

Chapter 1: Awakening

His eyes fluttered open to the great expanse of blue skies above. The sun was shining brightly with a few wispy clouds lazily drifting across the vastness. The sky was empty, yet it filled him.

It was the third such time his eyes had opened to witness the passing day, but the returning pain of his body had forced his mind back into darkness each time before. The day was much as it was before in each of his brief stirrings, brilliant and glorious. The sun was warm enough to create a glistening sheen on his exposed skin but distant enough that its rays covered him like a warm blanket. The bright clarity of daylight chased away the phantoms at the edges of his conscience.

He blinked a few times, still held in the confused lethargy of a long sleep. The heavens filled his vision, a familiar sight for a reason he did not fully understand as much as he felt. The endless heights seemed to summon him like a patient parent calling to a child. The sky lent a special comfort as if in mutual understanding. It was his home and, in truth, he shared part its essence.

Memories were as fleeting as shadows. His mind refused to work. Whether from the long sleep or the pain, he was dazed, unthinking and unfeeling. In his current state, he could remember nothing, only lying on this flat rock, basking in the summer sun, with a distant fear that the horrible pain would return.

For the moment, it did not concern him. At his core, he realized the seriousness of his injuries. The mind had only a limited capacity for suffering before it surrendered back into unconsciousness. His body knew instinctively when life was measured in seconds, rather than days. He had absorbed grievous injury and his soul somehow still lingered however tenuously. The sleeper knew not where or even who he was. His mouth was dry and he found it hard to swallow. His lips were dry and cracked, signaling he had been here for sometime.

The quiet peace passed as he feared it would as a wave of fresh pain washed over his body. It was just as sharp and terrible as the previous. But as if strengthened from before, his mind fought this time to stay awake and he was forced to endure the pain instead of slipping into blackness. Bile rose in his throat and his stomach wretched as he curled in agony.

His entire body was suffering, but the greatest pain originated from his neck. From his chin to his collar burned with a fire that made him choke. The sleeper gasped in short, ragged breath. Tears filled his eyes, blurring the once calming skies from his sight. His body writhed as he feebly clawed at his chest. In a wrenching convulsion, he turned to his side and coughed forth hideous a brackish mixture of blood and bile. For a few moments, he laid curled and sucking in mouthfuls of desperate air.

His short recovery was over and his mind was forced to action. The full measure of his injuries was coming to bear as he gradually returned to consciousness. He opened his eyes again to survey his surroundings. He was on some type of butte, a rock slab hovering over a canyon surrounded by steep grey walls that climbed higher. There were other colonnades, stone spires, as if massive pieces on an ancient chessboard, rising around him. It was a chasm, broad and deep, and the towers of rock created a dark labyrinth on the floor below.

His body struggled with the commands that were urgently streaming from his mind. Every limb, every muscle, every fiber of his flesh seemed damaged, bruised, and torn. Obediently, though reluctantly, his limbs complied as he struggled to right himself. It was his neck that caused him the most pain, though, as if it had been flayed with a hot knife. He was fearful to touch it, afraid of the injury his probing hands might discover.

The sleeper's eyes settled to the columns around him. There were birds everywhere among the stone canopy, hopping from column to column or perched in a torpid stupor. Their bodies were darkly feathered with white heads and hooked beaks. They cawed loudly, shouldering and sniping at their fellows that pushed in too close. These birds were carrion eaters and their crops were bulging to the gullet. Their feathers were stained red. Thousands had come and eaten their fill. They now rested above the field, waiting for their next meal. With growing trepidation, the sleeper straggled to the edge and looked below to find the source of their food.

The bottom of the chasm was filled with fine, yellow sand that dusted like powder with even the slightest disturbance. Stone stacks loomed high and dotted the field in a heavy cluster. The sandy floor was shielded from the sun by these broad, gray turrets. On either side were the steep, rugged cliff walls that created a primeval corridor through the ancient rock.

And there among these twisting warrens was the call for the ravenous birds. Masked by clouds of angry, biting flies and swarms of hungry buzzards was a mass of dead men scattered and forgotten. They were strewn about in a chaotic fray, some broken on ash covered columns and others half-buried in the fine yellow sand. Hundreds of men scattered throughout the chasm, blasted to pieces, bodies twisted and broken by an invisible force. Their exposed innards, wetly poured into the dry sand, served as a trough for the winged scavengers.

The sleeper allowed his eyes to follow the pattern of the blast. It was not hard to follow and he soon found the origin of the destruction. At the center of the chasm and nearest to the explosion, massive stone spires had crashed into each other causing a cascade of broken columns and thick rubble in all directions. In their wake, they left a circular clearing of blackened bodies and sharp rock on the cusp of a deep crater. The sand at the site of the explosion had been forged into large obsidian plates. This crater had been the eye of the storm, a catastrophic explosion that had ended the battle in total devastation.

The fallen men had been warriors, two sides dressed in distinct liveries with armor visible beneath. As his eyes scanned the battlefield, there macabre visions to behold in all directions. Men were burned from the inside out, their scorched eye sockets bulging from within, and staked the walls with shards and debris.

With a calming sigh, the sleeper rolled back onto column head. For the first time since waking, he felt the dire need to remember, to summon any memory of what happened or why from the thick veil hiding his memories. He closed his eyes to silence the gorge of feasting buzzards, to block the pain coursing through his body, and still the icy knot in his stomach. His hands returned to the stone, trying to absorb their warmth. As they spread out in an arc, tracing the rough surface, his fingers traipsed across an object lying by his side. It was a well worn and polished handle, a pommel. He pushed himself onto one elbow to survey his new discovery.

The white hilt was formed from enameled ivory, intricately carved in a complex pattern of runic weaving. The ivory had a blue tint to its coloration. The handle was long, easily accommodating two hands in a wide grip. And if the pommel was beautiful, the blade was transcendent. The folded steel forming its length created a fanning pattern along its cutting edge as if carved with the metallic hint of blossoms. The entire piece was five feet in length, equally proportioned between pommel and steel. His hands traced over the handle lovingly. The blade was perfectly balanced with the sharpness of a razor. It was a sword, his sword, and it was a masterpiece.

With this realization came another. Aeolan. His name was Aeolan.

Chapter 2: Decisions, Decisions

With the memory of his name, Aeolan felt a sense of relief. He had a growing feeling of familiarity, a returning identity, and was sure that more memories would come. In those memories, he hoped that there would be answers, answers that could tell him where he was, why he was here, and what had happened.

Aeolan sat on the flat top of the rock column, inspecting his wounds, his sword lying across his lap. There were too many bruises, cuts, burns, and scraps to be counted. The blast which had ended the battle below had decimated the entire chasm and Aeolan was no exception. His clothes, once an artful mixture of blue hues in multiple silken layers and wraps, were now in rags and stained in ash and blood. His long, silver hair hung in knotted clumps around his head, pulled from the delicate braids he had woven the day before.

The worst of these injuries was on his neck. He breathed in controlled, shallow bursts to limit its agony. It radiated pain in deep, pulsating throbs. Slowly, he moved his hand to the wound, tracing his fingers upwards from his collarbone. As the tips of fingers carefully explored what his eyes could not see, it was hard for him to distinguish between dried blood, dirt, and ruined flesh. It all congealed together in a grisly mess. He pulled his hand away before finishing. The wound was serious and he wondered again how he had survived.

Marked on his throat was the kaulas, hidden beneath the wound. Normally, it would appear as several stacked rings of magical blue ink encircling his neck, stained in his flesh. The markings were dark and appeared as a collar or a noose. Each ring held a series of small arcane symbols, waiting for a specific trigger before evoking the deadly magic stored within. The kaulas and the symbol that it represented had been with him since his earliest days. He was a servant.

This brought forth more memories and he began to remember who – and more importantly what – he was. Aeolan un-wrapped his forearm from the studded leather strap and rolled up the long sleeves of his tunic to reveal the sky blue rivi beneath. They were stylized bands, similar to the kaulas on his neck, starting at his wrist and progressing towards his elbow. They possessed an unnatural color. The rivi were different than a normal tattoo, which colored the existing skin in a new mixture of hues. Instead the rivi possessed its own color and a slight luminousness as vibrant as if made of jewels embedded in his flesh. Unlike the kaulas these markings did not hold a purpose, but rather displayed a rank. Though he only looked upon his left, Aeolan knew that there were four rivi marked on each forearm.

He replaced his sleeve and his forearm wrap solemnly. Aeolan's pain and confusion were replaced with a stronger emotion, one that had been trained into him since a child, duty. The rivi and the kaulas marked him as a voralai. And as a voralai, he had a master. It was Aeolan's sole purpose to follow his master's command without question. The voralai were magical servants, bred rather than born, crafted rather than raised. Aeolan cast aside his own concerns and resolutely struggled to his feet. Somewhere in the canyon below was his master, a maaginen.

Regardless of his own injuries, Aeolan knew it was his duty to find his master. He still lived with the kaulas intact and so he knew that his master must still be alive as well. There could be no voralai without a maaginen wizard to serve. The kaulas ensured it. Upon the death their bonded master, the bands on the neck would power with their stored energy to quickly decapitate the servant in a muted flash. This power of life and death was also at the whim of the master. The voralai were tools to be used and discarded

when no longer needed. The greatest maaginen possessed armies of these magical servants, ready to attend their every whim.

He approached the edge of the stone pillar and looked below once more. The sandy bottom was over thirty feet below, a deadly height for a normal being, particularly one as injured as Aeolan. But he was far from ordinary. He was a voralai, specifically a taivasar – a sky dancer, a wind warrior, a storm sword. Within the voralai, there were four different schools or seuroks, each representing one of the four natural elements, and from each a special type of warrior servant was produced. A sky dancer had no reason to be afraid of falling.

With his sword in hand, Aeolan calmed himself with practiced meditation and breathing. He pushed the pain from his mind and called upon a reservoir of hidden strength. Aeolan stepped from the stone into the empty space before him and gently floated to the powdery sand below, his hands outstretched to either side. His descent was as slow as a falling feather. It was one of the earliest abilities he had learned and required little effort to produce. As a taivasar of four rivi of seven possible, there were far greater powers at his command.

Upon his landing, the taivasar took note of his surroundings. The slaughter encircled him, broken and blasted bodies warped into indescribable horrors. There were two sides, clearly marked in their household colors. It had been a duel of two masters, two maaginen wizards trained in the arcane art.

Aeolan noted grimly that the duel had likely been outside of the approval of the Lumavar, the ruling council of the maaginen. They alone authorized the dueling of two arcane masters. The reasons for confrontations were numerous – to settle household feuds, build prestige among the more powerful maaginen, or to break council deadlock. In a land without laws or order, a land that embraced the rule of the mighty, the assembly of the maaginen, the Lumavar, was omnipotent.

It was beyond his station as a voralai to know why they had fought. Truly this duel was secret. There were signs on the field of battle that were obvious as he walked among the carnage. The number of warriors was the first clue. There were hundreds of dead. This had been a battle of entire households. Among them were common soldiers, voralai warriors, and even apprentices. The victor would be declared only by complete annihilation of his enemy.

The second was the location, hidden in an isolated rock chasm. The walls of the canyon did not show any of the normal signs of erosion as if this menacing gulch was carved by a river long vanished. Instead, there were vertical shearing marks as if the rock walls were forcibly raised from deep within the earth in a single swift movement. The dark stone signaled that this was the Karul Ridge, an artificial wasteland created by the Lumavar long ago as a barrier from their enemies to the east. It was a maze of winding ravines and sharp peaks.

Images of the final battle scenes returned as he kicked his way through a cluster of buzzards. Both sides were transported into the chasm by the magic of their masters. His chosen opponent, Aeolan remembered, had been a meren, a sea prince. Her blue clothes were loose and flowed as if carried by an unseen current. During the brief showdown as the maaginen spoke their challenge to each other, each voralai studied the other. He had noted that he outranked her. She possessed only five rivi of the potential twelve of the merdas seurok. The ranking system in each seurok was different and at times arbitrary. Aeolan had also noticed that the meren had been pretty, a natural beauty.

Their part in the battle would be minor, but it was one that Aeolan was eager to engage with her. The battles between air and water wielders were always interesting as they were neutrally balanced towards each other. Against fire, the meren were supreme. Against earth, the taivasar were superior. It was a means of controlling the voralai servants to prevent any single seurok from becoming too powerful.

Each seurok had not only a specialization in their powers, but also a defining theme of their combat style. The sky dancers were fast, mercurial, and agile. Regardless of the terrain, the taivasars would move like the wind. With their long, slender blades they overwhelmed their opponents with their speed and aggressiveness, moving and striking. He carried pouches filled with small razors that he could guide through the air with pinpoint precision.

The meren were different. They were hard to strike, flowing like water in the heat of combat, reacting with perfect grace to the swings of their enemy. They did not require the mobility of the wind warriors or the fire callers. The meren, also known as speakers, were able to control the minds of others with their words and powers. The seurok masters taught that men were composed mostly of the water element and this gave the meren an advantage over human bodies and minds.

When the battle finally began, the two wielders did not have a chance to finish their fight. The secrete duel had turned for the worse too quickly. The other maaginen, perhaps inferior in the traditional dueling arts to his own master, began summoning from the infernal realms, an act prohibited by the Lumavar. Such an incantation was very difficult to control as the wizard was pitting his own will against the demonic force he sought to control. A broken circle could result in a horde of demons spilling forth from the portal. These demons sought only flesh for their burning hunger, spawning even more like maggots as they feasted. Yet in a secret duel, there was nothing to stop such madness.

The taivasar approached the edge of the blackened crater as the conclusion of the duel unfolded in his mind. In response to the infernal spell being summoned, his master had unleashed a terrible incantation reserved only for the greatest of their order. With a resonant chant his voice became a fearsome weapon, bending steel, breaking bone, and rending the flesh. The spell soon spiraled out of control and the energy exploded outwards.

Trapped in the narrow gulch, the effects had been devastating. It reverberated off the rock in all directions, decimating both sides with tremendous shockwaves. The blast had been so powerful that it unleashed an avalanche from the cliff walls above, sending tons of stone into the chasm. Aeolan had barely escaped from the fury of the spell before losing consciousness in the crash of falling rocks. The opposing mage's organs liquefied immediately and his bones splintered inside his skin. Now there was no trace that the other wizard had even existed, blasted into nothingness.

At the lowest point of the crater was the charred body of his master curled into a ball around the remains of his magical staff. Azemar Vouri. The name unleashed the flood of the rest of his memories. It was the name of his master. For a few moments, he studied the fallen wizard without feeling or remorse. Those emotions were foreign to him. He had served out of duty and obligation alone. Any feelings that he possessed were irrelevant.

Aeolan's mouth twisted in confusion. It was apparent that the maaginen was dead and yet he as the voralai servant still lived. He carefully picked his path down into the crater, using his long shafted sword as a crutch of sorts. He held hope that Master Vouri still lived.

As he reached the corpse, Aeolan paused for a few brief seconds as if his arrival would cause the fallen maaginen to return to life. Nothing. He cocked his head to the side as he knelt down, trying to figure out what to do next. With a gentle tap, he nudged the burned foot with the tip of his sword. Still nothing. It was clear that his master was indeed dead. But the kaulas had left him alive. His hand wandered back to the wound on his neck and he gingerly fingered his injury. The arcane bands inscribed upon his flesh were cut by the heavy wound.

Since his earliest memories, Aeolan had been told what to do and when to do it. At the seurok, the taivas masters had instructed and commanded him, trained him from an infant to use his powers. At the age of fifteen, he had been given to Master Azemar. At times he fought against the master's enemies and at others he was spying upon the master's friends, but always following orders. His entire life had been spent under the control of one master or another. Now there was no one to tell him what to do and he felt misplaced. The world had forgotten him.

Faced with the first actual decision on what to do with himself, Aeolan struggled to find an answer. There was growing trepidation that his choice might bring the ire of his master, either the smoking ruin before him or the next. Several moments passed as he tried to make the right decision and no answer came. So he decided to wait and do nothing.

In his reasoning, one of two things would happen. Either his master would come back to life and tell him what to do or the kaulas would finally work and Aeolan would die by design. In either case, he would not have to guess what he was supposed to do.

It was his first decision without a master and Aeolan felt strongly that he had made the right one. So he perched himself on a rock overlooking the crater and waited for one of the two possibilities to happen.

Chapter 3: Still Dead, Still Alive

Darkness had fallen on the shattered ravine. The shadows had grown long. They were all consuming, covering the recent battle in concealing darkness. From his perch, Aeolan could still see the impression of the crater below him. More often though his eyes returned back to the night sky, gazing into the endless stars with affection. In his silent reverie, the day had passed quickly taking with it the scorching heat of midday. The air was cool and inviting.

Swarms of fat bodied flies still worked in frantic swarms to scavenge on the fallen. The rancor of the massacre had been released into the air. Caught in the chasm, it was nearly overwhelming. The carrion birds slept in thick groups waiting for the return of day to resume their feeding.

And worse yet, nothing had changed. His master was still dead. Aeolan was still live. Even worse than living, he was starting to feel better. His body was beginning to heal. The sharpness of his wounds was slowly turning into a driving ache. The cuts and abrasions on his skin were tightly scabbed and his pallor replaced with deep bruising.

The taivasar had been certain that waiting should have provided the answer he was looking for, but he was starting to doubt. Hours had passed, yet his master did not stir. Aeolan was sure that he was dead. The kaulas did nothing or perhaps was ruined by the injuries he suffered. His decision to do nothing was not panning out. It was becoming apparent that something would have to be done.

During his time on the rock, Aeolan had started to think of different alternatives. If his master were truly dead, that made him a kuritan, a wielder without a master. Any voralai found without a master would be removed, killed. Their very existence was illegal according to the Lumavar. Perhaps then it was his duty to take his own life, completing what the kaulas had failed to do. Yet he found himself surprisingly uncomfortable with this option and tried to keep it out of mind.

Hopping down from his perch, Aeolan began pacing back and forth in front of the crater. A growing hunger in his stomach was becoming increasingly annoying and it was distracting him from his waiting. He was lost in the Karul Ridge. The Ridge had been summoned from the earth as a natural barrier against the warrior nomads of Urendor to the east. They were committed enemies of the maaginen. Now the Karul Ridge was rife with secrets and foul races of beast, thriving in the labyrinth of sharp ravines and abyssal canyons. Aeolan could wander for years within it and never find his way out. The longer he waited, the greater urgency in making a new decision.

His thoughts were interrupted at the sound of sliding rocks. He looked into the darkness in the direction of the sound and discerned a silhouette of a man-shaped figure. Aeolan strained to see, trying to make it out more clearly. The darkness continued to mask the new arrival to the scene of the battle. From what he could see, it appeared that the figure was armed with a bow and even preparing to fire. Aeolan's idle curiosity switched to alertness as an arrow with black fletching whistled through the darkness towards him. It was poorly aimed and skittered off of a nearby boulder. There were more figures approaching from the darkness, maybe a dozen or more. They were speaking in low, guttural tones of some primitive language. It seemed that they all had bows and were preparing to fire again.

Kneeling on the rock, Aeolan concluded that this was perhaps the best answer he was looking for all the hours that he had waited. If the kaulas was not going to kill him, then these raiders would finish the task. His reservation about ending his own life was answered. He could allow these archers to do it for him. He turned towards them and stood to his full measure.

The sky dancer readied himself for the final blow. The volley of arrows was released together, gliding through the night air with murderous intent. He was a voralai, he reasoned, and with his master dead it was proper that he should die as well. Yet at the last moment, he had a change of heart about his new plan. Part of him was concerned that the archers would only wound him further. After all, the first shot had been widely off-target. Aeolan was not thrilled with the idea of any more suffering. With an idle wave of his hand, he sent the missiles careening in all directions, harmlessly clattering to the chasm floor. They had been batted down by a controlled burst of wind summoned by the taivasar.

With a sigh, Aeolan stood and took note of his attackers. They were Nitherung, beast men, and a scourge to all civilized races. They were abominations, relying on brute strength and savagery. They had probably heard the thunderclap of his master's incantation and were attracted to the noise and carrion birds. The raiders had waited until darkness to venture forth and loot the bodies. With a dozen or more in their hunting party and with his current injuries, Aeolan knew he would not be able to defeat them in direct combat. Instead, he would have to flee and abandon the body of his master. He was torn in a brief moment between survival and duty. The master had never ordered his voralai to stand vigil over his dead body and that realization helped me allay his feelings of guilt.

The Nitherung warriors were approaching with their crude weapons readied mostly spears and axes. Aeolan calculated that it was time to leave. With a single leap, Aeolan exploded from the ground and soared forty feet into the air, returning to the tops of the columns where he awoken earlier. Squeals of surprise were followed by more misplaced arrows from his attackers. The four rivi on his arms marked his rank within the seurok taivas as a Kisallyn and that granted him an array of magical powers, including the ability to jump massive distances or change the flight path of arrows with a thought. But he was still incapable of true flight. That power was found only at the highest levels of the taivasars.

Aeolan landed in a kneeling position, breathing heavy. His body pulsed with agony at his exertion and he paused on his new perch to cup his face in his hands. His physical pain was affecting his ability to focus his powers, sapping his concentration. Aeolan fought back a wave of revulsion lingering at the back of his throat. He needed to get out of this chasm to fresh air where he could spend some more time thinking about what to do next. The sky dancer scanned the terrain and carefully chose his route to minimize his leaps. He took a last glance down below before leaving the carnage of the duel. The Nitherung had quickly forgotten him and were already feasting on the dead.

With three well-placed leaps he made it to the top of the chasm and onto a towering butte overlooking the barrens. He could go no further. The pain was overwhelming and his next jump might fail, sending him crashing into the rows of razor sharp rocks below. He needed rest, his hunger would have to wait for now. The weather was cool, yet comfortable. Aeolan spread out on the flat top of the rocky tower he had made his temporary home. He drifted to sleep easily with his sword clutched to his chest.

The heat of the day had stirred him from his slumber. The memories of the past two days seemed surreal and dream-like. Reality returned quickly and with it the crippling hunger that held his stomach in tight knots. There had to be something he could eat and he desperately scanned the horizon in all directions for help. From the height of the Karul Ridge, he could see for miles in all directions. On his first pass, he had missed it, but to the northwest there was the signal of smoke. The lands in that direction were green and Aeolan knew that meant two things, water and food. It was also back into the lands of the maaginen.

His third decision was made. He had waited, he had fled, and now it was time to travel to the green lands to find food. He was confident that this was the best decision so far and he noted with a small amount of satisfaction that the decisions were becoming easier.

The spire that he had landed on last night was hundreds of feet above the jagged lands on the north face. It was one of the lone peaks that towered over the surrounding landscape. Fortunately for Aeolan, the southern face connected with a ridgeline just over the chasm of the duel and it allowed him to easy access to its apex the night before. The height overlooking the northern lowlands was just what he needed right now. His body was still in terrible condition and climbing in and out of the gulches and canyons would have taken weeks or longer.

Instead, he stepped to the edge of the butte and leaned forward until his weight carried him off. Gently his bodied glided forward, riding the warm winds north to the wispy trace of smoke. The glide was nearly effortless and he extended his arms out to either side to guide his flight. Aeolan was confident that he could make it to the green land by the end of the day.

Chapter 4: Secrets

Huirval was a master of the art were he to be measured anywhere other than the Lumavar. He moved briskly down the stone corridor, his soft slippers barely making a whisper on the plush red carpet. His powers were substantial, the elements at his command. He maintained a lavish tower with five voralai servants. Yet when compared to the keisari, he was but a novice, relegated to delivering messages and following orders. He had own grand schemes and plans, much of which was already confessed to his master and some still held secret. It was the way maaginen, always plotting, always scheming.

There were wards and glyphs along his way as he ventured deeper into the halls of the keisari, the ruling wizards of the Lumavar and greatest of their order, but he knew them well and casually disarmed them as he passed with little more than a gesture. Faces of gargoyles and demons carved on the polished buttresses leered at him from their shadowy perches. There was a faster pace in his step today, as there always was when he brought good news to his master, Berdanziallis.

He arrived at the ancient blackwood door, heavily carved in relief, and inset with white holly friezes. Huirval took a moment to arrange his robes, tighten his belt, and compose himself. Berdanziallis as a keisari was more than his master and patron. He was a god.

He checked for any wards on the door, knowing the keisari's caution. There were none that were unexpected. With a gentle rap, Huirval alerted his master to his presence, though he was sure that the keisari was already well aware of his arrival. There was silence at first, then a heavy click inside the massive door as it magically unlocked. The room was warm beyond comfortable as it always was and the wizard felt his skin flush with forming sweat beneath his robes. There was a healthy fire burning on the far side of the room in a black hearth. Silhouetted in its flames, a high backed chair faced the room, casting a deep shadow over the rows of shelves lined with ancient tomes, scrolls, and curiosities. Sitting in the chair, dangling a half-empty goblet precariously from one hand, was Lord Berdanziallis.

The wizard discarded his slippers and stepped into the room barefooted. When he came to the appropriate distance as required by protocol, he slipped to his knees and bowed deeply with his forehead pressed against the floor. It was a moment of complete vulnerability. He was unprotected either by armor or arcane means. It was customary for the servant of an arch-mage, even one as proficient as the messenger, to offer his life without defense upon each meeting. When an acceptable amount of time had passed in this posture, the wizard returned to a kneeling position with his eyes lowered.

"What news," the great wizard slurred.

The master's eyes were dull and his skin pale. He was using paihdi. Huirval could smell its sweet bitterness coming from the goblet as well as his master's breath, a powerful dose. Berdanziallis had no doubt built an incredible resistance to it through his constant usage and required ever larger amounts to feel its effects. It was a rare herb, meticulously cultivated by the maaginen for its special properties. When powdered and mixed with various ingredients, it allowed the user's mind to drift in separate directions.

The analytical mind was still anchored in the Esintya, the physical world, while the spirit was adrift in the Astraali. Those with powerful minds and great magic could use the dual existence, however taxing it was

on the body, to act in two places. In the nebulous sea of the Astraali, Berdanziallis could look back to Esintya without regard for time or space. It was the perfect means for scrying.

A mind so fractured came at a price. In both places, the user was terribly weakened both in strength and magical power. The side effects of paihdi only heightened the risk. There were tales of maaginen losing their minds in the Astraali, forever wandering in the distant plane, leaving their bodies guided by vestigial will. They were easy marks among in the Lumavar and their property and status quickly devoured. Still the use of paihdi persisted for as dangerous as it was. It revealed the true addiction of the keisari, knowledge.

"My lord master, I have news on Azemar Vouri as you have requested." Huirval bowed again to show his honor at serving his lord.

"Speak then." The voice was hollow and distant. Berdanziallis' eyes never focused on him as they floated across the room in ethereal bliss.

"Yes, my lord master." Huirval knew that behind the façade of drunkenness there was a keen mind, one would quickly absorb and analyze his words. As always his fate hung upon his every word and gesture. The news he provided was the culmination of one of many plots put in motion by the arch-mage. He continued fastidiously.

"The duel is complete. As suspected, Azemar was the superior, but the incantation you provided to young Lord Alyton proved the difference. My master will be pleased to note that Lord Vouri attempted to counter the incantation with a spell far too powerful for his mastery of the art. He lost control and the resultant backlash destroyed his entire house. Lord Vouri is dead, my lord."

"Such is the consequence for those that forget their station." If there was any satisfaction that an enemy was eliminated it was not revealed on his face. "A lesson you should remember, Huirval, lest you test my patience."

"Of course, my lord master." Another bow. "I am here but to serve you."

Huirval sat in uncomfortable silence, knowing that his master's attention was fixed elsewhere. His mind turned towards the young wizard unknowingly recruited and used in the conspiracy to remove the ambitious Lord Vouri.

"Do you wish to know the fate of Lord Alyton?"

"It matters not."

The goblet slipped from his finger tips and spilled the paihdi mix onto the carpet in dark stain. Immediately, the golden cup disintegrated in scintillating flash, held into existence only by the will of the keisari. The master's eyes closed as he returned his focus to the Astraali. Huirval knew that his audience was over and began bowing in preparation to leave.

Chapter 5: A Modest Request

The meadow was surrounded on three sides with thick evergreens and covered in knee-high foxtail grass. On the fourth side were the rear entrances of several cottages of the small hamlet of Turhas and their outlying pens and yards. Over the seasons, the meadow served in many capacities for the village, but its primary distinction was the refuge of young Samwel. Each day the boy of eight summers crept away from his household chores to play in the sunshine. At night, he returned to lie in the tall grass to gaze up the stars as only a lonely child with a mind for dreaming might do. It was his favorite place and his refuge.

Samwel sat near the tree line, enjoying the shade. He was small for his age with fair skin that burned easily in the sun. His brown eyes were large and expressive. The mess of brown hair on his head was awkwardly cut and easily displaced by the wind. His mother trimmed it twice a month with a pair of short scissors. Other than his rope sandals, all of his clothes had been passed down from other families in Turhas with patches added by his mother. She was the town seamstress. Samwel did not speak often, especially after his older brother was taken to the sorcerer's tower last winter. It had come suddenly and without warning. There was no chance for last words. He could still hear his mother cry herself to sleep each night. Sometimes he went to her bed to stroke her hair and other times he shed tears of his own.

His focus was solely on the shiny green beetle he had found crawling along in the dirt. He was careful to not hurt it, but enjoyed watching it climb over the obstacles he found to place in its path. The spindly legs, each moving of their own accord, slowly worked their way over grass leaves, twigs, stones, and pine cones. When he looked close enough, Samwel could see the small pair of antennae wave back and forth and its mandibles clicking. He wondered if it could think, feel, or even make decisions. It certainly acted on options, but Samwel debated if these were actual decisions or just the small insect simply reacting to the world around it.

Something moved in the woods and Samwel immediately lost interest in the beetle. There were stories told late at night around the cooking pot of ugly, evil things in the woods, released by the wizard. All of these stories ended in bad children being eaten, the children that did not listen to their mothers. And here he was, not obeying his own mother and playing the day away. He decided it was time to return to the cottage and finish his chores. Slowly standing up, he backed away from the shadows of the trees. He was ready to run at a moment's notice.

A face appeared above the brush, a man's face. The skin was even more pale than Samwel's. The head was crowned with long silver hair pulled into an intricate series of braids on both sides and running down the back. The face was framed by a slender jaw and high cheek bones. It was the eyes that surprised him the most. The irises were light blue, nearly iridescent in their brilliance. Only after Samwel noticed all of these other features, did he realize the desperation and fatigue creasing stranger's expression. Yet for some reason, he did not run.

The stranger stood up revealing silk robes, stained with dirt and something red. He had a tall sword in one hand, the other bracing against a tree trunk for support. In each ear were silver rings, easily worth more coin than Samwel could even imagine. There were markings on his arms and neck in light blue, matching his shimmering eyes. He did not know their significance. Seeing the stranger in his entirety,

Samwel realized he did not feel fear. Instead, looking into the sad, tired eyes he felt pity. The stranger's lips trembled as if he were trying to speak.

"I need your help." Saying the first words seemed to visibly relieve the stranger. More words followed. "Would you please help me?" His eyes were pleading like a child asking for a present. Samwel blinked a few times before answering.

"I will try." He was just a lad of eight summers and he was perplexed how he could help this warrior. Yet the request was filled with sincerity.

"Would you please kill me?" As he said these words, the stranger's eyes lit up with hope as he had just unveiled a master revelation.

"You want me to kill you?" Samwel was sure he had misheard or this man was deeply troubled.

"Yes, please kill me." When the boy did not immediately agree to take his life, he quickly added his brief rationale. "I should have died before, so you would be doing the right thing. And I have been gravely wounded, so it will not be difficult. Once I am dead, I would not inconvenience you any further."

"No, I will not kill you!" Samwel laughed at the ludicrous proposition he had just heard. He wished there was someone else here to see all of this, because no one was going to believe him later. The stranger seemed devastated that he had been denied and Samwel's giggling quickly subsided. "Why do you want to die?"

"I am a Voralai." The stranger took a deep breath of exasperation and continued. "My master is dead. He was killed in a duel and I should have died with him. For some reason that I do not understand, my Kualus," he gestured to his neck emphatically, "is broken. Are you sure that you will not be able to help me? Once I am dead I will not need my sword and I would be happy to give it to you as its new master." He held the sword before him so that Samwel may inspect its quality, which the young boy obliging did. It was a beautiful sword and covered in strange runes. He knew, though, that if he walked through the door of his home with a sword taller than he was, his mother would kill him.

"No. For the second time, I will not kill you. Stop asking that." The stranger seemed immediately humbled and it was obvious that he was not going to make the request again. Samwel put his hands on his hips, inadvertently mimicking his mother when she lectured him. "There are plenty of people in this world with greater problems than yours. What is your name?"

"I am called Aeolan."

"Aeolan?" The word was awkward coming from his mouth, it was a foreign tongue. "What kind of a name is Aeolan?" The question seemed to truly perplex the warrior.

"I do not know." Then the stranger asked in earnest. "What kind of a name is it?"

"I do not know either." Samwel laughed again and clapped his hands. When he finished his, they stood for in awkward silence for a moment before Aeolan spoke again.

"Can I ask one other question?" Samwel could only imagine what his request was going to be this time, but he still nodded. "Do you have any food? Please I am terribly hungry."

Chapter 6: Fishing for Hope

Samwel did not in fact have any food for Aeolan. If he ventured back into the cottage, his mother would force him to resume his long list of daily chores. So instead the pair of them gathered as many yellow gooseberries as they could carry. He was careful to show Aeolan which ones were good to eat and which ones should be thrown away. Once a sufficient amount of berries were gathered, Samwel took him to the Green Lampi, a large pond within the woods, fed by a few small streams and loaded with Siika whitefish. Other than a few brief instructions, they worked in silence.

Hidden in the hollow of a tree, Samwel retrieved his makeshift fishing rod with a handful of tiny hooks. Together they dug through the soft earth to find fat earthworms for bait. The boy carefully tied the hook to the rod and slipped a worm over the barbed point. He slid the body far on to the hook so that only a small portion of the worm was free. The Siika were good at stealing bait. His older brother had taught him the finer points of fishing through countless hours at the pond. He let out a heavy sigh at the memory and handed the pole to Aeolan. Aeolan dutifully held the rod with the bait dangling in the air, patiently waiting for something to happen. Hiding a grin, Samwel reached over and guided his hands so that the lure dipped into the water.

In the stillness of the Lampi, Samwel looked over at his companion. There was a wicked wound on the back of his neck, the blood curdled into a thick black scab and staining the back of his robes. He had noticed heavy bruises on his arms, as well. Aeolan held the rod diligently with both hands but was clearly eyeing the pile of berries between them. Before they had settled at the side of the pond, he had been gulping the gooseberries down by the handful. They sat in silence for nearly an hour before Samwel spoke.

"My name is Samwel."

"Greetings to you." Aeolan spoke to him as an equal, their age difference did not seem to matter and that made Samwel happy. "What kind of a name is Samwel?"

"My mother gave it to me," he answered with a shrug. "But she never calls me by it. Instead, she calls me Sami. I don't know why she didn't just name me that. Sometimes she calls me by other names when I misbehave. Do you have a mother?"

"No, I was born into the Seurok Taivas." Aeolan stated plainly while sneaking a hand over to grab more berries.

"What is the Seurok Taivas?" Samwel had never heard of any of these things. "You said before that you are a Voralai. What is that?"

"And Berdanziallis, first of the Lumavar, decreed it thus and thus it would be," Aeolan recited from memory. "Least among the Craft, the Voralai were made to serve and nothing more. The Seurok, balanced by the four spheres of creation, shall teach them to be servants lest they forget their destiny. And greatest of these, the Maaginen, infallible and perfect, eternal masters of the Art, shall command them all. Ducant et paremus."

"You serve the wizards?" He was tried to hide his suspicion.

"No," Aeolan clarified. "I serve only Master Azemar Vouri of the Hirvion Eye. Now that he is dead, I do not know who I serve."

"Why do you have to serve someone?" The boy knew that he obeyed his mother, but at some point during his life he would make his own decisions, though at times that seemed unlikely. "Why can't you just be your own person?"

"I was made to obey." Then he quoted again, "If there is no master to follow, the Voralai will become as dust. If the Voralai are not in service, then he is in damnation. These are the words of the Seurok."

"That's not true, Aeolan." Samwel's views were filled with the innocent idealism of youth. "You do not have to die because your master is dead. You can be free, everyone can be free. My mother is free. You said your master is dead, so that means you need a new one. You can be your own master and make your own way."

"I can be the Maaginen and the Voralai?" Aeolan was highly skeptical of this concept, but he was so tired of trying to make a decision that he was eager to find an answer.

"I don't know what that means," the boy shrugged his shoulders. "All I am saying is that you are free now and you make your own decisions. Let me show you what I mean. What do you want to do now?"

"I want to eat more berries." Aeolan said sheepishly.

"Then eat more berries," Samwel passed him a heaping handful of berries. Aeolan began to understand that without realizing it he had been making decisions the entire time. He had decided to escape from the thunderous incantation that finished the duel. He had decided to avoid the Nitherung's arrows. And he had decided to come to the green lands and ask the young boy for help. With a growing smile, the sky dancer ate a single berry. It crushed sweetly in his mouth. He popped another in his mouth, then another. He finished by crushing a handful past his lips.

"What do you want to do now?"

Aeolan thought for a second, unsure what to say. He looked at the rod in his hands and then to the pond. In the murky depths, he could see the dark outline of a fish. At the master's tower, he had eaten fish many times. His stomach grumbled for something more substantial than gooseberries.

"I want to catch a fish." They returned their focus to the Lampi. Occasionally, Samwel gave Aeolan advice on how to best move the lure in the water or the best places to find the fish, until he felt like he

was being bossy. In their earlier conversation, a seed had been planted in his mind and it was slowly growing into an idea. He was resisting the urge to ask, but he was losing the battle. Eventually he blurted out his question.

"Do you have magical powers?"

"No," Aeolan replied. Samwel dejectedly returned his gaze to the pond. "I do not practice the Art. Its mysteries are beyond the understanding of the Voralai. I am a Taivasar. I use the Craft to perform singularly-manifested foci."

"I knew it! You're a wielder!" Samwel could not believe it. "Which kind are you? Are you a sky dancer?"

"I am a Taivasar," Aeolan thought about the question. "My Seurok places the Aeres above all other spheres, so I guess you could call me a sky dancer."

"This is amazing!" Samwel jumped up from the bank, scaring away a group of curious Siika from the lure. Samwel then remembered his brother, taken to the mage's tower and never seen again. His mother had explained that all wizards were evil because they had so much power and knew too much. He looked back at Aeolan with suspicion again. The sky dancer returned his gaze innocently, berry juice covering his mouth.

"Are you evil?" It was the only way he knew to ask. As soon as the question had left his lips, he realized that he had a dilemma. If Aeolan was good, he would say no. If he was evil, then he would lie and still say no. It was up to Samwel to guess which was true.

"I do not know." Aeolan looked down at his lap as if the answer might be found there. "I do not really know what it means to be evil or to be good. Can you tell me?"

"Well," Samwel had not expected this answer. "My mother says that good children are those that do their chores and obey their parents. A good person is someone that puts other people's needs before their own. An evil person enjoys seeing other people hurt and thinks only of themselves."

"I do not enjoy seeing people in pain." Aeolan continued. "I was born only to serve my master. My own needs do not exist. His will are my actions. If being good is this, then I think that I am good."

"I see." Samwel studied Aeolan for a few moments. "I think you are good." He sat down again. A few moments passed in silence. "Aeolan?"

"Yes, Samwel?"

"Can you show me some of your magical tricks?" Aeolan paused for a moment, turning to look at Samwel. The request had been made in a meek voice as if even asking was inappropriate, yet was tempered with a quiet eagerness. He liked Samwel and tried to think of which of his abilities would be considered impressive. No one had ever considered his Craft to be particularly special or incredible. The Maaginen had such colossal magical powers that the abilities of the Voralai seemed paltry in comparison and the Taivas Master had been continually critical of his technique and energy focus. Aeolan was worried

that Samwel would be disappointed and would stop being his friend, but he decided that he would honor the request.

"Pick up a handful of berries and try to throw them at me."

Chapter 7: The Burning Bane

Curls of smoke emanated from his palms, twisting as they rose into the domed stone ceiling. The back of the Voralai was broad, his laterals carved in deep striations beneath his copper skin. His deeply veined forearms were marked by his rivis, two bands of maroon triangles on either wrist moving up his forearm. In matching color, the Kualan banded his ropey neck. The warrior wore only a short skirt of iron plates woven in thick platinum rings to a heavy belt. The garment was chosen for its resistance to extreme heat. A heavy scimitar, blackened with burnt oil, hung from chains on his belt. Aduros was a Paelun - fire callers, war masters, the burning bane.

Aduros was bald. He had no eyebrows, eye lashes, or even a hint of hair on his entire body. It was a trait that all Paelun shared for only their living tissue was immune to their fiery abilities. The feared Seurok Paelu were peerless warriors, their bodies sculpted into perfection by their exposure to the sphere's energy. Their abilities were singular in the effect, yet devastating. Unlike the other Seurok, the fire callers could only draw forth their energies to destroy. The reservoirs of power were potentially limitless though, only hindered by the Paelun's ability to control it. They acted as a lens of sorts, drawing forth the sphere into fiery manifestations.

As they grew in experience and mastery, they were capable of channeling awesome power. Yet too much energy would destroy the fire caller, as well. As much as their perfect bodies were molded from the energy of the sphere, so too were their chaotic and impetuous natures. The temptation to submit to the burning bliss, to be consumed in the inferno, had taken many war masters into oblivion. The Seurok Paelu was forced to instill a rigid discipline in their Voralai. A Paelun's life was a careful balance between incredible power and self control. This discipline took the form of the Rauhallin, a ritualized meditation that emphasized patience, self control, and inner peace. Each Paelun, particularly those young in the mastery of their abilities, were required to perform the Rauhallin several times a week.

Aduros was no different and he knelt in the dark chamber reciting the mantra. In fact, he performed the ritual twice a day, upon waking and again at midday. The lure of the flames was hard for him to resist and in the euphoria of his abilities, the fire caller had gone too far. A swath of nearby forest had been destroyed, laying in charred ruins, in his power lust. He had been coughing blood for several days and feeling pains in his chest. The weakness of his own body disgusted him. It was even more temptation to embrace the perfection of the fire, yet he dutifully meditated and allowed his body to heal. Failure to control his abilities, the Seurok Paelu taught, was a failure to serve the master. His emotions were still unsettled, evident in the smoke rising from his hands.

The smoldering palms revealed that his hands were the focal point of his powers, a sign of inexperience. Aduros was a Kersanti, the second rank of four within his Seurok. The rivis of the Seurok Paelu were barely maintained. In reality, every Paelun had the same abilities and energy at their command. They

were only differentiated in their ability to control it, a difficult quality to measure without risk of injury or even death. The ravis were ceremonial only and in reality vast differences existed between members of each rank, some more powerful and others weaker than their ranks would warrant. In time, as Aduros matured as a Paelun, his powers would not require a focal point. When that mental barrier was finally overcome, the fire could be summoned from anywhere.

His mind began to wonder as he started the Rauhallin again. He served Master Murghein Verimies, a reclusive mage that spent most of his time hidden away in the tower dungeons researching the Art. Aduros was a warrior and he felt ill-suited as a simple guardian for his master's experiments. His master never challenged the other mages of the Lumavar and had never once participated in a duel, sanctioned or secret. With the Karul Ridge blocking the Urendor riders and the cowardice of the Nitherung to venture into the lowlands, there were no threats in the area.

He often dreamed of his trials at the Seurok, the endless slaughter in the Searing Pits where he learned how to fight. These were his fondest memories. Aduros proudly remembered the recognition he received as a prized pupil of the Paelu Lord. His bestowment to Master Murghein had been a reward for the wizard's loyalty to one of the Keisari, the god-like leaders of the Lumavar. It was his short-lived honor to be given in such manner. His only respite was unleashing his fiery abilities on defenseless animals or hapless villagers from Turhas. He was unprejudiced in who he encountered in his wanderings outside the tower. All felt the fury of his boredom. It was no life for a finely-tuned weapon. Aduros bristled at the notion and had to start his chanting over.

Chapter 8: Laughter at the Treetops

Aeolan took another leap, this time much higher than before. He was growing comfortable in managing the weight he carried on his back. At first, he had been hesitant about taking a full jump as he was worried that his landing would be disastrous. After a few successful tests, he had decided to unleash the full ability and sprang into the air, sailing past the leaves and branches of the forest. Soon he cleared the treetops, relishing the moment of weightlessness at the apex of his jump. He descended back to the forest floor. The landing was light and easy as always.

His arms were tucked under the legs of Samwel, who rode on his back, tightly clutching his shoulders. Despite the firm, and sometimes uncomfortable, grip the boy had on Aeolan, he had been laughing and cheering every moment of their flight. The sky dancer looked over his shoulder back at Samwel, whose eyes were wild and his face bright red. For a few moments, he watched in amazement as the boy howled and giggled without taking a breath. Aeolan found himself smiling, too.

When they were sitting at the side of the pond a few days ago, Aeolan had been worried that Samwel would not be impressed with his abilities. The boy had thrown a handful of berries and Aeolan easily redirected them into the water. The reaction had been quite the opposite of what he expected. The boy was stunned into silence. After several more handfuls of berries and even a few branches, Samwel finally spoke again. It made Aeolan happy that his new friend had been impressed with his display. Two days had passed of playing in the woods before Aeolan thought to show him another one. They had just jumped twenty cubits, a mundane task for the Taivasar, yet the boy seemed utterly fascinated by it.

"Aeolan?" The boy's voice was rough from his laughter. "Your eyes go strange when we jump. They turn white."

"That is called Sirtyma," Aeolan explained, letting the boy off of his back. "When the Voralai access their sphere, their bodies change. Over time, these changes become permanent. My hair and eyes were once brown like yours."

"Are you done changing?"

"No," Aeolan held up his rivis. "When I reach Ylin, which is the highest mark of my Seurok, then I will be completely changed."

"What will you look like then?"

"It is a little different between each Taivasar, Samwel. My eyes will be completely white, my skin will continue to pale, and my hair will shine like silver. The Seurok Taivas teaches us not to cut our hair and we wear it like this, braided. My hair will have many braids when I reach Ylin. If I reach Ylin, that is."

"Why wouldn't you reach Ylin?"

"I have no master now. I should be dead. I do not know if I'll continue to advance in Taivas."

"I think your good enough now! Can all the Voralai jump like you can?"

"No, only some are Taivasar. Others focus on different spheres, like earth, water, or fire. The strongest Taivasar, though, can fly through the air as a bird. They never need to come down."

"I think coming down is the most fun part," Samwel smiled brightly. "My stomach feels like it is rising into my throat and my heart jumps around like a wild horse."

"Is this painful?" Aeolan was started to doubt the wisdom in taking a full jump.

"No, it's wonderful!" Samwel walked back over to their small campfire that was cooking a pair of under-sized whitefish. The meal was nearly ready and the boy laid out the wooden bowls he had snuck from his mother's kitchen. The fish were served and they happily ate with their fingers. As they finished, Samwel's expression turned philosophical.

"Aeolan?"

"Yes, Samwel?"

"Do you know being a friend means?"

"Not really," Aeolan had never had a friend, but he had heard about them. "People that you like that like you back. Right?"

"Sorta. My mother says that friends are the family you find along the way. You can laugh with your friend, you can cry with your friend. So I think it is more than just liking each other. Friends are loyal and help each other."

"Are we friends?" Aeolan did not look up from his bowl, but was hopeful.

"Yes we are." Samwel came over and sat in front of the sky dancer. "To be friends we have to make a solemn oath. Do you want to take the oath?"

"Yes, what is the oath?" Aeolan face turned serious at the gravity of the moment.

"Do you, Aeolan, promise to remain loyal and true to Samwel? To stand by him no matter what like a true friend should?"

"I do, Samwel. I promise."

"Me too." Samwel put out his hand and they shook on it to make it official. Aeolan breathed in deeply, so much had changed in his life. A week ago he could never have imagined the joy of playing in the woods or catching fish. The things that Samwel had taught him over the last few days were still bouncing around in his heart. Why did he have to be a servant? All of the teachings of the Seurok seemed wrong. Aeolan had learned in his earliest days that a Voralai without a master was a wretched being, dying from within because they had no purpose. The master provided that purpose and thus their reason for living. Yet he had no master now and he continued to live. In fact, he felt more alive than ever, happy even. His wounds were healing and even the stiffness in his neck felt better. There was so much more to experience than he had ever dreamed.

Samwel returned to his place by the small fire. The boy had a mischevious look on his face and was whistling to himself as he innocently looked into the treetops. Aeolan had seen it several times before over the last few days. With a quick inspection, he could see the boy sneakily grabbing a handful of berries. In a flash, the boy unleashed his attack of gooseberries at the sky dancer. Aeolan with a sly smile redirected them right back at him. Both collapsed in laughter. It was the first time Aeolan had felt such joy, simple and pure.

"Samwel?"

"Yes, Aeolan?"

"Want to jump again?"

"Really? Yes! Yes!"

They hopped up together and Aeolan picked up the boy onto his back. This time Aeolan silently decided that he was going to add the acrobatics of a real jump. Samwel would be very surprised at all of the feats he could pack into a single jump. He picked a landing spot thirty cubits away and burst into the air. Instantly he was rolling and twisting, weaving and dancing through the wide expanse of branches, mixing the propulsion of his leap with his gliding to snake his way through the air. They eventually reached the

blue skies above the trees and Aeolan was surprised at the silence of his passenger. As they started to descend, he flashed a look over his shoulder. Aeolan immediately felt a tinge of guilt and glided gently down to the ground at the greenish face of Samwel, fixed in terror at the unexpected elements of the ride.

Chapter 9: Leena the Dragon

The villagers of Turhas were a stout, proud bunch. Their forefathers settled the hamlet by fighting back wave after wave of Nitherung raiders. For generations, they worked hard in the fields and the flocks, scratching out a modest living. Throughout it all, they faced all adversities and obstacles with the same flare of persistence and determination. Wolves from the forest, beastmen from the Karul Ridge, and even Urendor spies were met by the same measure of grit and courage. There were in fact only two things that the men of Turhas feared. The first was the dark tower of the wizard, looming over the village from the sharp, black cliffs to the north. The second, no less fearsome than the mage, was named Leena the Dragon, the village seamstress.

She was short, even for a village woman, and barely weighed eight stones. Yet her tempestuous rage left even the most hardened milita man stammering for words. Leena worked hard and had the respect of everyone in the village. She had a pleasant face when she could find another expression other than a scowl. Leena did not spend much time on her looks. Her brown locks were in a constant state of disarray, tumbling from her hair pins, and her dress was always faded and worn. Despite all of this, she still had a comely allure. Her emerald eyes were simply enchanting. Some foolish men had even dared to call upon her after the untimely death of her husband. All were driven away with curses and hurled crockery.

Leena had endured more than her share of misfortune. The wizard had taken her mate and first born for his malevolent research never to be seen again. Armas, her husband, had been a fine tanner and he had taken their oldest son, Veli, as his young apprentice. Those were happy times before her beloved was taken. Other families had lost loved ones to the dark tower, but never two from the same family. To make matters worse, the cupboard was often bare on the lone wages of a seamstress. She looked too lean, but Leena never asked for help or pity. She was a fighter. Her grief and her determination had hardened her heart. The seamstress had one person left in her family and it was her singular focus.

The kitchen carried the aroma of heavy pottage. She had walked down to the river earlier in the day to collect a few sprigs of parsley to add to the mix of potatoes, flour, and water for extra flavor. A guest was coming to dinner, but that did not put any meat in the small cottage, Leena thought ruefully. They would have to be happy with potato stew. Sami had begged her to bring a friend to dinner before he disappeared in the woods for the rest of the day as usual. He had gotten so bad at doing his chores lately and Leena reminded herself that it was time to remind him of his priorities. Even since his brother had been taken, she had found it difficult to scold him. He had his father's deep brown eyes.

There was a knock at the door and Leena quickly straightened her apron. Her hair was such a mess that she decided against trying to fix her loose curls into place. She opened the door to the smiling face of Sami. Standing next to her youngest was the strangest being she had ever seen. Leena caught her breath at the sight of him. He had long, beautiful hair tied into tight braids. His eyes were the color of

the summer sky, nearly glowing in their radiance. His face was lovingly carved from stone, delicate and noble. Silver earrings dangled from each ear, their value beyond measure in simple Turhas. And yet it was obvious that his man was a warrior. He stood in a loose stance, radiating sublime confidence from a life without fear.

"Mum, this is my friend." Sami was just like his father, always looking for attention. Before Veli had been taken, he had been a natural performer. "His name is Aeolan." She remembered her manners only at the last moment.

"Greetings, Master Aeolan." She curtsied. "Welcome to my humble home." She emphasized the word humble and smiled. Leena moved aside so the guest could enter. He returned her smile shyly and followed Sami to the table. He did not speak. She was feeling awkward in the silence, so she decided to make small talk while she finished the stew. "So, what kind of a name is Aeolan?"

Inexplicable both Sami and the stranger started laughing. He had a bright smile with the teeth of a nobleman, perfectly straight and pearly white. Leena was no fool and she was growing concerned over Sami's new friend. Yet her boy seemed so happy, sitting at the table and showing his new friend the clay pot he had made last year. It had been a long time since she had seen her son laugh like a child, freely and without care. She decided she would hold her concerns until after the stranger had left. Sami could not be allowed to spend time around this man. It was simple too dangerous.

"Aeolan lives in the woods." Sami was playing host again. "He just moved here from the south. He is a fur trapper." She looked over Aeolan again and immediately dismissed her son's explanation.

"Well, I hope you like potato stew," she slopped two large helpings, leaving only a few mouthfuls for her own bowl. "We don't have the coin for meat very often. Master Aeolan, what type of animals do you trap?"

"I catch fish," he answered simple.

"He eats fish," Sami quickly chimed in, "but he hunts silver tail fox."

"So Aeolan where are you from?" She was blatantly probing and risked offending him, but it was her house and she would do as she pleased if it meant protecting her son. She had lost Veli and could not bear to lose another.

"I am from the Tower of Ulkaeus." Sami was clearly getting nervous, so she decided to stay on this track. The dinner continued quietly with a few more moments of idle chit chat before she struck again.

"The Tower of Ulkaeus?" She paused for a moment. "I am not familiar with that place. Sounds like it is far away. Do you get to see your family often?"

"No," the answer was simple enough and Sami visibly relaxed, but Aeolan continued. "It was only the wizard and I at the tower." Sami spit out his potato stew onto the table in his shock. His fearful eyes darted to his mother as if she might strike him. She was certainly angry, but she would never be that angry.

"Sami!" She stood up and put her hands on her hips, her upset stance. "You'd better start explaining yourself!"

"Mum, don't be mad." Sami was ready to burst into tears. She knew he hated to see her disappointment, but she was flush with outrage and disbelief at her child's ignorance. "He was the slave to an evil wizard. That wizard died and he became free. He has no family, he has no one. And when I found him he was nearly dead. So I helped him, taught him how to fish and find berries. Then we became friends. Mum, he has no one!"

It occurred to her what Sami was thinking. The realization washed over her in a wave of sudden grief. She covered her mouth and her eyes filled with tears. It was so clear. Aeolan had been taken from his family and forced to be a slave to a master, a wizard. He had been taken at such a young age that he probably truly believed that he had no family. It was also obvious that he had been changed somehow for his servitude into a magical being. The wizards had experimented upon him. Leena knew Aeolan's story. It was all too familiar for it was also the tale of Veli.

She felt her heart break. Her Sami missed his older brother so much. Leena had seen the change in him. When the harshness of his grief had passed, the child left was different. He did not laugh or smile. He stopped talking. The other children in the village had only made it worse, fearing that her family had been cursed by the wizard. In her own grief, she had failed to support her fragile young son.

"Oh Sami." She felt a single tear escape from her emerald eyes. She was a tough woman, but the pain of her son was her weakness. She snatched up the surprised boy in her arms and hugged him tightly. She kissed him on the forehead and he wriggled in her grasp, old enough to feel embarrassed in front of his new friend. Aeolan stood up with his head low.

"I am sorry," he muttered. "I should go." Sami shot a pleading glance to Leena. She closed her eyes to collect herself, immediately regretting what she was about to say.

"Master Aeolan, please stay and finish your dinner. You are our guest."

Sami hugged her and added a quick kiss on the cheek. They finished the rest of the meal without incident. Her son was talking the entire time, even through mouthfuls of potato stew. Leena was silent, trying to think of what to do. Aeolan definitely could not stay at Turhas for long. The servant of a wizard, even a dead wizard, would eventually attract attention.

"Your robes look like they need some mending." She walked around the table to inspect his garment. "If you'll leave the outer vestment, I will sew it up for you." Sami was pleased, but he did not realize her intent was to help prepare their guest for travel. It was already midsummer and she quietly decided that at the arrival of autumn, it would be time for her son's new friend to leave.

Chapter 10: A Fateful Encounter

Aeolan walked through the woods with a fishing rod resting over one shoulder. Leena had taken his outer robes to make repairs, so all he wore were his leggings and under tunic. The tunic was made of white silk with light blue embroidery in Viisar, the language of sages. He had spent the early morning fixing his braid, carefully arranging it into the Taivasar pattern, as he watched the sun rise from his tree top perch. He carried his ever present sword on a simple rope baldric slung over his back. For the first time in a fortnight, Aeolan felt refreshed and complete.

The morning air was already warming and he was looking forward to a peaceful nap by the Green Lampi as he waited for a bite on his lure. Life had slowed for the Voralai, yet it seemed more filled with purpose and possibility than ever before. After a few hours of fishing, Samwel would finish with his chores and they would play in the woods. Their favorite game now was simply skimming over the tree tops. Aeolan would pick up the boy on his back, leap to the heavens, and then glide in slow circles exploring the forest floor. From the air, they had discovered a whole new world, new fishing sites, meadows filled with brilliant wild flowers, and even deer foraging in the brush.

Lost in his own thoughts, the Voralai pushed his way past a heavy bush to cross a simple track on his way to the Lampi. It was a thick hedge line that obscured the near side of an old wagon track. As he slipped through to the road, he nearly stepped in the midst of a trio of surprised travelers. They were dressed in fine garments, a mixture of silk and velvet in a rainbow of color. At the side of each was a slender scabbard crowned with an elaborate sword hilt. They were obvious courtesans and each wore the Lumavarian badge. The travelers were servants of the ruling council of Maaginen.

Aeolan's heart jumped into his throat as both parties stood in stunned silence. One of the courtesans read the Viisar script embroidered into his under tunic with wide eyes, clearly a scribe. The Voralai dashed back into the thick hedge, his heart racing. The writing identified him as the servant of Master Azemar. He scolded himself for being so foolish for wearing the master's tunic. With his soiled clothes covered in blood stains, any speaker of Viisar would immediately realize that Aeolan was a Kuritan, a masterless Voralai. The Lumavar had prepared contingency plans for rogue wielders. It was called the Naamari, the night masks. They were assassins and hunters, specifically trained to kill wild Voralai.

On the other side of the thick hedge, Aeolan heard the three courtesans break into a run. They knew. If they made it to a Maaginen, then the Naamari would be unleashed onto Turhas to find and destroy him. Aeolan knew their methods were as brutal as they were indiscriminate. No number of lives or any amount of destruction would pacify their endless search for their prey. The night masks were legendary for their relentlessness and fury. Never once had a Kuritan survived their attacks and often entire villages were laid to waists. Samwel and Leena, his only friends, were in serious peril. He could not let these servants return to their masters.

In an blast of vicious wind, Aeolan powered into the air, high above the track where the servants were fleeing. They spotted his approach and broke in three directions, one into either side of the woods and the last down the track. The Voralai glided to the left, reaching into his deep pouch to produce a handful of iron throwing spikes. They were intricately carved with spiral grooves to spin as they flew, increasing his control over them. He dipped his glide below the canopy, controlling his approach with subtle dips of his shoulders. His arms were held behind in a V shape for maximum speed. When he was close enough, he hurled the iron spikes. They whistled through the air, each independently controlled by the will of the

Taivasar. With flawless accuracy, they embedded deeply into the trunk of a broad elm. The courtesan was held fast, his tunic nailed to the tree in six places.

Aeolan landed on the soft forest floor and exploded into the air again, a cyclone of leaves marking his exit. He decided to chase the other servant fleeing into the woods before he lost him for good. He had some ground to cover, so he could not idly glide. Instead he leapt from branch to branch through the canopy of trees, flipping and twisting through the maze of branches. The limbs he used to propel himself were smaller in thickness than his thumb. The Voralai found his target stumbling through a rocky creek bed. Just ahead, Aeolan spotted a rotten tree in the path of the runner. He had to get closer to focus his powers for such a task. With a massive leap, he covered thirty cubits and immediately unleashed his craft. Perched on a high branch, Aeolan reached into the air before him and pulled with all of his might. The ancient tree swayed for a moment, sharp cracking came from its base, before crashing down to the forest floor, pinning the second courtesan in the soft mud.

The last would be the easiest to capture, running blindly along the track. The final target was the scribe that had read his tunic. He rose again above the trees, his wild adrenaline adding to the strength of his energy focus. He plummeted down in a power dive, the wind whipping his braids wildly behind him. He pulled his pole sword from its sling and prepared to strike. The move had been carefully taught in the Seurok training grounds, called the haukka. It was the premier killing blow for the Taivasar, death from above. The servant was running, his arms flailing. It would be an easy kill.

Aeolan closed to striking distance and pulled from his power dive. His sword held high, he rushed past his prey and unleashed his blade in a blinding whirl. The scribe crashed to the earth with a screech. Aeolan landed softly on one knee, his eyes closed. His heart filled at doubt at what he had just done. Behind him, the scribe opened his eyes, surprised to find himself alive and uninjured. He had pulled back from the haukka and spared the life of his prey.

At the command of his master, Aeolan had bloodied his hands too many times to remember. In the fortnight of his new freedom, the Taivasar discovered that, under his own conscience, he was not a killer. Despite the danger to himself and his friends, he could not bring himself to murder these innocent men. The Voralai had acted on instinct at their fleeing steps, bursting into immediate pursuit. Through the past ten days, he had struggled to find his path and his purpose. At the moment of the haukka, the culmination of his training, he made his most important decision. He chose mercy. He chose life. Aeolan stood up and turned to face the scribe.

"Go," Aeolan heaved a deep sigh and gestured down the track. "I did not harm your companions. Collect them and go. You know who I am and to whom I once belonged. Tell your masters if you must."

With incredulous eyes, the scribe picked himself from the dirt and ran into the woods. Aeolan could hear him awkwardly crashing about, calling to his companions. It would be just days before the Maaginen were alerted and the Shadow Hunters released. His heart was heavy as he walked back, leaving the fishing rod lost in the woods. If he were destined to die at the hands of the Naamari, he could accept that. At least he would die knowing freedom. Samwel and Leena were a different matter. It was because of his presence that they were in danger and the thought of either of them suffering was unbearable. He knew

that he could not stay in the woods of Turhas without gambling their lives. He had taken the solemn oath of friendship and now he was going to fulfill that promise by saying good bye forever.

Chapter 11: Within the Tower of the Tyrant

Lord Murghein Verimies drank deeply from the silver goblet of red wine before the roar of his hearth. He was resting in a cushioned chair in his dark study with his Paelun slave, Aduros, quietly brooding in the shadows. The lord of the tower was dressed in heavy velvet robes of midnight. He wore no jewelry as the luster of gold lost its allure when it could be created from air. Instead, he wore a simple medallion, made from Tivinen. The metal called wizard stone was a magical creation and it took a small degree of the Art to even maintain it in a solid state before disappearing into deadly red mist. It was the badge of the Maaginen for only a wizard could wear it.

His thoughts were distant and he absently stroked his white beard. The Lumavar had summoned the full circle and, unless he desired to offend his Keisari patron, he was required to attend. It was likely to be no more than a melodramatic feud between meddling Maaginen looking to earn a reputation as duelists. All matters of the Lumavar were decided by the duel. Thus the Keisari made most of the decisions for the wizardly council, might makes right. It was a waste of Murghein's time and it distracted him from his research. He was too old to care for the ambitions of younger wizards, but not powerful enough to anger the powers of the council. It was a pity because he was ready to begin his next experiment.

The small of village Turhas, lying in the shadow of his tower, was little more than an afterthought to the mage. He viewed the collection of families, eking out a modest survival, as a breeding ground for subjects for his research. It was his domain and his power was absolute. Other Maaginen ruled their lands with laws and markets. Murghein saw no point in the pretense of governance. Everything he needed could be provided through the Art. Food, comfort, wealth, and other earthly pleasure were granted with a simple snap of the fingers. There was only one thing that he desired, only one need that drove him endlessly. He wanted power, pure and simple.

It was the quest of all men in one way or the other and a master wizard was no different. A king's quest for land or a priest's desire for destiny was simply misplaced goals. Murghein would never settle for simple dominion or divine servitude. Instead he wanted tangible omnipotence. That level of mastery was achieved only through the Art and it was a cruel master. It demanded endless hours of devotion, physical sacrifice and suffering, and sometimes even blood. It was the need for blood was ensured the continued existence of Turhas.

"More wine." It was a simple command and one that he could have normally accomplished on his own by easily lifting the crystal decanter with his magical energies, a nearly effortless endeavor. His research had put quite a strain on his health and he was conserving his energies for his portal crossing to the Lumavar court. The Art, when used at the levels he was channeling, was physically draining and often damaging. Any errors in his focus during the greater incantations could disintegrate him instantly.

He also enjoyed torturing his Voralai, the fiery spirited Paelun. He kept the slave on a short leash, focusing his activities on domestic chores. In fact, Murghein had never desired ownership of a Voralai

slave, but was granted the Paelun as a gift from his patron Keisari, Lord Oerazan. He often wondered if the Paelun was actually a spy used to pry into his own affairs, a living scrying device. If Aduros was indeed the eyes and ears of Lord Oerazan, there was little he could do about. Regardless of any hidden motives, the massive slave obediently fetched the crystal decanter and refilled the goblet.

Murghein had made preparations for the gathering of the Lumavar to last a fortnight. If it lasted longer than planned, his experiment would fall to ruin. Delicate components would need to be replaced and rune circles painstakingly redrawn. It would set him back at least a full lunar cycle. He stroked his beard further, agitation growing in his stomach. His last experiment had nearly succeeded and he was assured that this time would be a success. Of course, the Maaginen with greater mastery of the Art already knew the secrets he pursued, but it would be foolish for any of the circle to assist a potential competitor and enemy. The Art was a ruthless master.

His research required a consumable item that he needed to collect from the village, the last piece of his experiment. It demanded a child no more than thirteen summers in age, preferably male. It did not matter to the old mage which one as it would perish in the experiment anyway. He turned to look at his slave and debated delegating this responsibility. The requirements of the Lumavar left him little choice. All preparations that could be made for his experiment would be undertaken and he did not have the time to sort through a hundred or so villagers looking for his latest subject.

"Bring me a human child." He was sure to be exact in his request for he feared the simple creature would find a way to fail. "I need it alive and healthy when I return from the Lumavar. Look in Turhas for a boy no more than thirteen years of age."

The Voralai's eyes lit up with barely hidden delight, clearly possessed with some other motive. The Paelun were noted for their destructive tendencies. It made them ideal for combat, yet less suited to more delicate tasks. After much debate, it had been decided that this trait would be embraced in the Seurok Paelu, breeding nearly uncontrollable war machines. If a wizard needed a more subtle servant than he could request a slave from one of the other Seurok. Deep inside, Lord Murghein questioned the wisdom of bestowing such abilities to slaves. Someday that might prove to be troublesome.

"I shall return in a fortnight. See that you have followed my instructions," Murghein felt the need to emphasize the importance of his request, "or I shall be greatly displeased."

"Yes, my master. I shall do as you ask." Aduros bowed.

Chapter 12: Farewell

Samwel burst from the back door of his small cottage in a full sprint. He had just finished his chores and the rest of the day until dark was his alone. He held a small basket of food in one hand and a mended silk robe in the other. His mother had prepared the bundle of food, boiled eggs and hard bread, to accompany any fish they might pull from the Lampi. He was grinning as he ran through the meadow, eager to play away another summer day in the tree tops.

As he approached the tree line, he saw the Voralai sitting on a low branch. He did not have the fishing rod, as he normally did. Samwel nearly called to him to tell him about the boiled eggs and the finished repairs on his outer robe, but the expression on his friend's face quieted his announcements. Aeolan appeared to be greatly disturbed, his face masked in sadness. Samwel slowed to walk, filled with confusion.

"Aeolan," he spoke quietly, "what is wrong?"

"Samwel, I must go." The words struck him with force leaving his lip trembling.

"Why? I don't understand. Why must you go?" He held up his basket of food as if to show Aeolan that they were friends and to remind him of the good times they had playing in the woods. The Voralai seemed greatly pained. He dropped to the ground and came to a kneel before Samwel to look him in the eyes.

"You don't understand." Aeolan spoke softly. "I represent something to the wizards of this place. I am not just Aeolan, but a symbol, a symbol of their rule. They know that I am free and they will never stop looking for me. Never. And the people that they will send will do anything and kill anyone to find me." Samwel's eyes filled with tears. "I thought that I could stay here forever, but I realize now that I am a curse to whoever helps me. A bane to whoever becomes my friend. If I stay, you and your mother will be in danger."

"That's not true!"

"Yes, Samwel, it is true. You must understand that I don't want to go. You are my first and best friend. You have taught me what it means to be more than a slave, to be free. I owe you everything, Samwel."

"Then don't go." The boy was crying now.

"But I must." A heavy lump had formed in Aeolan's throat. He was saying good bye to the only peace he had ever known. To the friend that had taught him about the finest things of life, friendship, family, and freedom. "I will stay just a day longer, but then I must leave. And when I go, you must promise me that you will never speak of me again."

"No! Take me with you!" Aeolan put his hands on the boy's shoulders. He did not expect this to be so difficult. His heart was aching. It was a feeling that he had never felt before. On one hand it clarified his affection for Samwel, but on the other the sorrow filled his chest with a crippling ache. It was bittersweet.

"Samwel, your place is with your mother. The places that I must go are no place for you. I want you to live a long and happy life here in Turhas, fishing at the pond and making new friends. I have a dark road ahead, but knowing that you are here fishing at the Lampi will give me hope. The good times we had will last forever and we will always be friends. Always." All that needed to be said had been spoken. They stood in silence for a moment. Samwel's lip trembled and his face reddened.

"Go!" He was shouting. "I don't want you here! Go and hide! You're just like Veli!" The boy tore from his grasp and ran back to the house, leaving the bundle of food and the mended robes lying on the

ground. Aeolan nearly chased after him, but stopped himself. He knew that he had to leave and there was nothing he could say to make it any easier. Picking up his outer robes, Aeolan turned to walk back into the wood. He decided that he would wait a day at the Lampi before setting off. Perhaps Samwel would come for a final goodbye and they could part as friends should.

Chapter 13: The Shadow Hunter

The pale moon loomed in the empty sky with the balefulness of a grinning skull, staring on the barren valley below. A decrepit tower stood in blasted ruin, a quarter of its circular wall lying in mossy piles at its base, revealing the hollow interior. The support rafters that had crisscrossed the tower at each of the three stories had long rotted away and the air smelled thickly of brimstone. The only element of the ancient tower remaining intact was a worn staircase, hidden in the deepest shadow of the wall, spiraling down into an abyss. Silent ravens perched on the crumbling walls, watching the land with black eyes.

In ancient times, the tower had been occupied by a necromancer and madman. His vain attempts to gain mastery of demonic powers had resulted in catastrophe, leaving the tower in its present state. The explosion had been heard for leagues and the neighboring villages saw entire flocks fall to the ground in instant death. It was widely believed by both villager and wizard that the ruins of the Pirulta were cursed. The new master of the tower was pleased with its infamous legacy as well as with the lingering stench of the infernal. Below the ruined tower in the dungeon depths was the lair of Cammadean, the Lord of a Thousand Faces.

Cammadean was a Naamari, an adept of the third circle. There were five circles in all. Sitting as lord of the shadow hunters alone in the fifth circle was the Master of the Abyss, Arziel. With the creation of the four elemental Seuroks by Berdanziallis, the first lord of the Lumavar, a control measure and contingency was added should the Voralai ever loose their desire to serve. Known as the shadow hunters, the night masks, and the raven guard, the Naamari were assassins and trackers, uniquely trained to slay wielders. Like the Voralai the Naamari were crafters as well, unable to use the Art. Their abilities though did not come from universal spheres, the cosmic fabric of creation. Instead they channeled their shadow powers from the infinite of the Nether Realm, the endless abyss.

The Naamari Adept had received the summons for his next mark and the mission was approved by Lord Arziel. Another rogue Voralai was free and the Lumavar ordered death. Cammadean stood in the moonlight, his skin darker than shadow and his raven hair hidden beneath a featureless cowl. His eyes were white pearls, his pale irises and pupils indiscernible against the sclera. It was the touch of the abyss that had converted his features into that of a shade and the progression would continue as his powers grew. He could see perfectly in the dimness of night and surveyed the windswept lands before his tower walls. The time of subservience was coming to an end when the secret goals of the Naamari would be revealed.

Throughout the long history of the shadow hunters, their abilities and training made them experts in subterfuge and stealth. Their network of spies slowly turned their prying eyes onto the activities of their masters. The first secret stolen from the Maaginen was the creation process of the Naamari and they immediately began creating an army of assassins. Unknown to the Lumavar, the numbers of the hidden

shadow hunter were in the thousands. Cammadean was actually one of the few known night masks. It was his obligation to continue following the orders to avoid suspicion.

The second great secret of the Naamari was in their training regimen. An elite cadre of hidden shadow hunters was hand-selected by Lord Arziel to specialize their powers and abilities for a single purpose, mage slayers. Other Naamari were trained to mimic the abilities of the Voralai and placed as spies throughout the Lumavarian Court. The time was soon approaching and the Naamari had grand ambitions. Lord Arziel's patience was endless, but Cammadean knew that the waiting was nearly over. The very tool created to ensure obedience to the Maaginen was to be the clarion call of their doom. Cammadean delighted in the irony.

Until that day of righteous massacre, the Naamari Adept would continue as ordered by the false masters. His milky eyes caught the ominous moon. His mind focused on his target, a sky dancer named Aeolan. With a subtle nod of his head, the ravens crowning the ruined tower lifted into the air to begin searching the forests of Turhas. A Taivasar with only his fourth rivis was hardly a challenge. Cammadean's own markings were nearly invisible. The white dots on the backs of his forearms, which signified his rank, were only visible during the new moon unless he willed otherwise.

With a quick turn, his cloak swirling through the air seemingly with its own sentience, Cammadean went to the stairs leading to the ancient crypts of the necromancer. He needed a day to make preparations before he embarked on his mission. Within his soul, the shadow hunter knew it would be his last. A wicked smile crossed his lips as he descended into the velvety darkness of his lair. Soon the slave would strike and the ground would grow slick with the blood of the master.

Chapter 14: The Nightmare

The afternoon sky was choked with clouds, thick and ominous. A storm was pushing in from the southern peaks and it had dampened the spirits of Turhas. Summer storms arriving from the Karul Ridge brought omens full of portent. The villagers had hurried to finish their chores early before the light faded, hoping to weather the storm behind locked doors and near roaring fires. On the cragged hill, the tower had long been silent, perhaps too long.

Samwel was quietly carrying a basket of linens for his mother to the blacksmith. His encounter earlier in the day with Aeolan in his private meadow had left him hurting. He had rushed home and cried into his mother's apron. She had held him, stroking his hair, and yet she seemed relieved to hear that the Voralai was leaving. After the tears had dried, Samwel returned to his silence, taking in the world with empty brown eyes. Instead of allowing him to hide in his bed all day, his mother thought that helping with her chores and keeping him out of the house would take his mind off of his worries.

He had just made his way through the farmer's market, which was completely abandoned with the coming tempest. Samwel stopped by the empty carver's booth. When the booth was open there were all sorts of painted wooden knights on horses, complete with small wheels for pulling. Many precious moments had been spent inspecting the toys in front of his mother with the hope that someday she might get him one. Each was painted in different colors, so bright and bold on the backs of their mighty steeds. They were

fearless and noble with their wooden lances held towards whatever enemy they faced. The wooden knights did not fear the night. They did not fear the tower. If one of those wooden knights had been real, they would have gone to the tower to find Veli. They had been the heroes of his imagination.

When Samwel met the Voralai, he had found a real warrior. Aeolan danced through the clouds and tamed the winds. Never in his imagination had he envisioned someone so powerful or so graceful. He knew no fear and when Samwel was with him, he had felt safe for the first time since Veli had vanished. The knights in his imagination had been replaced by a real hero, a protector. Aeolan had been taken by the wizards as a babe and had emerged a champion. Samwel was hoping the same for his lost older brother, while holding on so tightly to Aeolan to drive away the nightmares.

Samwel felt guilty that he had spoken so terribly to his friend. If Aeolan had to go, then it must be important. Maybe he could not understand now, but he realized that he trusted his friend to make the right decision. The boy decided that after he delivered the bundle of linens to the smithy, he would stop by the carver and ask if he could offer work and odd jobs for a wooden knight. He had the rest of the summer to make good on his promise. If the carver agreed, he intended to give Aeolan the toy to remember him, an imaginary hero for a real one.

His thoughts were abruptly interrupted when he noticed he was being watched. The figure watching him was so disturbing that he dropped the clean linens into the dirt. It was a gigantic man, shoulders squarely cut and attached by heavy muscles to a thickly corded neck. He was bare-chested, his bronze muscles nearly unnatural in their flawless symmetry and pulsing energy. Dangling from his heavy iron belt was a heavy falchion. The warrior was bald and his face was distorted with malevolence. His eyes slowly turned to black as the air around his body began to ripple in waves of heat. He was a Voralai, a burning bane.

Samwel was paralyzed. Deep within the primal core of his being, the boy knew that this monster was so much faster and stronger than he that his plight was hopeless. He was completely at the mercy of the warrior. He could do nothing. Yellow flames licked forth over the rough palms of the war master, his eyes now black as coal. The heat raised the skin on Samwel's face. The flames grew in size, engulfing the forearms, streaked with blue and red. The hands were burning like freshly oiled torches. The warrior expression turned into a snarl, though it was clear that the fire dancing on his limbs was filling him with ecstasy.

The door of tanner's shop opened and Paavo appeared at the threshold. All of the villagers in the market square were witnessing the horrible events unfolding behind various spy holes, but only the tanner had the courage to try to save the boy from certain death. They had long been friends of his father and probably could not bear to see Armas' only remaining son lost to the tower. He was panicked, but he waved his arm frantically for Samwel to come. Behind him in the dimness of his storefront, his wife was screaming with their newly born baby in her arms. They were both calling him to run into their home, but Samwel saw murder cross the face of the warrior.

"Sami, come quickly!"

The burning bane slowly turned to face the newcomer and Paavo froze. The war master raised his right hand and the fire sprang to life. It twisted to the darkening sky, the flames dancing higher than the cottages surrounding the farmer's market. The heat was unbearable. He pulled the fist back, forming a

fireball in his hands, readying to release the fury onto the house. Paavo moved to shut the door while he screamed.

"Run, Sami!"

The door slammed shut, but it made no difference. The fiery blast razed the door from its melted hinges. Bracing the door on the other side with his own body, Paavo was bathed instantly in flames. In the terrible glow, Samwel could see the sheer terror on the tanner's wife. Her cries for mercy were cut short as another cone of fire was unleashed into the cottage. The burning warrior drowned the screams of the tanner's family with his own howls of laughter. The voice was shrill and maniacal. He unleashed blast upon blast until the thatched roof roared into an inferno. All lives within the blaze were lost, leaving only bright ash.

The scene of horror washed over young Samwel. He swooned on his feet, the waves of merciless heat and despair threatened to take his consciousness. In desperation, he searched the fading light for his friend. He feared that the words he had spoken had ended their friendship, broken their solemn promise, and that the Voralai would not come. He turned to flee, his steps awkward and ragged. A heavy hand grabbed the hem of his tunic and hoisted him into the air. Samwel burst into tears, his heart racing. He turned to see the black, soulless eyes of the burning warrior. They were emotionless and uncaring, already bored with the slaughter.

"Mummy!"

It was the only thing he could think to scream. His mother would come and make things right. She would wake him from this nightmare and hold him until dawn, rocking him gently with soft words. His mother had always been there for him with warm kisses for his forehead. When his father was taken by the wizard, she held them together and worked all day to provide them with food. When Veli disappeared, again she was there with a tight embrace. She had promised that no one would take him, that she would keep him safe. Yet there was no one. Aeolan, his mother, no one was coming to save him. The tower had finally gotten him after taking his father and brother. All of the visions that haunted his dreams had come true. Twisting in the grip of the monster, Samwel screamed again in the despair of realizing that he was alone.

Chapter 15: Promises

The storm was coming down in blinding sheets. The woods of Turhas were under the full fury of the ominous tempest from the Karul Ridge. The occasional flash of lightning offered the only light in the murky forest. The trees shook with the boom of rolling thunder and the wind tore leaves from their branches. Aeolan huddled under a bent tree, unsuccessfully trying to avoid the drench. His wet robes hung heavily to his flesh. The rain was chilling and the thickening mud at his feet like ice. The noise from the downpour on the Green Lampi was a deafening buzz.

The future was filled with uncertainty. Danger was coming from all directions. The fearsome Naamari would come for him with their shadow powers. The Lumavar would unleash incantations to track him over

the known world. There were enemies in new lands still undiscovered that would vie for his head, as well. He had to flee Turhas and from the lands of the Maaginen into the broad undiscovered world. His training had never prepared him for what could lie outside the borders of the council lands. Yet despite all of his own worries, all he could think about was the visible hurt on Samwel's face when they had parted.

The sadness that he had felt so acutely at their goodbye had solidified into an anchor in his chest, pulling his spirits down into the freezing muck. He could run and hide from the Lumavar, but the same pain would follow him throughout his days. Aeolan had trouble finding the will to continue, the motivation to fight for his freedom. Wherever he went and whoever became his friends, Aeolan knew that he would soon abandon them again to return to his flight. All that knew him were in danger. It was a curse, a life without possibility of meaning or warmth. The new freedom he had earned had become a worse prison than his slavery to the wizard masters. The Voralai knew that it would be easier to just submit to the coming blades of the Naamari, to expose his neck for the finishing blow. In the numbing rain, his heart was surrendering.

"Aeolan!"

The voice of desperation barely slipped past the roar of the relentless storm. The Voralai's ears picked up and he listened intently for the call again. The storm was pounding the forest, making it hard to hear. A glimmer of hope danced across his heart.

"Aeolan, where are you? Please help me!"

It was the voice of a woman, not a boy of eight summers. He recognized the speaker immediately. It was Leena, Samwel's mother. She sounded panicked and frantic. Something was terribly wrong. He leaped to his feet, slinging his sword over his back on the rope baldric. The mud splashed at his footfalls as he raced towards her voice.

"Leena! I am here!"

He spotted her. She was soaked, her hair pasted to her pale skin. Her hands were groping in the darkness. She wore no shoes as if she had left her cottage without preparation or any regard for her own well being. Leena looked so thin and frail, the veins on her neck bulging. Her eyes burned with wild urgency in pallor of her face. In a single stride, he cleared a fallen tree covered in moss and landed gently by her. He grabbed her shoulders, her skin was freezing. She was surprised at his sudden arrival as if an apparition had materialized from the storm to steal her to hell. Her mouth worked feebly, but no words escaped.

"Leena! What is wrong?" Finally, she broke from her trance and spoke.

"I couldn't do anything!" She was screaming at the top of her lungs over the power of the gale. "I promised him!" Aeolan was alarmed and needed answers. He shook her to her senses.

"Woman!" He barked at her roughly, his iridescent eyes flashing. "Tell me what is wrong! Where is Samwel?"

"The tower took him!" She burst into tears and fell into Aeolan's arms. It was obvious that she had been wondering the woods for at least an hour in the downpour looking for a savior. The wizard of Turhas had taken Samwel to the tower. The thought chilled his bones far beyond the icy rain, bending his stomach into knots. Many children went missing throughout the lands of the Maaginen, but the heartbroken families simply shouldered the pain and continued. The boy was doomed.

"Aeolan, they took my Sami!" She had collapsed into hopelessness. "I promised him that I would protect him, that the tower wouldn't take him. It took Armas. It took my Veli. I promised him he'd be safe! They've taken all that I have!"

Within the core of his heart, a warm glow started to form. The glow slowly coalesced into a slow burn. He felt his jaw tightening and the muscles in his back tensing. The Voralai envisioned rough hands on Samwel, dragging him unconscious into foul dungeons. The boy's head soaked with his own blood. The burn grew to anger. The innocent smile of his friend would be extinguished forever. The black tower in its arrogance thought that no one would dare oppose them for stealing children from their mothers, for the atrocities committed by their stone walls. The anger growing in his chest sparked into rage. The Voralai's face hardened and his hands began to shake.

He remembered learning to fish with Samwel by the side of the Lampi and the words that had been said. *Friends are the family you find along the way.* Without realizing it, his eyes paled to murky white as the Taivas sphere coursed through his body. The Voralai was unknowingly channeling his energies. *Do you, Aeolan, promise to remain loyal and true to Samwel? To stand by him no matter what like a true friend should?* It was the oath of friendship. Regardless of his own fate, Aeolan knew that Samwel needed him. The wizards were seeking him and the Naamari were coming, yet there was no one else that had a chance of saving Samwel. He was staring into Leena's eyes, but he was not seeing her. He was engulfed in his fury.

Inexplicably the storm stopped. The rain abruptly died and the winds calmed. The tempest that had pounded the woods vanished leaving only Aeolan and his rage.

"I too made a promise."

Chapter 16: Wind and Fire

The rain had stopped, but the clouds still gathered with frequent flashes dancing through their gloomy expanse. The wind was low but chilling in gentle bursts. The tower of black stone loomed before him on the broken hill. It was cast in silhouette against the velvet night, illuminated by the lightning from the storm clouds. The rock was featureless black granite, ancient and worn. The octagonal tower climbed high into the air, over fifty cubits straight up. The top was crowned with a horned parapet. The main entrance was at the end of the forestair, composed of two heavy doors of iron. A row of windows circled the tower three quarters of the way up its length.

Before coming to the tower, Aeolan had taken Leena back to her cottage. She had collapsed at his feet from her exhaustion. He had placed the sleeping mother carefully into her bed and locked the door as he

left. Along the way, he walked through the smoldering remnants of the farmer's market. The attacker had burned down several cottages and destroyed the wooden stalls used by the farmers and tradesmen to sell their wares. People had been murdered in their homes. Curious villagers scampered back inside their doors at his approach, peeking at him from behind closed shutters. Aeolan grabbed a torch lying in wrecked market and dipped its head in broken barrel of black pitch. He lit the torch from the smoldering embers of the tanner's shop, still glowing despite the storm. The pitch burned black with thick, heavy smoke pouring from its flaming end.

His fury still raging in his breast unchecked, the Taivasar approached the smooth granite walls. The tower was too high for his leaping and too slick to climb, but it made no difference. Aeolan had another means to enter. He dropped the still burning torch on the rocky ground. He breathed deeply to focus his craft and carefully stepped onto the thick black smoke. Up he rose, riding the rising soot up the wall of the tower, using his hands to guide him along the granite surface. It was a difficult power to evoke, one that he had just learned before the fateful duel that gave him his freedom. The floating particles were too small for him to jump from, but in the lee of the wind they would get him to a window ledge.

As he rose further into the air, his ascent slowed as the smoke dissipated. He maintained his energy and slowly crept towards the barred window until he was close enough to grab the iron fixture. Aeolan pulled himself so that his feet rested on the edge of the window and glanced to the overhead to the hanging corbels. He leapt up and outward from the tower until he reached the perfect angle and then used his momentum to glide back to the parapet. The Taivasar pulled himself over the stone crenellations and onto the top of the tower.

A simple trap door was in the middle of the eight sided landing. It was wooden, but heavily bolted with bands of iron. The hinges were on the inside, but a solid iron ring was available. Aeolan gently pulled and it rattled with a simple sliding lock on the reverse. He laid his ear on the stone threshold and listened carefully to the rattle of the bolt. He pinpointed its location and focused his energies on the locking mechanism. It was difficult to manipulate it as he did his throwing spikes, because he could not see it. He tested different maneuvers and eventually it twisted down and then out of the bore. Maintaining complete silence, he lifted the iron ring and pulled back the trap down to reveal a spiral stone staircase.

His footsteps were indiscernible on the stairs. The Seurok Taivas focused on two primary abilities. The first was movement whether to leap, glide, float, or even fly. The second ability was silence and surprise. Most of his expertise in stealth was physical training and long hours of practice. As he navigated the newel stair, the Voralai's mind worked on the general layout of a wizard's tower. All mages had summoning chambers and alchemy laboratories. It was probable that Samwel would be held near one of those areas. These chambers were either at the very top of the tower or down in the dungeons. Most were secured by magical traps that he would be unable to detect or counter. Up or down, it was a gamble either way, Aeolan realized.

He continued down the stair, passing several ordinary looking doors on the way down. Opening a single door could cost him his life, so Aeolan was determined to find the right one. The way was lit by the occasional torch sconce, brightly blazing. The stairs descended the length of the tower and opened into a broad entry chamber, bounded on either side of the central stair by the main entrance and a descending

stair following the octagonal walls. There were several tables displayed about the room with a roaring hearth against one of the wall sections. Sitting on one of the tables was another Voralai.

"Welcome, brother sky."

Aeolan stepped from the shadows of the stair into the full light of the room. The speaker was clearly a Paelun, a fire caller. His bronze skin, flawless physique, and lack of hair on his body clearly identified his Seurok. All were traditional signs of Sirtyma for the fire wielders, the gradual physical change from exposure to the energy sphere. He wore a skirt of iron plates and had a heavy curved sword resting next to him on the table. Simple clothes would burn from his flesh instantly at the release of his fiery abilities necessitating the steel garb. The Paelun seemed pleased to see the newcomer and flashed a genuine smile. Aeolan knew the motivation. The fire callers were a blood thirsty group, always eager for battle. It was their only skill, yet they excelled at it.

"I have come for the boy, Paelun."

Aeolan's voice was firm, commanding. It was unnatural for a Voralai to speak so forcefully and freely in the home of a Maaginen. He also barely concealed his disgust for the Paelun. The two Seurok had a long history of hatred for each other. In the careful construction of Voralai, it was decided by the Lumavar that each sphere would balance another. Their training and abilities were designed to intrinsically provide an advantage or disadvantage toward their opposition schools, air over earth, earth over water, water over fire, and finally fire over air. The Paelun exercised this programmed dominance over the Taivasar with ruthless efficiency.

"I am eager to see you, Taivasar. Or should I call you Kuritan." It was clear that Aeolan had no master by the ragged appearance of his once stately robes or the boldness of his speech. He was a rogue wielder, a Kuritan. In any other circumstances, it would have been considered an insult. Instead he wore the title with honor. He was free.

"War master, I have no quarrel with you." He pointed at the Paelun. "You are but a slave following the orders of your master. Give me the boy and you shall yet live from our meeting." He emphasized the word slave with contempt.

"Then you quarrel with Aduros," the fire caller rose from the table and hopped to the floor, his massive girth easily shadowing the newcomer across the room, "for I am the will of the master." Flames burst from his hands, licking up the triangle rivis of his arms.

Aeolan quickly appraised the situation. He had been trained in stealth, which required cunning and strategy. His craft abilities may be poorly matched against the fire caller, but his mind was far superior. If he were to win, then it was essential that he took leveraged this advantage. He examined his opponent. The Paelun had two bands of rivis, which did little to reveal his proficiency with his fire. The Seurok Paelu was inconsistent with the ranking of their warriors. Instead, there were other ways to determine his level of skill.

He thought first of the fires in the village, wild and sporadic. The fire caller was still enjoying his abilities, reveling in the power of destruction. The sphere of fire was euphoric, yet deadly. Its energy could only

destroy. Second, the fire burned from his hands. Aeolan had seen the masters of the Seurok Paelu summon fire from inside their adversaries, burning them hollow. This Paelun had a physical focus in his hands, which was a weakness. As they stared each down before their duel began, Aeolan realized that he could use these weaknesses to his advantage. The color of Aeolan's eyes dissolved into white, matching the growing blackness in his opponent's.

As the Taivasar hoped, the fire caller started the duel with a blaze of fire pouring forth from both hands. Aeolan leaped into the air, distancing himself from inferno. He landed lightly on a table opposite the room. Another gout of fire followed, turning the table into glowing cinders. The mercurial Taivasar vanished again, this time sitting on the mantle of the fireplace. The Paelun unleashed blast after blast, but each attack was thwarted by Aeolan's quickness. Aeolan countered with a volley of throwing spikes. Most were consumed in the blaze while others pegged the stone walls. The room was burning and the stone walls covered in black ash. So much energy had been expended to leave the chamber in ruin, but to no avail. In a brief respite, they met each other's gaze and Aeolan winked with an added smile.

Aduros roared and unleashed an apocalyptic firestorm in the large chamber. He filled the room with a solid stream of fire, turning in an arc. Aeolan leapt to the heights of the vaulted ceiling, but could not escape from the deadly heat. The superheated air stung his face and skin. He saved his lungs from bursting by removing his need to breathe, a simple ability. He pushed the flames as far away as possible with a torrent of fierce wind. Yet the damage was still done, his clothes were blackened and his left arm covered in blisters. If the room had been a single cubit smaller, Aeolan would have burned to death. The fires abated and the Taivasar eagerly looked to his adversary.

The war master was grabbing his chest, blood boiling straight from his lips. The fiery energy the Paelun had summoned had been too much for his control and had back lashed. Aeolan had guessed correctly. His opponent was inexperienced and relied too much on his powers in combat. In his euphoria of the inferno, Aduros had injured himself. The power of fire could only destroy. The plan had worked, the sky dancer had baited the Paelun and he was reeling from his burning insides. Aeolan sprung to capitalize, releasing his pole sword from its shoulder baldric. He spun the blade in a blur of shining steel, too fast for his opponent to prepare for the striking angle.

The Taivasar sailed across the room in a power dive and into his haukka, the falcon strike. With a parry impossible with the speed achieved by Aeolan's sword, the fire caller abandoned his footing and tried to dodge the aerial assault. He dove to the ground in a roll, but Aeolan struck true. The sword slashed deeply across his bronze chest, blood immediately coursing from the wound. It was not the killing blow that the sky dancer had hoped, but it had at least leveled the field. With internal burns and a vicious chest wound, they would fight as equals.

Aeolan and Aduros faced off again, both wielding their swords for close combat. They circled again, slowly sizing each other up. The Paelun seemed oblivious to his own injuries, his black eyes narrowed with determined intensity. The Taivasar knew that his foe was now a cornered animal and would fight with renewed savagery. With his longer blade, Aeolan had the advantage in reach as well as quickness. He was cautious though of the heavy falchion. One solid hit would finish him and end the fight.

They sprung at each other into full attack in a frenetic whirl of steel. Aeolan had intended to push the fight, but was immediately put on the defensive by the ferocity of the Paelun. His strength seemed to be completely unaffected from his wounds, yellow fire coating his falchion. The sky dancer flipped and twisted over a sword blow and burst up the wall in a short run before leaping across the room to catch his composure. A blast of fire followed him, forcing him to spring to safety before returning to the fray.

Aeolan was surviving only by using all his skill and cunning, his muscles already burning with fatigue. The fire caller was relentless in his assault, each sword blow stronger and faster than the previous. The Paelun was cutting off the room with bolts of fire, keeping the Taivasar from maximizing his mobility. Aeolan used his abilities to propel broken pieces of furniture at his pursuer, who either deftly swatted them for the air or ignored their impact. He was being driven back by a flurry of blows with an intensity he had never encountered. His mind was racing to keep up with the assault. Finally, Aeolan made a slight miscalculation in his defense and immediately paid for it.

The falchion of the burning bane smashed through a light parry and dug into Aeolan's side. The pain exploded through his torso and his vision flashed into white. Aduros followed the sword blow with a sharp kick to the Taivasar's sternum, sending him crashing to the floor. Despite the impact, the wind warrior managed to hold onto his sword with one hand. Without wasting a moment, the Paelun was on top of him, his hand crushing his throat. Aeolan's head spun and his vision dimmed as his life was strangled from him.

"And now it is time to die, sky dancer." The words were thick with confidence. Aeolan was struggling to free his neck with his empty hand, but the fire caller was so much stronger that it was in vain. "I can feel your blood slowing under my grip, your soul slipping from the yoke of your body. You were no match for Paelu, sky dancer. Before you die know that the boy below will suffer in the rituals of the master."

Aeolan's eyes fluttered opened, pure white and gleaming. His mouth twisted into fury, the rage burning away the pain and searing his consciousness to alertness. The Paelun flushed with surprise when the Taivasar suddenly grabbed his wrist and held it tightly instead of trying to push it away. Aeolan placed both feet on the bloody bronze chest of his strangler and pushed with his entire body. Aduros' arm was stretched straight, but he defiantly held onto his choking grip, squeezing as hard as he could. The veins were standing clearly on Aeolan's face and blood coming from his nose, yet he smiled through the pain. In a flash, the wind warrior's free hand brought his razor sharp blade through the joint of the fire caller's arm, severing it completely.

Aduros stumbled backward in horror of his amputated limb. Blood poured forth from the wound like a broken cask of wine. Aeolan rose to his feet and cast aside the severed forearm. He dropped his sword by his feet and clinched his fists before his arching back. Energy coursed through his body, surging to new heights. His face turned feral and a cyclone filled the main chamber, picking up glowing embers in a swirl about the room. Aeolan focused his energy into the chest of the Paelun, channeling more and more Taivas in an attack. With a bellow, he released it in a violent maelstrom. Aduros catapulted across the room. He struck the wall sharply and shattered fragments of stone littered the ground. The impact resounded with a wet crack, spine of the Paelun broken.

Holding his wounded side, Aeolan picked up his blade and headed for the stairs to the dungeon. Fresh blood stains marked his silk robes as well as a thick layer of soot. Releasing the spherical focus, his eyes returned to their normal blue radiance, yet something in his appearance had changed. His white hair glimmered with a subtle metallic sheen like true silver. Without realizing it, Aeolan had taken another step in the Sirtyma.

Chapter 17: The Tower Deep

The narrow stairs followed the octagonal shape of the tower far below into the ground. The burning smell on the ground floor was slowly replaced with a fetid, decaying odor. The steps of the stair were smooth with usage, brightly burning torches lighting the way. Carved in the center of each step was a single arcane rune bordered by a circle. The entire glyph was inlaid with silver. They were protective wards to prevent unwanted visitors from the tower dungeons. Their effect was unknown, but surely a terrible fate awaited any prowler foolish enough to touch them.

Aeolan floated down the stairs, maintaining his glide just enough to remain in the air. He was careful to avoid the stone surface of the steps or the walls. He moved over the first ward, holding his breath, and there was effect. The rest of the symbols appeared to be the same as the first. He could easily glide down the stairs, but the ascension would be much more difficult. There was no way that he could manage a leap through the narrow stairs without touching the stone, but he would worry about that problem after he found Samwel. For now he hoped that the master of the tower would rely solely on the wards of the stairs to protect the dungeons. He had no doubts that the summoning room and alchemy chamber would be trapped, but Aeolan had no interest in either of those places.

He knew that the Maaginen was not in the tower. The duel with the Paelun would have immediately brought the wizard and the battle would have ended quickly. The master was away and the fire caller had left as a guardian. He did not know how much time he had to find Samwel, whether it could be measured in days or seconds. His mind was numb. The agonizing wound in his side was sapping his concentration and the power that he had that he channeled for the duel left him exhausted. Yet he had to be careful, lest he stumbled into some arcane device or servant that finished the job that Aduros had started.

The Taivasar reached the bottom of the stairs, which opened up into octagonal room of similar dimension to the tower above. The stench was stronger and Aeolan knew it well. His former master, Azemar, had dabbled in the arts of necromancy, the smell of corpses often strong on his wizard robes. Lying in the center of the room, with sharp, bare ribs reaching into the air like white fingers from the grave, lay a human being, gutted of its internal organs. It was lying on an oval altar with small channels carved periodically to allow the blood to drain to the floor. The blood coagulated into sticky rivulets around the dark iron bands of the drain. Aeolan could hear heavy breathing from below, something monstrous.

The floor was clear of glyphs and Aeolan slowly landed. After both feet were firmly on the ground and finding himself still alive, the sky dancer set about evaluating which door might hold his friend. There were doors on each wall, seven choices aside from the staircase that rose back to the tower. On opposite sides of the room were two fireplaces, smoldering over low coals. Three of the doors had glyphs set at chest level. These were likely the summoning room, the alchemist den, and the private library, the most

important chambers to a Maaginen. Aeolan immediately turned his attention to the other four. One door, across the room, had a barred window and a heavy bar locking it. He moved across the room and cautiously peered into the darkness on the other side. He found a row of cells.

The bar slide easily from its brace and Aeolan opened the door. The light from the room revealed a short corridor with two cells on either side. A bleach white skeleton lay face down in the cell immediately to his right. The only other occupant of the prison was a small form at the back of the furthest cell on the left. It was covered by an old brown blanket, but Aeolan was hopeful. He took a short leap to the door of the cell and examined the small mound. It was breathing softly. He turned his gaze back to the cell door, barring his entry. It was locked, but that did not deter the Taivasar. He had been trained to bypass such things.

He examined the lock set into the iron bars of the cell door. It appeared to be a simple warded lock, one that would open quite easily with the right key. Aeolan did not have the luxury of having his ring of skeleton keys with him. He had not needed them at his master's duel. Instead he would need to recreate the key's effects his simple set of lock picks. Such refinement and accuracy to work within the lock took a great deal of craft skill and he was not at his best. The mundane solution would be sufficient. He looked closely into the keyhole and noticed two things. The first was that the key wards inside the lock were set vertically, which would make moving the latch an easier task. The second was the small glint of a pin head. The lock was trapped with a poison needle.

Aeolan smiled and moved to one side of the lock. He pointed his finger at the lock from a safe angle and focused his energy into the aperture. The trap triggered and the needle flashed forward, resting the width of three fingers from the keyhole. Wrapping his hand in his robe, Aeolan pulled the needle free and withdrew his lock pick set from his deep pouch. It was a simple lock and he quickly found the right combination of picks to turn the latch and open the door.

The floor was bare aside from a few handfuls of scattered hay. Aeolan moved across the floor and pulled the brown covering from the sleeping figure. It was Samwel. A wicked bruise had formed at the hairline of his forehead, deepening into multiple shades of purple. The boy was alive, though, and Aeolan was relieved. He did not relax. He fully expected the wizard to step forth from the stairs at any moment. The sky dancer hoisted the unconscious body onto his shoulder and exited the dungeon. There was no way he could manage the stairs and their magical wards, especially with Samwel. Instead, Aeolan went to the glowing hearth and peered up into the flue.

It was wide enough to accommodate him. He would not be able to ride the smoke as before, he could only manage his own weight. Instead he would have to jump into the darkness and simply hope. Holding Samwel with both arms, the boy's head resting on his shoulder, he placed his feet on either side of the fire. Aeolan leapt into the flue, his eyes searching the darkness. The walls were coated in ash and soot, leaving him completely blackened as he careened off of the stones. His eyes detected something approaching in the darkness and dragged his feet against the walls to slow his approach. It was a side vent to another fireplace sharing the same chimney and from intense heat pouring forth it was obviously from the ground floor.

The flue was narrow enough that Aeolan could brace himself with his knees, while he placed his boots on the ledge of the vent. He leapt again into the darkness. The next side vent he found had no fire. The opening was narrow, but Samwel would easily fit. He carefully laid the boy into the vent and released him slowly down into the cold fireplace. He then placed his sword in the vent and guided it safely away from the boy. Finally, Aeolan slipped his feet into the opening and gradually slid past his hips and up to his chest. He had a lean build and it helped him squeeze his shoulders through, though with rough abrasions.

The Voralai stepped out of the fireplace and cautiously into the chamber. It was an unused bedroom, apparently for entertaining guests. Aeolan picked up his sword and Samwel and opened the door. The newel stair was before him and he breathed a heavy sigh of relief. He climbed the stairs, his legs burning with each step. The wound on his side was open again and he could feel the hot blood mix with his sweat. His hands and face were covered in thick black soot. He reached the trapdoor at the top of the tower and flung it open into the chill of the night.

Standing at the top of the parapet, overlooking the hamlet of Turhas below, he leapt into the air holding Samwel in his arms. The boy stirred, but did not awaken. It gave Aeolan further hope that his friend was well, despite the bruise on his head. Slowly they descended through the night air to the lonely village below. With the impressive height of the tower, he was able to ride the wind all the way to the farmer's market. It was deserted. The Taivasar went directly to where he had left Leena sleeping.

She was awake and her eyes filled with terror as he kicked open the door. He laid Samwel onto the kitchen table and she rushed to his side. He watched for a brief moment as the mother inspected her son. Leena gingerly cupped her child's face in her hands, wiping away the soot and grime. Her mouth twisted with emotion and her eyes filled with tears as she kissed Samwel's forehead over and over again. She looked to Aeolan and he saw the humble thankfulness in her expression. Before she could speak, he grabbed a pair of winter cloaks from the wall.

"Take these," he tossed them to her. "We cannot stay here. More than the just the wizard will come looking for us."

"Where are we to go?" She obeyed by wrapping herself in one cloak and Samwel in the other, but she was confused.

"The only place where the Lumavar do not have iron rule," Aeolan sighed and moved to the door to look to the stormy skies. "We go back into the Karul Ridge."

Chapter 18: The Hunter Approaches

The room was in absolute ruin. The walls were blackened and scarred with merciless fire. The simple trappings of the room were consumed into charred wreckage. Blood covered the floor in a viscous pool, congealed from the intense heat. The only remaining witness of the battle lay resting against the edge of the room in a broken slump. It pleased him to view the destruction. It was the entry chamber of the wizard's tower. The Maaginen's sanctuary, destroyed by the powers of the Voralai, was filled with ominous foreshadows. The irony was not lost to Cammadean.

At the command of Lord Murghein, his investigation had been confined to this single room. Cammadean was not allowed access to either the upper floors or the lower depths. The Maaginen was concerned with protecting the contents of his dungeons and the progress of his research from prying eyes. He would not risk even a Naamari access to find the killer of his Voralai. The treachery of the wizards was endless and it was indeed a wise precaution. It made no difference to the shadow hunter. The Taisavar's purpose for entering the dark tower and challenging the fire caller was inconsequential. His only objective was to find his prey, not understand his motives. The entry chamber contained all that he needed. The duel between wind and fire had taken place in the main chamber, the devastation of the craft obvious. Their energies had told a secret tale for those that knew how to read it.

Murghein had returned early from the Lumavar's summonings. He stood to one side with his arms crossed over his chest, impatiently waiting on the Naamari to finish and leave. The embarrassment before the ruling wizards of the council must have been incredible. His own tower ravaged by a rogue wielder and his servant slain. Even worse, the secrets of the tower had been penetrated. The Taivasar has entered the dungeon, past the protective wards, and successfully escaped. He had outsmarted the wizard. It was a sign of weakness and the consequences were inevitably dire.

Cammadean ignored the mage and instead focused his mind on recreating the battle. His mind and abilities were acutely trained to decipher the signs of the craft, the unique signatures of the four Seuroks. When he knew every thrust and parry, attack and counter of the duel, Cammadean would know his opponent. The strengths and weaknesses of the Taivasar would be revealed. It made the hunter more efficient in finding and killing his prey.

From the damage on the walls, it was clear that the Paelun had channeled massive energies during the fight, utterly destroying the room. Yet there were signs that the Taivasar was equal to the task, if not the better. The ash on the highest portions of the walls was marked with hand and footprints. The sky dancer had been clever, dodging through the storm of fire. The tactic was brilliant, urging the Paelun to channel even greater amounts of energy. Cammadean knew that Aduros had been a Kersanti, banded with only two rivis. The fire caller had been a fool, too inexperienced to focus his abilities with the necessary cunning and intelligence. The amount of power unleashed into the room would have surpassed the Paelun's tolerance, searing his innards and damaging his energy focus. The Taisavar was clever indeed.

The shadow hunter moved about the room, following the course of the duel as it had unfolded. The combatants had moved to a battle of swords as each realized that their powers alone had reached a stalemate. That was odd. The training throughout each of the four Seuroks emphasized that fire would destroy wind. It was the natural order, the balance of the spheres. In this encounter, though, the fire had turned against its master and wind had survived. The Paelun must have been concerned that his fiery powers were unable to finish the Taivasar, contrary to his years of teaching. The effect must have been a devastating blow to his confidence, leaving the Taivasar with the mental edge.

He continued following the tracks through the wreckage. The sword battle had been fierce, the sky dancer surrendering ground quickly. The physical advantage still clearly belonged to the war master despite the earlier guile. The battle had culminated with a vicious wound to the sky dancer. Cammadean knew that the blood on the wall and floor belonged to the Taivasar. When a Paelun was wounded during their

channeling, the blood would boil straight from the wound, hissing as it touched the stone surfaces. The battle then should have been over with the fire caller the victor. Yet it had turned out completely different.

Cammadean turned to the opposite side of the room and once again examined the fallen war master. At the moment of victory, he had been hurled across the chamber. The impact on the tower stone had been so devastating that it had splintered nearly every bone in the fallen warrior, including his skull. The Paelun was left in a crumpled mess, hardly distinguishable as a human body. The power to propel a being of that size with such force was incredible.

The duel had made perfect sense to Cammadean until the final moment. The Taivasar was a Kisallyn, only four rivis. They did not possess such power. Yet the sky dancer had waited until the last moment, the moment of his own death, to release his supreme attack. The shadow hunter had heard tales of the rare Voralai reaching new heights of power simply through force of will. These stories were often discarded as exaggerations. The progression through the Seurok was slow and difficult. Many Voralai simply did not possess the skills or attributes to reach the highest levels of mastery. Yet the evidence was clear. The rogue Taivasar was more than he appeared.

A separate notion appeared to Cammadean. Perhaps fortune had added a boon to the secret schemes of the Naamari. A potentially awesome talent, both without master and fearless, obviously willing to challenge the wizards would make an exceptional ally. The idea took hold of Cammadean and he concealed his smile from the annoyed observation of the Maaginen. Of course, if the Kuritan resisted his overtures to serve Arzial, the alternative would be death.

The shadow hunter moved to a wall, studded with iron spikes. Carefully, he pulled one free and examined the spiral grooves running its length. It was the tool of a Taivasar. Cammadean opened his own energy focus, channeling the abyssal powers of the Naamari. It began gliding over the spike, covering it in shadows. He was reading the energy from the tool, using the residual impression to locate its master. His consciousness eased into the nether and glided through the darkness until a single vision appeared in his mind's eye. It was the Karul Ridge. He saw was the Voralai he hunted. Walking next to him was a boy and a woman.

The Naamari returned to his own body, releasing the dark craft. His vision further confounded him. The sky dancer was traveling with a pair of villagers. They would only slow him down and make him weak, yet he appeared pleased to have their company, even happy. Cammadean would travel south into the Ridge and find his prey. He would offer him two choices. Join the uprising or the join the darkness. Before he departed, though, he decided to investigate further.

"Master," he spoke without bowing before the wizard, knowing it was a sign of disrespect. He also knew that the wizard was powerless to punish him under the current circumstances. "To find the Kuritan, I must speak with the villagers of Turhas. All of them."

"Then do it, raven guard," Lord Murghein snapped at him. "Just be on your way."

"I fear that they may attempt to hide their knowledge from me. My methods may be ... fatal." Lord Murghein bristled at the request, seeing his candidates for experimentation disappearing along with his reputation. Again, he had no choice, but to acquiesce.

"Then so be it!"

Chapter 19: Ghosts

The chasm was a narrow swath cut between towering yellow stone walls filled with red gypsy sand. It ran a crooked crack with several cutbacks and intersections. The fine bed of sand was occasionally disrupted by twisted spires of stone, reaching from the earth in accusation towards the heavens. The Karul Ridge was an unnatural blight on the land. It had been summoned from the secrets of the depths by the awesome powers of the Maaginen. Hidden in the honeycomb of caves and burrows were untold numbers of the Horned Men, the bestial Nitherung tribes. It was truly a haven of desolation.

The dusky sky above left the floor of the ravine in near total darkness. Lying in the shadows were the bleached bones of servants from two households. The duel of wizards had left a score of bodies left to rot in the open sun among the litter of fallen rubble. The beast men had looted the bodies long ago. They had taken everything of value, including the putrid flesh. The buzzards had cleaned up the rest, leaving scattered skeletons slowly disappearing into the rust colored sand.

In the center of the ruined battlefield, a massive yellow boulder stood unmolested. Protruding from beneath were the swollen, purple feet of a man crushed beneath its thunderous weight. The Nitherung and other scavengers had left the body to the elements, sensing the dark energies still emanating from the body in death. One slipper was idly cast to one side, left by the curiosity of a former servant, exposing the blistered surface of rotting flesh. It was the only visible sign of Master Azemar Vouri of the Hirvion Eye.

The wizard had been highly regarded for his magical powers and particularly his dueling prowess among the Lumavar elite. In addition, Azemar was the master of the Hirvion Eye, an ancient artifact of unknown origin. It was rumored among the Maaginen that the Eye bestowed precognitive powers to its master. This was unproven, but suspicions abounded. The Eye was highly valued and Master Vouri was strength was often tested to keep the artifact in his keeping. He had met all challenges with victory. Master Vouri was a master wizard, particularly strong in the runic magic. It was a special focus of sorcery. Rune Art focused on arcane sigils and symbols, particularly for protective wards and summoning circles. He had often used these special skills to his advantage in his duels.

It was decreed long ago by the most powerful wizards of the Lumavar, the Keisari, that each wizard enter the dueling ring without personal enchantment or magical device. They would begin the contest as equals and only their ability to attack, defend, and counter attack would determine the winner. Azemar was notorious for his ability to hide ready made rune spells even from magical detection. When the battle began Master Vouri would activate his Rune Art preparations with a single word, building a sophisticated magical defense for his opponent to decipher. It left him free to attack and he was merciless. The list of

the defeated was quite impressive, counting wizards of greater rank and power than Azemar among the fallen.

Master Vouri kept the skulls of all his victims crowning the gate of his mountain keep, the Tower of Ulkaeus, as a macabre reminder to any challenger foolish enough to call upon him. Each bore the unique wizard mark of the dead mage in etched silver across the skull's forehead. It was a brazen challenge to his enemies, one that was conveniently overlooked. Few Maaginen had ever entered his domain and none had viewed the inner chambers of his tower. His seclusion had bordered on paranoia, but among the Maaginen, it was simply considered common sense.

In addition to his enemies, the possession of the Eye coupled with a reputation as a master duelist had earned Azemar many admirers among the wizard council. Favors were granted without request in the hopes of forging alliances. Master Vouri had received prominent seating in the council chamber beyond his station. He had been granted special allowances by the Lumavar in his demon research, a practice normally banned for its often disastrous results. And he had been permitted personal selection of his Voralai servant, a Taivasar.

Indeed, Master Azemar had been a remarkable wizard full of great potential. He had accomplished the impossible too many times to fully recount in any single telling. Even the Keisari were surprised by his accomplishments. In the silence of the fading light and solitude of the Karul Ridge, the bare foot of Master Azemar Vouri twitched with the sudden pulse of life.

Chapter 20: Words in the Wild

For ten days the trio had wandered through the endless labyrinth of the Karul Ridge, gradually picking their way through the sharp gorges and high peaks. The weather had aided in their hasty exodus with clear skies and peaceful winds. Their progress was slow, but methodical. The Taivasar used his unique bird's eye view to navigate the twisted chasms, steering them ever eastward. He was careful to guide them clear of danger, particularly away from the ravenous tribes of Nitherung living in the endless honeycombs through the stone.

The Karul Ridge was a narrow from east to west, yet long north to south. It was a mountainous wall that divided two peoples, to the east, the land of wizards, and to the west, the horsemen of Urendor. Though blood had been spilled countless times between the Maaginen and the horse lords in their border wars, Aeolan still prayed for refuge in the lands of his enemy. At the very least, he hoped the Lumavar would find it difficult to track him through the lands of the ancient foe. If he had been traveling alone, he would have cleared the Ridge by now, but his companions did not possess the craft. In fact, they had never traveled from their village of Turhas before. Leena made up for their inexperience with quiet determination. Aeolan was hopeful that their journey would end without discovery and they could begin navigating their fates in a new land.

Aeolan carried the heaviest pack, far lighter now that their short supply of provisions was nearly gone. All that remained were a few water skins and a half loaf of hard bread. Replenishing their provisions was hopeless. The Ridge was utterly barren. The Nitherung managed to survive by hiding deep in the caves

and finding their water from underground streams, but the surface was desolate. He knew that they had only a few days, a week at best, before they were in dire trouble.

He took a moment to examine his companions from the height of a rocky spire that he had used to study the terrain. Leena was holding Samwel's hand as she always did, pulling him past the exhaustion filling his young body. Her head was wrapped in a red cloth to protect her from the relentless heat. She carried in her pack the heavy cloaks that they used in the cool night. Samwel had a simple green hood. His face was flush red and he was breathing in ragged gasps. Each night when they camped, the poor boy collapsed from sheer fatigue. The terror of the tower had faded from his mind and was replaced with the current physical hardship. The dangers he had faced at the hands of the Paelun was now only as real as a distant nightmare.

Leena was another matter. She did not sleep. She did not eat. Her eyes burned with purpose and she rarely took her hands off of her son. She had been so close to losing the last piece of her family. Aeolan could easily read the horrible memories in the eyes of the mother. It had branded her very soul. She was determined to save her child at all costs and would carry him bodily over the Karul Ridge if she had too. Her small body, lean and frail, pushed ever forward, possessed by limitless amount of will. Watching her climb over the boulder strewn path with her jaw set in determination, he was profoundly touched by the perseverance of a mother's love.

"Taivasar."

A single whisper stealing from the black shadows of the nearby rock sent chills up Aeolan's spine. He knew instantly that they had been discovered and the grim reality of the situation confronted him. The shadow hunter had found him. If he were to achieve anything less than total victory in their duel, then all of them would likely perish. Without his leadership through the Karul Ridge, Leena and her son were doomed to die of exposure or worse. The Nitherung might find them. Aeolan knew first hand that there were worse things than death in the Ridge. All of this weighed on Aeolan's shoulders as he turned to face the shadowy crevice at his back. If the speaker had wished him dead, it could have been achieved long before the attacker revealed himself. Aeolan held his palms up in a peaceful gesture.

"Show yourself, shadow hunter." The Taivasar braced himself for an attack.

"In due time, brother," the voice was barely a whisper. "There must first be a reckoning between us lest we charge into a fate that both of us wish to avoid. You need only listen for now. Do you understand?"

Aeolan grimly nodded his head. He had no other choice. The shadow hunter had the tactical advantage should he attempt to fight, cloaked in stealth. To make matters worse, the Naamari was selected based on the full understanding of his Taivas powers and abilities. His good fortune in the duel with the Paelun would not serve him here. This was a perfect hunter, crafted for a single purpose, to kill rogue Voralai. His only other option was to flee, which would leave Leena and Samwel at the mercy of the Naamari. His hands were tied.

"I have been watching you for several days," the voice was cool and relaxed. "At any time I could have moved against you or your companions. I am Cammadean, the Lord of a Thousand Faces, scourge of Seurok Taivas, and slayer of the sky kings. Believe me when I say in truth that you continue to live

because I choose it. You defeated the Paelun, showing your will is greater than the balance of the spheres. But I have been bred for a solitary purpose. I say this to show that I mean you no harm."

The words rang true with Aeolan. The Naamari could have slain him at any time. His eyes remained defiant though, searching the darkness for any sign of his opponent. The shadow hunter continued.

"I do not know your motives, but I suspect that we share a common goal. In killing the Paelun, you have struck a blow against the Maaginen and in this endeavor we are truly brothers."

"I do not understand."

"Taivasar, the Naamari serve no master, but of their own choosing. The Lumavar have turned their eyes from their slaves to spy on each other. It is their arrogance that has freed us. They have trained us to use the darkness, to master the shadow. Master it we have, my brother, and we will use it to strike back."

"But the Lumavar is all powerful, all-knowing. How can you deceive them?"

"Those are lies, Aeolan, engrained in you since your birth to maintain your obedience. They are not omnipotent and I testify with my own eyes that they can be killed. They mean to control us with fear, but the Naamari have become greater than fear. We have become greater than the Lumavar. We move in secret, slipping the hidden blade to the throat of the sleeping master. It is at our choosing when that blade strikes."

"The Naamari number fewest of all Seurok. How can you possibly stand against the Lumavar?"

"I am to tell you a secret that would cost many lives should you betray our cause. I offer it to you in the hope that we may reach an understanding of trust. The Naamari have discovered the secrets of the Seurok. There are unknown thousands, lying in the darkness, combining the strength of the four spheres into an unstoppable army of wild Voralai."

"And what do you wish from me, Cammadean?" Aeolan was overwhelmed with the revelations.

"For now, Aeolan, I do not wish anything but to offer my help. You have made a bond with the woman and her child. I have come from Lord Murghein's tower and I have seen the result of his ire. The entire village of Turhas put to the torch and its people impaled on spikes along the roads. You must escape to Urendor and I can aid your journey. I only ask for one thing in return."

"Speak it."

"I will send word to the arcane council that I have slain their rogue wielder. So lax have they become that I will not even require proof of your demise. My word will suffice. In return, you must remain hidden in Urendor. If you are discovered, then questions will be asked that may betray us."

"You would help me only for my silence?"

"Indeed, brother." Cammadean stepped forth, emerging from a different set of shadows than Aeolan had expected. It was the deceptive power of the shadow. "We have a common enemy and your victory of freedom is my victory, as well. But remember well when the time of the Uprising is upon us, it will be your brothers laying down their lives so that all of us may share in the dream of freedom."

They were nearly opposite in their appearance, Aeolan with silver hair and fair skin and Cammadean dark as the night. The Taivasar looked down to his hands. Try as he might, there was nothing in the words of the Naamari that he could find false. His only goal was to reach Urendor with Leena and Samwel. Keeping them safe was his single focus. If the shadow hunter could help, then so be it. Aeolan sighed deeply and slowly put forth his hand. Cammadean firmly accepted the extended hand. His fingers were long and agile, his flesh unnaturally cool to the touch.

"I accept."

"Come then, Aeolan, there is something I must show you. I have made preparations."

Together they traveled over the rocky terrain. Aeolan leaped from boulder to boulder, while Cammadean stepped through darkness as if they were magical gates, reappearing at another shadow further away. He had never seen the abilities of the Naamari, only hearing of them through rumor. He was awed by their craft, pulled from a different focus than the elemental spheres. The Naamari summoned their powers from the abyss. They reached their objective quickly. It was a low cave. Inside were two pack mules, loaded with provisions on rope harnesses. The cave stretched into the distance far beyond the reaches of the light.

"Brother, this passage will take you directly to Urendor. There are no connecting tunnels, so you will be safe from the Nitherung and need not worry about getting lost. The journey will be no longer than two days. Once you are on the other side, it is up to you to find peace with the horse lords. Remember, you must remain hidden. Now go and bring the mother and her child here. Tell no one the secrets that I shared with you on this day." Cammadean faded into the shadows. His white eyes were the last to disappear, firmly holding the gaze of Aeolan.

The sky dancer returned with Leena and Samwel, carrying one in either arm as he leaped over the broken lands. The extra burden was taxing both to his stamina and his energy focus. It was only a short journey and he decided they would rest in the entrance of the cave before setting off into the tunnel. He was surprised that neither Leena nor Samwel hesitated at the appearance of the unexplained mules waiting in the darkness. She found a skin of water and passed it to her son and then continued to ruffle through the saddle bags for food. Aeolan realized that they trusted in him so completely that they did not even question their new found luck. It was naively accepted as part of the powers of the Voralai.

At very the moment that Aeolan was about to relax, to shrug off his pack and rest, something happened that gripped his heart with paralyzing fear. It was the terrible recognition of doom, sparked from memories nearly forgotten. For the first time in his life, Aeolan experienced absolute dread. His mind bordered on sheer panic. It took the form of three simple words, spoken in a low voice from outside the cave. The tone was calmly confident, yet it resonated with the edge of thunder.

"Come forth, Aeolan."

It was the voice of the master. It was Azemar.

Chapter 21: The Master Calls

The master was waiting.

Aeolan bowed his head, staring at his hands in desperation. Delicately crafted with long, slender fingers, they held no more answers. His abilities had seemed so powerful only moments before, capable of solving all of his problems and protecting Samwel and his mother. He had found their freedom and would bring them into a new life. Moments before he was filled with hope for the future. The feeling had deserted him, leaving only an icy chill coursing through his heart. He realized he was powerless. His freedom had been a pleasant dream. Now the master called and it was finally time to awaken.

He turned to look at the frozen stares of Leena and her son. Her face was drawn tight, her eyes wild for a fight. It was her motherly instinct to protect her son even against certain doom. Samwel cowered by his mother, holding her dress in both hands. The nightmare had returned. It was apparent in his terrified eyes. They had placed all of their trust in his powers and he had failed. His legacy had finally returned to claim him back into the fold. Leena and Samwel would pay the price, as well. For all of his efforts, Aeolan had only brought ruin and disaster. The entire village of Turhas destroyed. The townsfolk butchered. And now his only friends would die in torment under the merciless sorcery of his former master.

The Taivasar discovered the raw emotion of despair, the constant companion to the commoners of this suffering land. He had found joy, peace, and belonging. Now he knew loss and hopelessness. For all of it, the laughter, the sunny days, the fishing by the Green Lampi, exploring the treetops, there was nothing but pain. It was the secret that every broken back and grieving mother already knew. Aeolan slumped against the wall of the cave and cradled his head in his hands. In his tears, he found the last piece of the humanity that had been denied to him.

"Aeolan." Leena whispered softly in the darkness. Her voice was full of the knowing from a lifetime of grief. "Thank you."

He wiped his eyes with his sleeve and turned to look at her face in the darkness. It carried a tranquil acceptance. Her eyes were filled with tears, yet she seemed calm with her arms holding Samwel. She had fought to the end. Aeolan realized that she could find peace in meeting her fate with her only remaining son in her arms. She had long suffered from the death of her husband and her firstborn. The pain would end as it should, mother and son together.

"Thank you for bringing my Sami back." She smiled genuinely. In her eyes, Aeolan saw peace and appreciation. Her gratitude did not fail under the dire circumstances, instead Leena appeared to be all the more thankful. Aeolan had offered his life to bring back her son if even for just a few more days. And there it was. It was the keystone of human existence. For generations, these people had been tormented and enslaved by their wizard masters. There was no hope or justice. Yet still she found joy, still she gave thanks. It occurred to Aeolan that if life was unending pain, then it was the small moments that made it worth living. Small moments of opportunity to make a difference.

The reservoir of his soul opened once again. When he had faced the Paelun, Aeolan had discovered a burning determination that he never knew existed. The focus of his energy, the Taivas sphere, had grown with his rage, pushing his powers past his limit. His relentless had not accepted failure. It had not settled for defeat. All of that intensity returned again, greater than before. A rush of fire filled his being with white hot light, coursing through his veins and the very essence of his being. His energy focus was being torn apart with the surge of power. His face hardened and his colorless eyes flashed dangerously. He rose turned to face the fading light peaking into the cave entrance. In a flurry the long handled sword was at his side. Aeolan turned to address his friends for the last time.

"Go. Now!" There was no need to say more. They already knew the contents of his heart.

In a blinding flash, he burst from the tunnel into the growing dusk. The sky darkened with gathering storm clouds, seeming to appear at his summons. Higher into the air he rose, a cyclone of debris rising behind him. His war cry was matched with peals of thunder and strikes of lightning. Lightning crashed onto the cave entrance, collapsing the entrance with impenetrable rubble. The sword whirled in his hands without effort, moving of its own accord. His hair was shining as if spun from pure silver.

"Azemar, I seek you!"

He roared defiantly with the energy of his sphere coursing through his body, thunder rolling upon each of his syllables. Aeolan reached the zenith of his climb and hovered in the air. He spied Azemar, covered in blood spattered robes. The wizard was in a state of half-death. His body was bloated and rotting, yet the art kept him alive. Purple energy crackled over the Maaginen's hands, bursting into violent sparks as it fell to the stone at his feet.

"Servant, the time has ..."

"Silence!" Aeolan roared with the full might of the storm, drowning the voice of the Maaginen below. "It is I that shall speak. I am slave to no one. Wizard, you stand before the throne of storms and I alone am its master."

"You are a petulant fool!" The wizard hissed in disgust. "How dare you speak to me as an equal. Cower before me, you dog, before I banish you to the burning realm where the demon horde will devour your entrails from your living body. Such is your fate."

"For all of your power, Azemar," Aeolan spoke softly yet his words were carried dutifully by the wind to the ears of the wizard, "you know nothing. There is nothing more that you can take from me. I am fee. And if I must endure the torment of hell, then so be it. Let us begin."

A barrage of lightning bolts poured from the stormy skies on top of the Maaginen. With a simple incantation, he deftly deflected them back to the Taivasar master. Aeolan spun through the air, dodging the returning arc. He dove at full speed to fully engage the wizard in physical combat. The Maaginen was slowly recovering from his injuries and his energies would be diverted to maintaining his slow regeneration. He would not be at full strength. Aeolan pressed to find a weakness.

The slashing flurry of blows was met with equal resistance. Azemar was using a force barrier, adeptly adapting his shield to each sword strike. There were multitudes of attacks with each passing second. Aeolan wielded his sword with his will, sending into a combination of strikes on its own before returning to his hands. The wizard's eyes were filled with growing panic as he struggled to maintain his defenses. The onslaught was too fast to see with the normal eye. Both combatants were at the limits of their power. The Taivasar was determined to push his opponent even further. Rocks of all sizes began to fly at the wizard at the command of the sky dancer, assaulting him from all directions.

It was a brief opening in the defensive wall, just a small breach. Aeolan scored a wicked hit, slicing deeply into the thigh, black blood spurting down the side of his leg. It was a crippling strike and the wizard's eyes bulged in agony. The seemingly all powerful wizard had been grievously wounded by the former servant. The air of omnipotence quickly fled as the wizard clutched at the seething gash with a low moan.

Master Vouri was far from defeated and he responded quick savagery. He was using the Art to repair the damage to his body, sustaining his regeneration. The fight had been on unequal ground. Azemar's face contorted with hellish ire as he summoned the full strength of his art. All of his energies were focused into a single blast of green energies into the chest of the sky dancer. The force of the blow split the massive boulder at his feet and sent the Taivasar hurdling limply through the air. He landed heavily onto a pile of jagged rocks.

Nearly unconscious from the powerful incantation, Aeolan's vision dimmed. Night had finally taken full form, but he could still see the mage. The necromancy keeping him alive was failing and black blood oozed thickly from his nose and ears. Yet the damage was done. Aeolan's body was broken. He could not find the energy to stand, only feebly fumble at his splintered sword laying in his lap. Fading in and out of consciousness, he took solace that Samwel was at last safe. Azemar was approaching, awkwardly shuffling from the intense pain of death retaking his body. The wizard was stiffly holding his ragged leg, cut to the bone by the former servant.

"It hurts?" Aeolan tried to laugh, but his effort resulted in a bloody cough instead.

The wizard's wrath precluded further conversation. He came to stand over Aeolan with a snarl filling his face with rage. He held up his hand and the purple energy returned, dancing over his scarred fingers. Aeolan found his legs numb and unmoving. His hands were robbed of their agility and strength, barely able to hold the broken shaft. He looked into the eyes of his former master and knew no fear. His time had come for his passing, but yet he knew that he would live on. Samwel would live and with him, their friendship would last forever. Azemar leaned in close, reaching for the face of the fallen Taivasar master for the final blow.

Two white eyes appeared in the darkness behind the shoulder of the injured mage. The eyes were filled with the cold void, the eyes of the raven guard. A pair of blades whipped up between the arms of the Maaginen and plunged into either side of his rib cage. Cammadean's face fully appeared as he buried the daggers deeply into the breast of his flailing victim. The blades were drawn along the path of the ribs, widening the horrible injury. Azemar instinctively reached for the hands of his attacker to halt the damage. With his hands still dancing with violet energies, the wizard sent his attack into the Naamari assassin. The shadow hunter writhed in agony, his face twisted in pain.

Lacerations opened on the shadow hunter's face and neck with purple electricity sparking in blinding scintillations. Their struggle continued for only a moment as Cammadean tried to force his blades deeper into the wound. His strength quickly faded and he collapsed on the rock, his body smoking. His body was covered in vicious wounds. Azemar pulled the black daggers from his chest and dropped them with a clatter to the rocks at his feet. He turned to stand over the defeated Naamari, confusion clouding the distorted face of the mage. His hands grew brilliant once again with his death spell and he reached forward to finish the raven guard.

"Live, brother." Cammadean gasped as he caught the gaze of the Taivasar. A simple gesture of his hand and the shadow powers were activated.

Aeolan fell through the darkness of the rocks and into the shadow gate. It felt as he had fallen into an icy pond. His body floated in the abyss, carried by the darkness. He could feel the cold, the freezing chill of the shadow realm stealing his life from him as he tumbled towards some unknown destination. It was this realm that changed the Naamari to the dark hunters. It fed upon their life energies and left another essence in its place. The shadows were tearing at his soul and stealing his memories. He was in the endless abyss, the void. Yet the journey through space and time finally came to an end.

His eyes fluttered open to the great expanse of blue skies above. The sun was shining brightly with a few stratus clouds lazily drafting across the vastness. He blinked a few times, still held in the confused lethargy of a long sleep. The beautiful heavens filled his vision, a familiar sight, and it brought a special comfort as if mutual understanding. The sky was his home and, in truth, he shared its essence. His memories and understanding were as tangible as shadows, leaving him unthinking, yet it did not concern him. For the moment, he knew not where or even who he was, but he was content to stare into the azure firmament above.

END PART I