Steven come here." A small panel in the wall to his left opened and a squat creature stepped out. It was human or had once been human, but had devilled so deep and for so long into the dark magic's that his body had been twisted beyond anything anyone would say was human. His hair was pure white, but his eyes were black as night.

"Yes my Lord." hissed Steven,

"How goes my plan?"

"It is almost time, the planets are coming together."

"How long?"

"A time my Lord, a week, a month, six at the most. The planets move in their own time my Lord." The Lord Reagent picked up the goblet of wine beside him and threw it at Steven.

"If I wanted to guess, I could do that myself." Steven bowed repeatedly to the Lord Reagent.

"Yes my Lord."

"When will you start your spells?" questioned the Lord Reagent in a softer voice.

"Within the next moon cycle, my report will be in shortly after that, my Lord." The Lord Reagent sat taking all that Steven had said in and all that he didn't, with a flick of his wrist, Steven backed away and head down his dark tunnel, the wall sliding back into place.

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Mac and Eleanor sat in a small cave within the Black forest, when the storm had come their horses were dead tired and needing rest, they themselves could hardly walk, when they saw a light in the distance, they headed towards it hoping to find shelter from the weather, they came to this small cave a fire was lit but no one was around, the two of them huddled around trying to get warm, Eleanor's teeth started to chatter, her blonde hair was matted to her head from the rain. Mac didn't look that bad, it was as if the rain had just fallen off him, his black hair looked a little darker than normal, but Eleanor couldn't tell, as the two of them started to become warm someone else walked in, Mac drew his sword and stood his ground. The woman paid him no heed and stood by the fire, trying to warm herself.

"I'm sorry if we took your fire." apologised Eleanor, putting her arm on Mac's, pulling down his sword.

"This isn't my fire; I saw it as I travelled and needed to come out of that weather. I mean you no harm. My name is Laura." Laura removed her cloak, as a raven flew over her shoulder and landed on a boulder; Mac's sword came up again. "Don't worry about him, he's harmless". Mac could see that she was a ranger or at least one in training.

"I'm Eleanor, and this is Mac." Mac bowed to Laura.

"Where have you come from?" asked Laura,

"Raenor" Mac was back on the defensive. "You know it?"

"Only of it, my father told me all about it. He travelled a lot when he was younger, before he met my mother." Mac could hear no lie from Laura only pain so didn't pry.

"So where are you heading Laura?" asked Eleanor. Laura smiled

"To Sudoumor, I have some hides to sell, and work to find. What about you?"

"We are heading for there too; perhaps you would like to travel together?" Laura just nodded; she had taken food, water, herbs and a cook pot from her pack and was starting to cook a stew.

"Would you like some?" Eleanor nodded her mouth watering from the smell of the food. The three of them sat passing small talk as the stew cooked, when Laura shared out the food, she put a small portion to the side for the raven and then giving the most to Eleanor, which Mac

noted and appreciated, after the meal, the three of them were starting to feel tired and slowly they drifted off to sleep.

In the early hours of the next morning thunder clapped overhead, startling the three of them awake.

“Well I see it’s going to be a long day,” Laura put on her cloak and headed out into the rain to set some traps, if she was going to be feeding herself and the other two she would need more food, she didn’t think she would catch anything, but she had to try. When she came back into the cave, Mac asked what she had been doing, she told him, thinking that he was running from something, but seeing how he handled that sword yesterday, she didn’t think that she wanted to meet whoever was after him. About midday Eleanor was getting bored, she had slept most of the morning and there is only so many times that you can sleep when you’re not tired and she felt her magic trying to get out, but she didn’t want Mac or Laura to see that. “I’m going to have a look around the cave.” she jumped up and grabbed one of the torches. “Ok but don’t go too far, we don’t want you getting lost.” Eleanor had been gone for about ten minutes when they heard her scream; the two of them didn’t even think, they both jumped up, and ran towards the sound. Had the two of them been thinking they would have brought a torch or maybe gone a little slower but instead both of them fell through the hole that Eleanor had already fallen into. Eleanor got up kicking herself for falling but Mac and Laura would come looking for her so she wasn’t worried, when she heard the ground give way above her, when she saw Mac and Laura land in front of her, Laura was trying to get off of Mac, but kept slipping. Well at least Mac and Laura were here with her.

“Great can anyone see?” asked Mac, as he finally pushed Laura off of him and stood up.

“Oh I can.” said Laura, her voice dripping with sarcasm, “Sorry didn’t I say, I CAN’T SEE WHEN THERE’S NO LIGHT,” she shouted, she was angry with herself, but it felt good to take it out on someone else.

“I can help if you give me a minute.” calmed Eleanor,

“Ok, where’s the torch?” asked Mac ignoring Eleanor. Eleanor started to concentrate, the last time she tried this she had set her arm alight. She didn’t want to do that now, she could feel the heat running down her arm, and it started to glow.

“Ah found it.” shouted Mac as a small ball of fire leaped from Eleanor’s hand and stopped over Mac’s head. Mac dropped the torch and moved out of the way.

“Oh sorry, Mac,” said Eleanor

“You’re a sorceress?” asked Laura. Eleanor just nodded it was getting harder to control the ball of fire.

“Mac please light the torch, I don’t think I can hold on to this for much longer.” gasped Eleanor as sweat started to run down her face. Mac didn’t need asking twice, and lit the torch, Eleanor let the flame disappear from her mind and the ball slowly faded away. Both Mac and Laura just looked at Eleanor, when Mac started laughing.

“What so funny?” asked Eleanor.

“I was just thinking of all the trouble that you would have caused Madam Honey, if she had managed to get you.” At that Eleanor started to laugh as well. “Come on we’d better find a way out of here.” The three of them headed down the tunnel they could now see in front of them, they could tell that they fell quite a way, for the roots of trees were over head, and it was warm and dry, the rain hadn’t reached this far yet. As they walked Laura checked her bow making sure that it hadn’t suffered any damage in the fall.

The three of them had been walking for about an hour, they torch was slowing dying and the tunnel that they walked didn’t seem to be ending, as they turned a corner they came to another cave entrance, that had a cover stone that caught all of their eyes it had the symbol of two dragons circling each other. In the centre was another smaller hole, as there was no other way to go. The three of them stood there, Eleanor looked at the smaller hole, and it

looked like her ring. Eleanor placed her ring into the whole when they heard a click and the cover stone moved away.

“How did you do that?” asked Mac.

“My ring, it opened the door.” breathed Eleanor, surprised herself. The three of them walking into the cave it was like walking into an oven, they couldn’t tell why it was so hot, at the same time the torch spluttered a couple of times and finally died. As the three of them stood there in the dark they could see a light off into the distance. They all decided to carry on heading towards the light. They rounded another corner and came into a huge opening, off to their left was a lake that was burning in places, to their right was the largest creature that any of them had ever seen. The golden dragon just looked at them, Laura had her bow cocked in seconds, aiming at the dragon, later she would think of the futility of that but at the time she wanted a weapon in her hand, Mac had thought the same, his sword glistened as he pushed Eleanor behind him.

“Put down your weapon, I called you here. You have nothing to fear from me.” boomed the dragon, the three of them carried on staring at the dragon, not even realising that it was the one to speak., “For heaven’s sake, all humans are the same.” grunted the dragon, a strained look passed across the dragon’s face, as he started to ripple, slowly the dragon looked small, even puny. “Now will you put down your weapons?” asked the dragon, who now looked like an old man dressed in a ragged grey robe that must have once been white but now had become dull. Mac slowly lowered his weapon, but Laura took awhile long. The old man hobbled over to the wall where a cane rested, he picked it up and continued to hobble over to the three of them, looking each one of them over slowly, and he made a small sigh and moved away to a diminutive table that none of them had seen upon entering. “Come eat, I’m sure you’re hungry.” The old man sat down, Eleanor was the first one to approach.

“Am I right in saying you’re an elder dragon?” the old man smiled nodding to Eleanor.

“You would be Victoria’s granddaughter, you look a lot like she did at your age, and she was the greatest sorceress I have ever known, even before my gifts” the old man coughed a little.

“And when you’ve live five thousand years that’s saying something.” smiled the old man offering Eleanor the chair. Mac stepped forward.

“You knew her?”

“Not personally, but her grandmother I did, magic is often handed down in families. I’ve no doubt that I know someone from each of your lives, even if it was briefly.” smiled the dragon thoughtfully, Mac took another step forward.

“And who from my life did you know.” demanded Mac, the old man smiled looking up at Mac.

“From your clothes and the cloak pin, I would say it was Serlene, a truly noble woman.”

“You knew Serlene but why did she never say anything about you?”

“Nor could she, as she well knew, for the people to take their place could never know until I meet them. But I would have thought that she would have brought you here.” the old man looked back at Eleanor, “As well as your grandmother.”

“She couldn’t she died a year ago, she saved my life.” sobbed Mac who turned his back fighting the tears that tried to appear.

“My grandmother died three years ago. I don’t know how, but when I put this ring on I saw her in a mirror she told me to head south.” the old man nodded a sad look upon his face.

Laura had listened to all of this, but still did not trust the old man.

“And you my dear, how is your mother, I see that you have her bow.” Laura took a step back.

“This wasn’t my mother’s, it was given to me by a ranger called Bounder.”

“Bounder, young man with blonde hair and green eyes, but what happened to your mother?”

“I don’t know, she died in her sleep when I was ten.”

“I’m truly sorry child. But that bow belonged to your mother, the only thing that I can think happened was after your mother’s death, your father gave the bow to your uncle to keep safe until you required it.”

“My uncle?” asked Laura

“Yes my dear, your mother was a twin, after she had been here she told him everything, all against the rules of course, but they were like two peas in a pod, the old man shook his head slightly. He went by the ranger name Bounder, but I thought him long dead.” A strange look passed across his face, he then looked to all three of them. “You see the people that you know are a lot older than you would think.”

“Older, they can’t be that much older.” The old man laughed as Mac went to sit opposite him, Laura walked over feeling slightly better.

“The first time that I meet your grandmother, Victoria, your teacher, Serlene and you Mother, was about a thousand years ago, at the time when the dark elves were attacking from the west and we were looking at war.” The three of them looked blankly at the old man. He continued letting them hear all of it. “You see they were the Sentinels, here to bring peace to the Realm.”

“The Sentinels, they’re just a myth,” interrupted Mac.

“They’re more real than that, they lived in the world, helping where they were needed, and now that they have gone it is time for their replacements to step up.” The old man stood up, walked back to his lair; and began rummaging through his possessions.

“What do you mean their replacements to step up?” asked Eleanor.

“I thought that was pretty obvious, you three, the chosen ones, you each carry the symbols.”

Chapter Three

The Shadow was beginning to think he would never get out of this office, every time that he went to go for a walk another report would be put in front of him that required his eminent attention, but this last one was troubling, he wanted to help, but the only help that he could give might make things worse. The Shadow scratched his beard, he had been thinking of removing it but every time he did he decided not to, it would make it too easy for people to recognise him if he needed to disappear. The report in front of him was from one of his spies in the Capital, news about Lady Anne's father was starting to get around town, if she didn't marry soon, she would lose everything, she was trying to marry Lord Colten, 'the traitor', his father was the most responsible for the downfall of the King. The Shadow was sure that Lord Colten's father had stood there when Lord Reagent had raped and murdered the Queen in front of the King. The only reports that he could get hold of were sketchy, of how he had the King beg to spare his wife and to kill him. Lord Reagent hadn't, he had inflicted every torture he could think of on his brother and his wife. And now Lady Anne wanted to marry Lord Colten, he didn't like it, while he had never seen or heard of anything menacing about Lord Colten, he didn't think that the 'apple had fallen far from the tree'. But if he didn't do something, she and her mother would lose everything. The Shadow stood up and headed to the throne room. Two criers stood outside.

"I wish to see Lord Reagent." One of the criers bowed and the other slipped inside, he came out shortly after and bowed to The Shadow. The two enormous solid oak doors opened, as he walked in the two criers shouted out.

"Lord Bannalift." The Shadow walked up to the throne and bowed.

"Ah Lord Bannalift, what an unexpected pleasure, what can I do for you on this fine day?" The Shadow's guard was up, normally when the Lord Reagent was in this good of a mood someone was going to die.

"I have sad news your Majesty."

"Really, and pray tell, what might that be?"

"Lord Colten has been causing trouble." He hadn't but if it was questioned The Shadow could soon give the Lord Colten more trouble than he wanted.

"And what has the young Lord been doing?"

"The normal, bar fighting, wenching, and generally giving the palace a bad name." Lord Regent's face darkened.

"I owe his father much, but even I am beginning to lose my patience with the boy."

"I may have a solution to this problem, my Lord."

"Go on."

"Marry the boy off sire, some young Lady, which may settle him down."

"And who did you have in mind, for the young stallion, I hope it's not my niece." The Shadow held his tongue, he knew that the Lord Reagent had something planned for the princess, but he couldn't find out what it was and that worried him.

"No your Majesty I was thinking of the Lady Anne."

"Lady Anne, skinny girl, not very pretty?" The Shadow wouldn't agree with the description, but at least the Lord Reagent hadn't laughed.

“Yes your Majesty.”

“Hmm, that’s quite an idea; do you think that this girl would agree to this marriage?”

“I think that she could be talked into it sire.” smiled The Shadow.

“And what about Lord Colten, what do you think he will say?”

“If it comes as a direct order from you my Lord, he will accept it; he cannot afford to lose your favour.”

“Good. I like it, set things in motion; I will talk to Lord Colten.” The Shadow bowed and left the throne room, only smiling once he was back into the safety of his office, now he only hoped that it was the right thing. There was nothing he could do for her father, but The Shadow owed him a favour, and this was all he could come up with in the short time he had.

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Princess Alexandra sat in her garden, news of Lady’s Anne wedding had spread like wild fire, it was as if all of Lady Anne’s prays had been answers, but Alexandra remembered Lord Colten as a child, he had laughed at others pain, and bullied everyone around him. He was said to be furious at the wedding but in the Lord Reagent’s present, he showed willing and happiness, but it was no secret that he had wanted the princess’s hand, which was one small blessing. Lady Jane entered the princess’s garden.

“Your Highness, how are you on this fine day?” Lady Jane bowed and sat beside her.

“I’m worried about Lady Anne, I know that sometimes she is a pain, but she doesn’t deserve a life with Lord Colten.” said Princess Alexandra,

“You never know, they may be happy together.” replied Lady Jane

“I doubt it, he will never be happy, he wants the throne.” said Alexandra

“And you know this your Highness.” said Lady Jane, Alexandra smiled.

“Sadly yes, when we were children, he used to come over with his mother, he told me then how his mother had plans that they were to be married and all the things that he would do as king. I don’t think his mother’s mind has changed and I’m sure his hasn’t.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Lady Jane shaking her head. “To be honest we all thought that Lord Reagent was grooming him to be your husband, now we wonder what he has in store for you.”

The two of them sat there for a while longer, before Lord Reagent summoned Alexandra.

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Dodger sat in his small rooms in Samatol, he had just received a letter from The Shadow, all of his debts were paid, but in return he would have to track down Mac. Mac was probably the best man that The Shadow had ever turned out; Dodger knew why he was being sent. One it was to stop him gambling and the other was so Mac knew that The Shadow had no problem with him. But there was a small chance that Mac would kill him on sight, not giving him time to give him The Shadow’s message. So Dodger packed up the few items he needed and

headed south, out of Samatol, it was said that he had been seen heading that way, Dodger had only just got out of the city, when a horse almost ran him over, this was why he liked the city, horse's didn't go that fast and there were more people than horses.

"Hey watch it," shouted Dodger pushing the horse away.

"You," replied the man on the horse.

"What" Dodger didn't care that the man was dressed in purple robes, he just wanted to be on his way, as he started to walk on the man grabbed his throat, he was unable to breathe.

"Do you not know how to address a magician, you maggot, now show the proper respect?" The man made a slinging gesture and Dodger flew through the air landing a few feet away, some of the city guard walked over, laughing at Dodger, all of them knew him. "Now maggot I asked you a question." Dodger wasn't the smartest of The Shadows men, but he still didn't back down.

"Sorry I missed that, what was it again dung breath?" Dodger got up and started to walk away with his head down when he heard the guards talking.

"Stop," ordered the captain drawing his sword. Dodger froze he didn't want any trouble from the guard. The Shadow wouldn't be happy.

"Dodger go about your business." That was when Dodger looked up at the man in the purple robes, he held a ball of fire in his hand, anger radiated out in waves from the man. The guards don't want to get involved, but they were here and they could not allow someone to be killed in front of them. "Sir if you would come with me, perhaps we could help." The man sighed and the ball of flame disappeared. Dodger continued walking.

"I'm looking for my daughter, she ran away two weeks ago." Dodger wasn't surprised but kept on walking.

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Sir Baker walked into the captain's office, his purple robes swaying around him, the captain sat down behind his desk, removing his swords.

"How can I help you sir?"

"It's my daughter; she ran away two weeks ago, we had an argument." the captain put up his hand.

"Sir I don't need to know specifics. If you could just give us a description, and we will see what we can do." That captain didn't like this man but he knew better that to argue with a man who wielded magic, it tended to lead to very a very short life.

"Her name is Eleanor; she is just over four foot tall, with pale blue eyes and wavy blonde hair. Will that help you?"

"Thank you, where will you be staying so that we may get a hold of you?"

"I will be staying at the Athame Inn." The two talked for a short time about Eleanor after which Sir Baker turned and left, leaving the captain to carry on with his work.

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Laura stood by the lake, shooting arrows into a log floating on the lake, 'I have to get out of here, I have a life to get on with,' thought Laura. Mac stood nearby, Laura hadn't seen him yet, and he doubted that she would. Eleanor sat with the dragon, the dragon had turned back to that form shortly after their first conversation, he said it was getting hard for him to hold his human form, Eleanor was the one who talked to him the most, mainly about her grandmother but also about magic and how to hold it, she was becoming quite good, Mac waited until Laura had finished shooting before he headed over.

"Mac?" gasped Laura.

"Laura are you alright? You seem a little edgy." Laura ran her hands through her hair.

"I just need to get out of here."

"And you will." said the dragon, for such a large creature it could move like a cat. "Please come and sit." The three of them retook their seats at the table, but this time the dragon didn't turn back. "Now for the last of my tales, for it is almost time for me to die." Eleanor let out a small cry. "Don't cry child I have lived a long and happy life, I can only hope the same for you. You may not yet believe, but you three are the Sentinels, upon leaving here, each of you will be given two gifts, the first is long life like that of the Sentinels before you. The second will be solely for you. Eleanor you will be granted complete control of the elements, be careful this is a powerful magic, none before you have ever had this, I look to you two to help her. Mac none can see you with your training; now every shadow will hide you, you will move like the wind, no sound or mark will ever be made by you. And finally Laura," smiled the dragon, "You can hear and speak to animals, now with concentration you will be able to see what they see, hear what they hear and smell what they smell. Now it is time for you three to go, by the lake is a staircase that will lead you up; you are heading for a perilous time, I ask but one thing, head to the Capital, that is all." The dragon had started to fade and it could be seen struggling with itself. The three of them headed up the staircase, they found their kit still by their fire that was lit a week ago, outside the sky was clear and crisp, they all grabbed their belongings and headed out, stretching as they came out under the bright sunshine. Mac moved up beside Laura, no sound was made.

"Now that's going to take time to get used to!" laughed Mac, making Laura jump as she slapped him on the arm. "So what are we going to do?" Eleanor walked up beside them.

"The dragon said to go to the Capital." replied Eleanor, Laura looked at her thoughtfully.

"I think we should head to Sudoumor, it's not that far out of the way, and it's the only way to go if you want to avoid Raenor." Mac smiled at Eleanor.

"To Sudoumor it is then." The three of them set off, walking at an easy pace, Mac leading his horse with Laura's raven sitting on the saddle, at midday, a loud cry could be heard from the forest, it sent all of the birds flying away. Laura looked up and was suddenly filled with the image of a hundred birds taking flight, her head span, and she fell to the floor, all she could see and feel was the air beneath her, the wind whipping past. She heard the cry again, all the birds chorused, 'Good bye friend.'

"Laura are you ok?" shouted Mac as he slapped her around the face, Laura shook her head.

"Wow,"

"What happened?"

"I saw what the birds saw, what a feeling." Laura scrambled to her feet with the help of Mac and they continued walking. Eleanor was sitting on the horse, she was feeling a little upset, she hadn't tried her magic in a while but was a little worried about doing so, if it went wrong

she could hurt someone. The three of them kept a good pace but Laura stopped them just as dusk was approaching, leading them from the road back into the Black Forest, they heading to a small clearing with a trickling stream running through it.

“Nice find” smiled Mac as he placed his pack against a nearby tree, and lead the horse to the stream allowing her to drink. Eleanor placed her pack down beside Mac’s and started collecting firewood. Laura disappeared off into the Forest to hunt for food. Mac collected the canteens and started to fill them at the stream. Eleanor sat in front of the collection of firewood focusing her power, she felt the heat running down her arms, her hands starting to glow, and as her power flowed through her she was amazed at how easy it was. A small ball of fire appeared in the centre of her palms and was growing rapidly. Eleanor stared at the rolling ball of flame, lost in its swell of colours.

“Eleanor?” called Mac startling Eleanor, the ball launched out of her hand exploding the firewood and flew straight towards Mac’s head. Mac watched the fireball and as it approached, he somersaulted out of the way, the fireball passed over his head and hit a nearby tree, engulfed it in spectacular flames.

“Mac?” shouted Eleanor running over to check if he was alright. “Are you ok? I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” tears had started to run down her face as Mac took her into his arms. Eleanor buried her head into Mac’s chest.

“It’s alright, no-one was hurt.” reassured Mac as Laura came running through the trees “It ok Laura.” Laura looked over at the burning tree and shook her head.

“I’ll be back in minute” said Laura as she disappeared into the Forest. Mac started to lead Eleanor over to the fire pit that was now burning easily. Laura came back through the trees carrying a brace of rabbits.

“What happened?” asked Laura as she sat down by the fire and started to skin the rabbits,

“It was my fault, I lost control. I’m so sorry.” sobbed Eleanor.

“Eleanor don’t worry about it, no-one was hurt.” soothed Mac.

“Eleanor, you’re still young and if you’re anything like the rest of us your skills and power have increased greatly, that is going to take time and practice to control.” assured Laura as she finished skinning and deboning the rabbits, her raven flew over and landed on her shoulder, Laura smiled and was feeding him some of the meat when she felt a pressure in her mind, as Laura focused on the pressure she felt a ball in her mind it was golden in colour and felt very heavy. Laura felt around the ball when it split open and she fell in, as she regained her focus she was looking at herself but everything was lacking bright colours as if everything had been washed out, she launched herself from the ground, she was flying through the air, over the Black Forest, wind flowing over her wings, the light was fading fast and she was circling the camp.

“Laura, Laura” shouted Mac grabbing Laura’s shoulder.

“Mac?” said Laura breathing hard, “Wow that was interesting”. The raven landed back into her shoulder and rubbed his head against her cheek, Laura stoked his head absentmindedly.

“What happened?” asked Mac, Eleanor was staring at Laura.

“My friend just took me for a little ride.” Laura smiled, and returned to preparing their dinner. “I’m going to have to work out how that happens.” commented Laura as her raven launched off her shoulder again and flew back to the horse’s saddle.

“I guess we’ve all got things to learn.” sighed Mac, he had been thinking about what the dragon had said. He was looking into the fire; Laura and Eleanor were talking about what had happened to each of them. Mac was getting lost in the shadows cast by the firelight, he could feel them gathering around him, he pulled on them wondering what would happen.

“MAC!” screamed Laura and Eleanor.

“What?” replied Mac looking at them both, Laura and Eleanor were both staring at him? Their mouths hanging open.

“You just disappeared.” said Laura

“What?” questioned Mac sounding confused.

“All of a sudden you weren’t there, everything was black as if all of the light had disappeared, and there was just a black shadow.” explained Eleanor, Mac started to laugh.

“I guess I didn’t know how right I was,” he said rubbing his hands over his head. Laura and Eleanor joined in with Mac’s laughter. The rest of the night went by quickly. The meal eased any tension left from their discoveries, they lay down on their bed rolls, talked into the night, their conversation easy and light. At the first rays of morning Laura woke, she silently rose and cleaned up the camp packing away all of their possessions. Mac woke up soon after and helped her; they both remained silent not wanting to wake Eleanor until they had to. Eleanor woke when the morning sun glared into her eyes; she stretched and yawned, “Good morning sleepy head,” smiled Mac.

“What time is it?” asked Eleanor, Laura slung her pack onto her back.

“Time we were leaving.” replied Laura, Eleanor rolled off the ground and groaned.

“I admit I do miss a bed,” laugh Eleanor stretching out her aches from sleeping on the floor, the other two joined in as Eleanor grabbed a quick bite of dried rabbit that Laura had prepared and some bread that they had to eat and the three of them headed back to the road. The next few days set into the same pattern, they finished walking just as dusk was setting in, Eleanor would sort out the fire while Laura would head off into the Forest to hunt for food and Mac would fill the canteens and set out everyone possessions. While dinner was cooking they would each practice their new skills, Laura found she could feel each animals present and could enter their mind, once in there she could experience everything they experienced. Eleanor could call on all of her old magic and now had the power over each of the elements, fire was the hardest one to control, but as with the others she could shape and move them as she needed. Mac could pull and shape the shadows as he desired, covering himself and others around him. By the end of the week they had reached Sudoumor.

Just as the day’s light was setting they walked into Sudoumor, it was a dusty town with an old wooden fort, a couple of inns and a few stores, there were a few farms on the outskirts but they were more brown than the normal green that the three of them had become used to seeing, the town’s main produce was spider silk. The desert to the west had hundreds of silk spiders, but it was a hard life, most people walked around with their heads down, thinking about what tomorrow would bring. They stopped outside one of the inns, the sign was faded and hanging by only one hinge, from the peeling paint they read, ‘The Silk Pillow.’

“I hope the place is better on the inside.” said Laura, as she started to unload the horse, she had caught a number of rabbits on the way, and hoped to sell them here.

“I don’t care as long as they have a bed, I feel as if I couple sleep for a week.” said Eleanor, a small boy stepped out, his clothes were in rags and he didn’t have any shoes,

“Your horse,” offered the boy.

“Yes please also make sure he’s fed and watered too.” ordered Mac as he tossed him a silver coin, the boy deafly caught it and went about seeing to the horse, the three of them walked into the inn, Eleanor stayed between Mac and Laura, not forgetting the last time she had be into an inn. An oldish man stood behind the bar polishing some glasses, the three of them were quite surprised, the place had seen better days, but it was clean and well looked after.

“Can I help you?” asked the man placing down the glass.

“Three rooms if you have them.” requested Mac, the old man smiled. His lip crooked up making an old scar twist in protest.

“I think we can fit you in. Come this way.” said the old man stepping out from behind the bar and leading them up the stairs to their rooms, they were interconnecting so they could move between each others’ room without going into the hall. “Dinner will be ready in an hour; its lamb stew with fresh bread, but the bar is open now. There’s a hot spring to the back if you would like to freshen up, it’s one bronze coin for clean towels, Mac pulled out a gold coin, the man’s eyes sparkled as Mac placed it into his hand. That would cover a week’s stay. “Sir this is too much.” Mac just smiled and closed the man's hand. The two girls went into the hot spring first while Mac went down to the bar. He wanted a beer; Mac sat at the bar, while the old man got him a drink.

“This looks like a good pub, what happened?”

“It was the best, owned by the Honesty ones.” Mac had heard of this couple they came from the Capital, owned a dozen inns over the Realm, real high class. “They built this one during the silk boom, when everyone was wanting silk garments, silk this, silk that. Just before the market dropped, they sold this off, I bought it, I was working for them at the time and they gave me a really good deal on it. But they warned me that the town trade was about to die, I didn’t listen, it took five years before it completely died, but it did and all the money I made in those years I have now lost. I’m too old now to do anything else. I couldn’t see the place bought by someone just to be turned into some cheap brothel.” Mac just nodded, the two girls shouted from the top of the stairs to say the hot spring was clear, and that he could go in.

“Thank you sir,” said Mac downing his beer.

“Sir, ha haven’t been called a sir in a few years boy, it’s Donald.” Mac nodded shaking his hand and headed up stairs.

After Mac had come out of the hot spring the three of them headed down to dinner, it wasn’t a grand buffet, but a simple meal that warmed their stomachs and filled them. They were talking between themselves about what they would do tomorrow, when they heard cries of panic from outside, Donald came bursting in through the front door.

“Quick help,” the three of them jumped up and followed Donald, as they came outside they could see what was going on, a house down the street was in flames, people were starting to form lines from the well to sling water at the house. The three of them were quite close to the house when they heard a scream.

“Andrew. Where’s Andrew?” a woman was running around looking at everyone. “My boy, my baby boy, he’s still in there.” Tears streamed down her pale face, the woman tried to run back into the house but the villagers stopped her. Eleanor’s power awoke she felt the heat radiating from her arms she could feel the flames; saw them inside herself.

“Mac I can hold back the flame. But someone needs to go in there and save the boy.”

“Eleanor are you sure?” asked Mac, Eleanor just nodded; it was as if she was part of the fire. “Laura, watch her.” Mac ran into the house, Eleanor could feel him, feel the fire’s anger towards him, it wanted to hurt him, Eleanor grabbed hold of the flames and pulled them away, she found where the boy was, the fire was all around him, she created an opening for Mac. The fire was in her control, Mac ran through the house despite the oppressive heat, he could hear the boy’s cries and every time he tried to get to him the fire tried to stop him, but Eleanor took control of the flames and allowed him through. Mac grabbed the boy in his arms, when the flames broke away, and licking Mac’s side pain raced through his body, he pushed away the pain and carried the boy out. Eleanor retook control of the fire sweat soaking her brow, while Laura kept her standing. The fires anger flared in her. Mac stepped out of the house.

“That’s it Eleanor,” reported Laura

“No, it will bow to me.”

“Eleanor,” shouted Laura, grabbing her arms and looking into her pale blue eyes. “Enough, let it go, you won.” Eleanor’s eyes focused on Laura, then she started to cry, Laura pulled her into a hug letting Eleanor cry freely. The woman crowded around Mac taking her son and hugging him, Mac walked over to Laura and Eleanor.

“Is she ok?” asked Mac, Eleanor had stopped crying and fallen into an exhausted sleep, Laura nodded, Mac picked Eleanor up and heading back to the inn, behind them the house continued to burn. The next day the three of them sat down stairs eating breakfast, Eleanor was slightly pale with dark rings around her, Donald came over.

“I want to thank you three for last night.”

“It was nothing,” said Mac trying to change the subject.

“My lad I have been around for a number of years, what you did was very impressive, what the young girl did was one of the most powerful displays of magic I have ever seen.”

“Me I didn’t do anything.” said Eleanor not wanting to cause trouble or draw attention to herself, as magic was not meant to be practiced by women.

“Don’t worry my girl, I’ve know a few spell casters in my time some of the best were women, and what you did last night was, truly spectacular, I remember talking to one once. She told me, ‘It’s sometimes hard, the magic tries to take control, afterwards you always have the feeling of betrayal, but don’t let it win.’ That’s what happened last night, I think I’ll be hearing of you three in the future.” Eleanor just bowed her head, she knew what he spoke of, how could she have let the magic take control like that. Donald walked away with more life in his step than he had the day before.

“I’m sorry about last night, it won’t happen again.” said Eleanor, Laura placed her hand on Eleanor’s shoulder.

“It will, just know that we will be around to help. You need to practice, don’t feel shame about yesterday, you were brilliant.” boasted Laura, Eleanor smiled. “Come on I want to go to the store before we head off.” said Laura, and they packed up their kit and headed to the store, where Laura exchanged her rabbits for some herbs and travelling food that would last about a month and taste like it had lasted two but just eating meat wasn’t good for you. The three of them would be headed east from Sudoumor, this would take them across the river Muse to Bendol, they would then turn north east to Lustor and take the road to the Capital, and they should be in the Capital in three months.

The three of them practiced each day gaining more control. Eleanor could hold a number of spells at once, but they became more difficult when she used different elements that countered each other, like holding a shield of air and controlling some form of earth. Mac could move like the wind, shaping each shadow so that no-one ever saw or heard him while he moved around, and Laura found her awareness was expanding, she could focus on a single animal that was within a large group. Her awareness was still greatest with her raven but she still wondered why he didn't speak with her, while the other animals that Laura met did. Eleanor's next challenge came as they reached the river Muse; the spring rain had burst the river banks. Eleanor had to stop the water so the three of them could cross, as she stopped the water she could feel its weight and pressure against her and was getting stronger. Mac placed Eleanor onto the horse and led them across the river, but once across. She collapsed, Eleanor stayed on the horse, so she could sleep and they carried on travelling to Bendol.

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Lady Anne stood at the altar, her long blonde hair hanging in curls around her shoulders, her green eyes sparkling in the spring sun, Lord Colten, stood beside her wearing dark blue robes with a red sash around his waist, she thought that he was so handsome, she was going to make him happy, the Princess and Lady Jane sat behind her, they had been so nice to her, her mother was beside them, looking sad but happy. Tonight was going to be a night to remember thought Lady Anne.

"And do you Lord Colten; take the Lady Anne to be your wife." Lord Colten paused, Lady Anne looked at him.

"I do," said Lord Colten through gritted teeth. After the ceremony, everyone was stood around eating, drinking and chatting excitedly, the Lord Reagent had supplied everything for them, and Lady Anne was having the best day of her life, when Lord Colten walked over with a cold smile on his face. "Anne my darling, I was hoping to meet your father here today, but I don't see him."

"Oh my father, why my father, no he's not here, he couldn't make it. He sends his apologies." The smile on Lord Colten face turned colder.

"So I won't be able to ask him about your dowry." Anne's face turned white.

"My dowry, I didn't think you wanted one."

"Of course my dear, don't worry about it, if you would excuse me," sneered Lord Colten, his face strained from controlling his anger. That little bitch, to think that I would marry her if I had a choice, Lord Colten headed to the throne room Lord Reagent would hear about this. The criers saw him coming and the look on his face, before he could get close one of them had gone in and told Lord Reagent, so as Lord Colten came closer the two huge double doors opened.

"Lord Colten." Lord Colten stopped in front of Lord Reagent and bowed; standing beside him was Lord Bannalift, one of the lord Reagent's advisers.

"Lord Colten." said Lord Bannalift, Lord Colten nodded back, trying to get his anger under control.

"Your Majesty," replied Lord Colten.

"Yes Lord Colten, what can I do for you?"

“It has just come to my attention that Lady Anne, is a commoner, her father has lost everything that they own, I agreed to this marriage for you, your majesty but now I find I’m a laughing stock.”

“Lord Bannalift?” asked the lord Reagent

“I’m afraid it is true, your majesty, that was one of the reasons I came here, I’ve just found out myself.”

“Not your usual standard.”

“Sadly no, my attentions have been elsewhere.”

“Your Majesty, what am I to do?”

“She is your wife, it is your choice, but understand, she is not to be killed.” This was unusual for the Lord Reagent, but The Shadow wasn’t happy, as he watched a smile slowly spread across Lord Colten’s face.

“I think I know what to do with her.” This sent shivers down The Shadow’s back; he decided that Lady Anne’s mother needed to disappear for a little while, he couldn’t do anything for Lady Anne at the moment but he could protect her mother. “Your Majesty, Lord Bannalift,” bowed Lord Colten he then turned and headed out of the throne room.

“Bad business Lord Bannalift,” commented the Lord Reagent.

“Yes your Majesty, for the other reason that I came here. I have reports that some forms of monsters have been seen around the outskirts of the Capital.”

“Monsters really, I’ll have the guards look into it.” said the Lord Reagent in a nonchalant voice, while this news should disturb the Lord Reagent, it only seemed to make him happy, that worried The Shadow, he would have to have a few of his men look into it.

Back in his room he wrote letters to his people, instructing them to look into these reports of monsters, and then called in one of his more discreet men to arrange for the Lady Anne’s mother take a little trip out of town, so that Lord Colten couldn’t get his hands on her. He only hoped that the Lady Anne would be able to deal with what Lord Colten had in store for her. The Lord Reagent sat in his throne room, it was now time, things were in motion, and everything was going to work.

“Steven.” whispered the Lord Reagent, the panel in the wall opened up.

“Yes your Majesty.”

“Well?”

“It is ready; sir in two weeks all that you have wanted will be yours.”

“And the Princess,”

“That is up to you my lord, I don’t need her until the planets align in two week, but if you feel it is better, I can have her placed with me sir, that way she cannot go anywhere.” The Lord Reagent sat thinking for a while.

“Do it, I want no mistakes.” Steven bowed and headed away.

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Lady Anne sat in her bedroom waiting for Lord Colten, she wore the sheerest nightdress that she could find, the moonlight shined through it, showing the silhouette of her petite body. Lord Colten walked in and looked around the room; she could smell the alcohol on him. Anne stood up and walked towards him.

“My Lord what can I do for you?” she didn’t even see the punch; all she felt was the world explode inside her head.

“Oh, how you are going to learn what those words mean.” He grabbed her by the arms dragging her to her feet. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out, that my wife was nothing more than a whore, selling her body to stay a Lady, well my little whore, if that is how you like to be treated, I’m happy to oblige.” He tore the nightdress from her body. He picked her up and threw her onto the bed. For the next hour all Lady Anne remembered was pain and blood, the last thing she saw was her husband punching her in the face. The next time she awoke she was in a coach, with her hands and feet bound.



Princess Alexandra, sat at her dressing room table brushing her long golden hair, she was worried about Lady Anne and promised herself that tomorrow she would go and see her, make sure she was ok, a slight chill ran down her back, there was a draft coming from somewhere behind her. She turned around to see if she could find it, when she saw a man standing behind her, his limp hair was white and his black eyes bore into her.

“You highness” drawled the man. Alexandra lashed out with the mirror but the man caught her wrist, “Now, now is that any way for a princess to behave. Please come quietly I would hate to have to hurt you.” The grip that he had on her arm was like a vice her hand was turning white, Alexandra tried to kick him, but he just twisted her arm around her back. He started to walk her forward, to where she saw an opening in the wall that had never been there before, he pushed her down the dark winding stairs, she could smell damp and nearly slipped down the stairs. “Hold on please. I would hate for you to hurt yourself.” The staircase was black, only the light from behind them lit the way, as the floor levelled out into a corridor the light was swallowed. Alexandra didn’t know how long she walked for time, lost meaning in the dark, they came to a small room filled with green smoke, the smoke stung her eyes, but she saw the room was filled with glass vials of different coloured liquid, in the far corner was a cage that he led her too. “Welcome to your new home,” he opened the door without letting go of her, pushed her into the cage and locked the door.