

## **'The Fallen Herald'**

### **Chapter 9**

#### **The gift**

It was their fifth day travelling and they'd encountered only one woodsman, headed north towards Firs Deep. However, he had not replied to their greetings and had kept his head down as his cart rumbled past in apparent haste. The only acknowledgement of their existence was the snarling and barking of his large black dog from the back of his cart.

They were surprised later that day when they came across the hamlet. It was set in a small and lightly wooded glade, and they had neither seen smoke nor heard any noise to alert them to its existence.

By unspoken agreement Agastalen and Heath halted at the edge of the glade. There were just a half-dozen thatched dwellings in the community, set into an approximate circle about a small totem of some form. Small piles of chopped lumber rested outside those houses that they could see. There were no apparent signs of life.

Heath shrugged to Agastalen and left the cover of the wood, walking out towards the hamlet. Agastalen stepped out and followed. He was acutely aware of the silence of the glade and wood as he followed his friend. As they drew near, he noticed that much of the grass in the clearing appeared churned. Kneeling down, he noted the U-shaped imprint of horses' hooves.

Looking up, Agastalen saw that Heath had halted at the edge of the hamlet. Arising from his crouch, he approached, curious. Heath was staring straight ahead, ashen-faced.

The totem in the centre of the hamlet was carved into a crude likeness of a smiling female face, the features bark and the hair wheat; it was not an uncommon representation of Ondalla, goddess of nature and the harvest. Impaled on the totem was a young boy. A spear had struck his torso with such force that it had split the wooden totem. The youthful countenance that could have seen no more than ten cycles was transfixed in horror, eyes staring sightlessly ahead. His sundered chest was matted thick with the lifeblood that had run down his legs to pool in the wooden offering bowl to Ondalla below; becoming a dark and unwanted offering to the goddess of nature.

About the totem lay other crumpled forms. The bodies lay in angles of unnatural repose. Some lay beside the limbs that had been brutally hewn from them and there they had died, futilely clutching at the stump of a leg or arm, their departing life running in measured beats onto the mud. Others appeared to have been run through, sword and spear rising from backs or gut like some strange salute to the sky.

Heath stared aghast at the carnage. Gasping, Agastalen dropped to his knees and vomited.

Heath barely whispered, 'Who could have done this? Why? The baronies are at peace, aren't they?'

Retching, Agastalen barely managed a nod.

'Where are we?' asked Heath. 'Are we still in the Barony of Croft?'

Agastalen wiped his mouth with his hand and, taking a breath, said quietly, 'No, we couldn't be. Croft is one of the smaller baronies, we must have crossed into Wren at least a day, if not two days ago.'

Heath nodded and said firmly, 'Right, we should get out of here. That blood has barely congealed: this happened within the past few hours.'

'All right,' replied Agastalen, getting back to his feet, 'but we should check to make sure that no one is still alive first.'

'You've got to be joking,' Heath replied, incredulous and without humour. 'That looks like a pretty thorough job to me.'

Agastalen, however, was already moving towards the pitiful fallen forms.

Moving from one body to another proved to be a grisly task. Heath was right about the time of this, though, thought Agastalen: this had happened within the past few hours. He tried to ignore the agony frozen in the faces of the victims, their mouths often gaping in one last silent scream of pain or perhaps to some unhearing god, beseeching mercy. There wasn't one weapon among them, Agastalen noticed with

burning anger: these villagers had either not known the attack was coming or they simply didn't possess a single weapon.

His fingers placed upon the withered neck of an old lady, Agastalen started back in surprise to find a soft, irregular heartbeat. Her face was deadly pale against her iron grey hair, the lips almost blue. This grandmother's got strength in her, thought Agastalen with a slight surge of hope. He gently pulled aside her coarse wool smock to inspect her wound and gasped at the dark glitter of entrails showing clear through the belly wound. He gagged and called softly to Heath, who was crouched beside him in a moment.

'She's alive,' said Agastalen.

Heath blanched when he saw the grievous wound that she had taken, and looked at his friend. Understanding the determination he saw etched there and feeling akin himself, Heath said, 'Right, but we can't stay here. Whoever did this could be back any time. We'll have to take her with us.' Agastalen nodded in agreement.

Agastalen lifted the old lady as gently as he could, cradling her in his arms as he would a child. They walked towards the wood and neither of them looked back.

They carried her as far as they could until they were both almost exhausted, halting eventually in a small gully, no more than thirty spans across. Gently laying the old lady down on the woodland floor, Agastalen collapsed onto the damp earth, his feet almost in the small stream that bubbled cheerfully through the the gully.

As the sun began to set, Heath set about getting wood for a fire and Agastalen turned his attention to the old lady's belly wound. The wound was deep; almost half the

width of her torso. The flesh around it was puckered and angry. Already it was beginning to smell. Having little real medical skill, Agastalen knew that there was little he could do for such a grievous injury, so he set about cleaning it as best he could with fresh water from the stream and then bound it with strips torn from their only spare shirts.

Heath had got a small but warm blaze going by this time, and noticing the diminution of their only spare shirts, he said, 'Looks like we're both going short-sleeved, then.'

Agastalen laughed softly and covered the lady's recumbent form with his cloak. Her face appeared haggard and deathly, even in the warming glow from the fire. Sitting himself next to his friend in the fading light, he said, 'There is little we can do for her, I fear. She needs the skill of a true healer or possibly even a daughter of Eli-shar, the goddess of healing.'

Heath did not reply and stared into the flames, face hidden by his curling hair.

'Does this change anything?' Heath asked eventually, keeping his gaze on the fire.

Agastalen thought for a moment and reached into their sack, retrieving some salted pork, part of which he handed across to Heath. 'I don't see that we have much choice but to continue on as we were. If we knew the geography of the area, we could alert a local garrison and perhaps even find a healer, but without that knowledge we've got as much chance of stumbling across both as we have of finding them by intent.'

'Those chances both being remote,' said Heath.

Agastalen nodded gently.

‘I wouldn’t worry,’ said a soft and frail voice. ‘I’m tougher than I look, you know.’

The old lady was watching the two of them from watery, half-open eyes.

‘How are you feeling?’ said Agastalen, after recovering from his surprise.

‘I’ve certainly felt better,’ she replied, managing a small smile. ‘My name is Rosie.

So, might I know the names of my rescuers?’

Agastalen and Heath stumbled over each other trying to introduce themselves.

Rosie laughed quietly, which swiftly turned into a hacking cough, during which time they both waited solicitously.

Agastalen asked, ‘May I get you anything, Rosie?’

Rosie replied, ‘Unless you’ve got a daughter of Eli-shar hidden in that old bag of yours, no thanks.’

Walking around the fire, Agastalen knelt beside Rosie and gently stroked the grey hair from her face. ‘Can you tell us what happened, Rosie?’

‘What, and you’re going to gallop off and sort it all out, are you, like some knight of Athel-Loria?’ Rosie chuckled weakly. She smiled and Agastalen noticed dark blood rimming her teeth. ‘Sorry,’ she coughed, ‘I’m a caustic old girl. You get to be when you’ve seen as much of life as I have.’

Agastalen nodded, waiting for her to continue.

‘Didn’t recognise them,’ Rosie said, ‘not that I know many warriors mind you. It was all so quick, so brutal. We didn’t even hear them coming. One minute it was quiet, the

next they were galloping among us, hacking and slaughtering. They were laughing, Agastalen; by the nine gods, they were laughing.’ She paused a moment and then whispered, ‘Am I the only one left?’

Agastalen hung his head and replied, ‘I’m sorry, Rosie.’ She nodded resignedly and her eyes closed.

Sleep did not come easily to either of them that night. Agastalen eventually settled for sitting and staring into the fading fire embers, trying to make sense of what he had seen. Heath tossed and thrashed in his sleep, calling out unintelligible things.

Occasionally Agastalen got up to check on Rosie. Her face was cold, colder than it had been, he thought, so he appropriated Heath’s cloak as well, causing him to cry out in his disturbed slumber, and gently draped it over the old lady.

Agastalen racked his brains for an answer as to what they had seen, but try as he might, he could come up with none. Excluding an occasional border dispute, the baronies had been at peace for four hundred cycles. They were each fiercely independent and would suffer none other to rule them. The larger Dukedom of Taed to their west had from time to time attempted to annex either Lont or Mytle but had always been beaten back by combined forces from the baronies. Although barony relations with Taed remained terse, the last such battle had been more than a hundred cycles past. Certainly Agastalen knew that his knowledge of Runic history was not exhaustive, but was sure that he would have taken note of the existence of such a brutal regime or force as the one evidenced in the village.

‘You’re magi, aren’t you?’ Agastalen turned at the sound of Rosie’s soft voice. Her face within the nest of cloaks was angled towards him, and the fire having largely

died out, it was outlined only by the faint silver moonlight. It made her seem more frail even than before, almost translucent, like the finest china.

Agastalen nodded. 'I am, but not much of one, I'm afraid. I'm just an apprentice.'

'No such thing as *just* an apprentice when it comes to,' she coughed, 'Magi.'

'How did you know?' Agastalen asked.

'My life is slipping away,' Rosie replied. 'I can feel it ebbing with every beat of my heart. With death's cold hand closing about me, I can see the very life-force glowing within you. Only a mage could have such an affinity for the force of life. It's beautiful.'

Moving closer to her, Agastalen said, 'We're going to get you to a healer, Rosie. You just need to hold on.'

Taking a rattling breath, Rosie said, 'I'm old, Agastalen, and if you ever see as much of life as I have, you'll be lucky indeed.'

Agastalen smiled at this, admiring the strength and courage in her.

'So, don't delude yourself or try to lie to me, young mage! My life's breath is measured in hours now.'

Agastalen took a breath to raise protest, but seeing the steely look in Rosie's rheumy eyes, he chose not to say anything but instead took her hand in his. He was startled at how cold it was.

Minutes passed while Agastalen sat holding Rosie's hand, when she softly said, 'Did you know that once the magi were the preservers of life? They did not always manipulate their links to the Nexus in the ways they do now, ways that they so elegantly call "forms".'

Agastalen shook his head at a loss for words, as Rosie continued. 'That's right, the Nexus is the heart of all life and that to which all mages are attached through bindings.' Looking fondly at Agastalen, she said, 'Save their apprentices, that is. Using their bindings, the magi once simply nurtured and preserved life for the love of doing, so you know.'

'Rosie, how do you know all this?' Agastalen asked. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that Heath had sat up, apparently having given up on sleep.

'Let's just say that there is mage blood in the family,' she replied.

Agastalen started to ask another question but a soft squeeze of her hand forestalled him. 'I would give you my binding, Agastalen, that which links me, as it does all living creatures, to the Nexus.'

Agastalen rocked back on his heels, vaguely aware of Heath's gasp across the dormant fire. His mind whirled at the implications. As an apprentice, he had no bindings of his own save one, as was held by all living creatures, through which life flowed into him from the Nexus, the source of all life in the universe and the heart of the power manipulated by the magi. Certainly in ancient history it was not unheard of for a binding to be "gifted" from one human being to another, but since that always resulted in the death of the person bequeathing the gift, those instances had been rare.

In present times bindings were usually handed from one mage to another to allow elevation within the magi's ranks, or more rarely they were seized during, or as a result of, combat. Thus, an apprentice's first binding was always now gifted from their master or mistress, when the apprentice was deemed ready for elevation to the rank of Demi-Mage. This also ensured that the first binding, a highly delicate process, was conducted with success.

At last Agastalen replied, 'Your gift humbles me, Rosie, but I cannot take it. I am not worthy to receive it. In ages past I know that such gifts were not unheard of, but no longer. That time is done now. A binding has not been taken from outside the mage order for more than three centuries.'

Rosie's eyes twinkled as she said, patting his hand softly, 'And that, my young saviour, is exactly why you are the right person to take it.'

Shaking his head even more firmly now, Agastalen set his mouth in the firm line that Heath knew would take no rebuke. 'Even should I want to, Rosie, and your gift overwhelms me, I could not. There are edicts concerning such things, since during previous ages they were sometimes taken from people by force. It would have to be witnessed and assisted by another mage.'

'I'll do it,' said Heath quietly.

Agastalen turned to look at his friend, whose eyes were shining brightly with fervour in the moonlight.

'Agastalen, I know I'm just an apprentice, but that still means I'm of the mage order. I could witness the gift for you and help, if you need me to, that is.'

‘You see,’ said Rosie, coughing and wiping at her mouth with a withered hand; it came away dark with blood. ‘Even your fellow apprentice agrees with me.’

Agastalen looked somewhat hopefully between the faces of Rosie and his friend, but saw little to help him extricate himself.

‘Never forget,’ continued Rosie, ‘it is mine to give to whom I choose, as is the right of any living creature. And I choose to give it to you.’

Agastalen bowed his head, humbled. His hair had fallen free from its clasp and when he finally raised his face to meet Rosie’s eyes, it was wet with tears. ‘Very well, dear Rosie... I accept your gift.’

‘Good,’ said Rosie, her voice remaining firm. ‘Now let’s get a move on. I’m getting cold, I’m afraid that my passing is almost upon us. Can’t help you when I’m gone, now.’ With an almost childlike quality to her voice she then said, ‘Will it hurt?’

Agastalen shook his head. ‘I have witnessed many such ceremonies. The process, I believe, is brief and painless. But before we do this, is there anything that you would like us to do for you, or perhaps pass a message to someone when you are gone?’ He finished the last word softly.

Rosie shook her head. ‘All the ones I loved passed yesterday, and the others round about, well they’re not really worth worrying about,’ she grinned. Her breath was now coming in shallow gasps and she feebly gripped at Agastalen. ‘Now stop fretting. Get on with it, please.’

Agastalen sighed a brief assent and looked to Heath, who also nodded, his face deadly serious.

The glade seemed unnaturally quiet as Agastalen placed a trembling hand upon Rosie's breast, directly over her heart. She smiled reassuringly at him, but Agastalen did not see as he reached within himself and opened his well, the place which also harboured the anchor of his own personal binding to the Nexus. His innermost self blossomed open with the slightest whispered touch of his mind and warmth suffused him. Watching quietly, prepared to help if needs be, Heath saw a soft golden light suffuse his friend, illuminating Rosie's pale skin and drawing a slight gasp of wonderment from her.

Opening his inner mind, Agastalen saw the woodland glade anew. No longer was it a place of damp, moss and silver moonlight but now it was suffused by life. The trees quivered with it; soft silver light pulsed in soft steady beats from their roots deep in the earth, throbbing to the tips of their leaves. The insects that crawled across their bark and lived in the forest floor were alive with it; and glowed a thousand different shades, racing motes of movement in the night. The very air and earth were alive, writhing with bindings, tubular vein-like conduits, connecting every living creature to the Nexus.

Agastalen's gaze dropped from this wonder to Rosie. The golden cord that bound Rosie to the Nexus blazed with a pure and golden light but the pulse along it was faint and sluggish. The binding disappeared into her sternum, where Agastalen knew that it fed her inner well. Her flesh seemed pale and almost translucent to his inner mind.

Opening his hand, he gently placed it around the binding which shimmered gently in his grasp. Rosie gasped softly as he did so. Agastalen looked at her in concern.

‘I see it,’ said Rosie, ‘I had no idea: it’s so beautiful.’

Agastalen could only nod, tears standing in his eyes, struggling to bring to mind the ritual words. He’d never spoken them before, but only witnessed them used in ceremony with others. Yet they were emblazoned on the mind of every apprentice, as he or she hoped one day to speak them to their master and be bequeathed their first binding.

Agastalen drew comfort from Heath’s presence beside him. Taking a deep breath, he looked into Rosie’s eyes and brought to mind the ritual words. ‘I am a disciple of Nim, father of magic and bringer of life. I hold now this sacred binding, your connection to the beloved Nexus, which is the heart of our father Nim. Do you give this binding willingly and for the betterment of the order of Arcanum?’

Rosie, looking directly into Agastalen’s eyes, said softly, ‘Yes, Agastalen, I do. And may Nim guide you and protect you. Use it well.’ Then, smiling gently, she closed her eyes.

Suddenly the binding in Agastalen’s hand gave slightly and came away from Rosie’s sternum, the slim end pulsing golden light that flowed into the air to scatter like fireflies.

Smiling, Rosie breathed her last breath.

Agastalen looked at the pulsing binding clutched in his hand and then at the recumbent form of Rosie before him. Emotions tumbled through him. What right did he have to do this? He had just taken the life of an old lady. This was wrong. No mage had taken a gifted binding for centuries and there was a reason for that.

Agastalen gasped, clawing air into his lungs, and shuddered.

He was aware then of Heath shaking him. 'Quickly, Agastalen, it's fading.'

Agastalen shook his head and gasped, 'I can't. What right did I have?!' Tears coursed down his face.

Clutching Agastalen's shoulders and placing his head against his friend's, Heath whispered urgently, 'She was dying, Agastalen, and wanted to repay your kindness. Don't let her gift be in vain.'

The binding was beginning to fade in his hand; the binding that was Rosie's gift, as Heath had said. Within, Agastalen understood that Heath was right and that the gift was freely given.

Summoning his courage, he spoke the final words. 'Rosie, I accept your gift on behalf of Nim and the order of Arcanum.' His inner well reached out and the binding came free of his hand and floated through the air, drawn towards him and his own single binding. Where it touched his own binding at the point at which it touched his sternum, it simply vanished. Agastalen gasped and the pulsing of his own binding grew stronger, as if with a double beat.

From beside him he was vaguely aware of Heath completing the ritual words. ‘Nim embraces you, Agastalen, as you grow now, becoming our beloved demi-mage.’

## **'The Fallen Herald'**

### **Chapter 10**

#### **Immortal Veylistra**

'He must be corrupted.'

'I am aware of that' replied the silky voice.

'How will you do this? If the seed blossoms before he is corrupt, even we could not control him.'

'The human heart is weak, he will seek revenge; it is inevitable.'

'Remember our bargain.'

'How could I forget?! Now go, the boy is waking!'

One of the figures vanished.

'Where am I?' asked Thorn, his voice barely a hiss through the band of grief bound tight about this throat and heart.

‘My home.’

‘What kind of place is this?’ Thorn croaked as he pushed himself to his knees. The sky was laced with purple fire and broken bronze ruins thrust up like rotten teeth from a tortured mountaintop.

‘I know; it’s not much.’ The feminine voice laughed, sultry, almost a purr.

Thorn’s gaze looked upon bare feet laced with tiny silver charms, and traced upward to where whispering translucent silk hinted at the softest of skins. A carved silver breast plate highlighted a lush and female form and raven hair framed a face, where wide eyes of deepest mauve were flecked with gold. A rune; two dark lines slashed by a third marked one cheek, at odds with such apparent perfection.

Heat rose in Thorn’s face as his gaze traced her ripe body. He gasped at the heat of the desire that suddenly began to course through him.

Thorn thrust himself angrily to his feet. ‘Are you my captor?’

‘Yes darling, I suppose that I am.’

‘Then you killed my Mum!’ Visions of the dreadful sweeping axe blade raced through his mind, his mum’s body suspended motionless for a moment before it fell limp beside him, unheeding as he screamed in despair.

Unthinking he launched himself at her with a shriek, his hands outstretched like claws.

The lady smiled, though it was without warmth, and stepped away from him with an astonishing speed.

Thorn plunged into a decrepit bronze wall, which burst apart as he struck it, and for a moment he teetered at the edge of a cliff. Winds shrieked and plucked at him, seeking to cast him onto the empty ragged land beneath. His arms flailed desperately, seeking a hold and found none.

Strong arms dragged him back and he fell to the ground panting. He lay for long moments clawing breath into his lungs in deep uncontrollable shudders, and with each breath his wracking sobs grew deeper. Images flashed into his mind; the axe, the red mailed chieftain and the twisted face upon his helm, his mothers last words ‘please, do not take the life of my son.’ It played over and over. She couldn’t be gone. It made no sense. His Mum dead. Alazla, gone. Nothing made sense.

Thorn didn’t realise that he wept in her lap. In those mighty bronze ruins, that lay like the ancient bones of some giant upon a mountaintop, where they seemed to be the only two people on the world, he wept in the arms of a stranger, and she stroked his hair as if she had known him his entire life. His tears spilled across priceless silks, and he screamed his mothers name until the stars became beads of silver in a twisted violet sky.

When he finally opened his eyes, the world of Rune hung above him, fat and blue in the night sky. The stars hung about it, as if seeking to create some heavenly crown.

He rubbed at his eyes. ‘By the nine gods’ he hissed to himself ‘that’s Rune.’

‘Yes, yes it is. And this is my world.’

The lithe figure hopped down from the embrace of a bronze wall and strolled toward him, a gentle smile upon her face.

‘If that is, you can call it such’ she added bitterly.

‘You’re a god’ Thorn stated.

The lady laughed, though the smile on her face seemed mocking. ‘No, I’m no god.’

Thorn took in then the mauve landscape and his world that floated far above and his mind moving as quickly as ever said ‘we’re on the Violet Moon; Veylistras’ face.

And that means you must be Veylistra, daughter of the god of Magic.’

She stopped then and smiled at him, and this time, it seemed genuine. ‘You’re right, on both counts Thorn. This ‘world’ was a gift from my mocking father. I asked for a place to rule, to call my own, and he gave me this; a world of dust, ash and tortured skies.’

‘So you’re just an immortal then?’

Veylistra stepped closer, and there seemed to be some menace about her as she replied ‘yes...I’m *just* an immortal Thorn. Daughter of a god...but not, in fact, a god.’

Thorn had no idea how he was going to do it, but he became utterly resolved even as he stood up. There was a rage in him, and rage was not something that Thorn was used to. It replaced the fear that he normally felt, and it was good, deep and cold, coiled within, right in the pit of his stomach. ‘Well, immortal or not, you’ll pay for killing my mum you immortal bitch. I’ll hunt down your followers and burn every temple of yours to ash. Every day of my life, will be dedicated to your destruction.’

As he stood upon the violet moon, his own world literally as far from him as the stars, his words sounded utterly hollow, even to his own ears.

Her reaction was not what he had expected.

Veylistra sauntered closer and Thorn felt his breath catch, intoxicated by her very presence. He swam in the golden sparks in her eyes as her honeyed voice replied ‘but it was not me Thorn. *I did not kill your mother.*’

Thorn snarled as he struggled to hold onto his anger ‘I, I, know it wasn’t you, but, but, I’m here and that means that whoever did it serves you!’

An elegant hand rested softly on his burning cheek. ‘Things are never as they seem Thorn. You must believe me when I say that I did not order the death of your mother. I’m sorry that she died. Truly.’

Struggling through the heady intoxication of her presence Thorn fought to continue. ‘But it *was* your order that brought me here – it must’ve been! It was your order that killed dozens of sons and daughters of Oldoth! Whether or not you ordered it, my Mum is dead, dead – because of you!!’

Veylistra hung her head, raven hair hiding her clouded eyes ‘I’m sorry Thorn, I never meant for us to meet on these terms.’

Thorn did something then that he’d never done before today, he hit out. His hand lashed out, almost of its own volition, and unnoticed, motes of blue light blazed about his fist. Her eyes widened slightly in surprise as he struck her square on the cheek, with as much force as he could muster. Veylistras’ head moved only slightly with the

impact, but a shudder went through the earth and the bronze ruins groaned as if tortured.

A trickle of ruby blood traced Veylistras' cheek, where it followed for a moment the line of the rune that marred her perfect features.

Velylistra said nothing as she lifted a single finger to her cheek and scooped the drop of blood onto it, where it hung as if frozen for a moment, before she licked it with the tip of her tongue.

She laughed and scampered away from him where she leapt into the air and landed with a swirl of silk and silver. 'Your power begs to be awakened boy and *that* it why you are here!'

'Send me home Veylistra. Send me home so I can burn your temples until your name is nothing but a faded memory and all that's left is this broken rock hanging in the sky.'

'He's here you know.'

'Who?'

'The one who killed your mother.' She smiled, and it was that of a predator.

Thorn reeled. Fear and rage raced through him like a torrent; a mixture of fire and ice. He was here – the red armoured giant! Was he, Thorn, next? Would his blood drip next from that same axe blade to mingle with his mothers? His very limbs felt sick with the fear of it. And yet... there it was again, within him, that throbbing insistence

and he felt it welling, rising up, to smother the fear - rage. Rage boiled within him thick and heated as molten lava.

Veylistra must have seen it, for the smile on her face was rapturous.

‘I can...introduce you, if you wish.’ Her coy understatement was lost on Thorn.

Thorns’ fists clenched. ‘Yes, I think I’d like that.’

Taking Thorns’ hand in hers Veylistra led him through a cut in the jagged rocks. Long before they reached their destination, deep voices and laughter echoed up to reach them. Thorn had never felt rage before and he embraced it. He had no idea what he was going to do, and seemed numb, almost incapable of any thought, other than he had to meet his mothers’ murderer again. He had to look on that twisted helm, somehow even to remove it and see the face beneath. To look into the murderers’ eyes.

They descended down a narrow ravine to emerge upon a small plateau that hung precariously out from the mountain, above a landscape torn with rivers of fire and utterly empty of life. Encircling the plateau were seven bronze thrones, precariously close to the cliff edge. Each throne, except one, was occupied by a figure. All were elegantly dressed, in a variety of expensive robes, gowns, or armour rich enough for any court in the land. Each also bore the same Rune of two lines slashed by a third upon their cheek. In the centre of the circle stood, the red armoured chieftain.

All talking stopped as Thorn emerged from the ravine, hand in hand with Veylistra.

The chieftain turned. He was as huge as Thorn remembered. The handsome face upon his carven helm seemed to leer at Thorn, as his eyes gravitated to the double bladed axe slung across his back.

‘Mistress’ the armoured giant boomed from the centre of the circle and bowed to Veylistra. ‘I was just apprising the Council of our plans for the annexing of the Peldane Baronies.’

‘Very good Pyrus. However, we have a little something that we need to discuss first.’

With those words, something within Thorn broke, all the fear that he had felt during his life evaporated and became white hot. That he should see his mothers murderer here before his eyes, and be powerless, as always, to do anything, was too much.

He screamed. It was a primal thing full of rage, pain and despair. It echoed through the mountains like the piercing cry of an eagle.

And with that scream still breaking from him, Thorn charged. He had no idea what he was going to do, other than he had to do something.

‘Oh my’ said one of the figures, on a throne, a plump lady in red satin brocade.

‘Don’t worry’ chuckled an aged man in a long scaled leather coat. ‘She’s just trying to goad him. It’s going to take more than this for him to become ours though.’

The giant Pyrus took a step back in surprise, and looked to Veylistra as if asking what to do.

Thorn did not see Veylistra shrug and wave a nonchalant hand.

Pyrus did not draw his axe, apparently unconcerned as Thorn ran at him.

Rage and despair raced through Thorn as he churned towards Pyrus. His mothers' decapitated head hung before his eyes, the eyes wide and sightless, the mouth still moving reflexively. Tears chased his cheeks unheeded and he barrelled into Pyrus.

The crack as Thorn struck Pyrus shook the plateau, and it seemed to tilt. Rocks tumbled from the mountainside and Pyrus was lifted clear off his feet, to crash against the base of one of the bronze thrones.

The gasps from the thrones were audible.

Thorn barely paused, and then he was on the dazed Pyrus like a rabid wolf.

He landed atop Pyrus and began to pummel him, and all he knew was white hot fury. He rained blows with a bone cracking strength, as the armoured giant battled to fend him off.

With a roar of pain and a massive thrust Pyrus sent Thorn tumbling away from him, where he rolled fluidly to his feet in the centre of the throne circle.

'Oh bravo' shouted a voice.

'Quiet you fool' hissed another, 'this is no game – at least, not now.'

It seemed that Pyrus had realised the same, for without even a glance at his immortal mistress he drew his giant axe.

'Come' boomed Pyrus' grating, metallic voice, the face on the helm twisting the words obscenely. 'Die upon the same blade that slew your mother. The demon in

this blade fed upon her soul....you should know this. Or did not the order of Oldoth tell you – even as they cast her body from the cliff in their precious and false ceremony?’

‘No!’ Thorn staggered.

‘In Oldoths’ name no....please.’

‘Ah, they did not tell you I see. Demon blades child; they need to be fed and souls are their meat.’

Thorns’ world span as he remembered his mothers’ laughter, and the endless love reflected in her eyes. The times when she’d held him when he was ill and sung him to sleep. She did not deserve this fate, or any such fate. She deserved life, but it was not his to give.

He dropped to his knees. It was too much. That she was gone was enough, but to have been consumed, her very soul eaten. What was he to think? He was numb. It was all gone – his mother dead, his father lost, Alazla lost. It was over.

Pyrus was beside him now and raised the axe.

An expectant hush dropped across the plateau. Pyrus looked for a moment to Veylistra who nodded.

‘Die by the same blade child....fitting’ he grated.

He was numb and through that haze he could hear the heart beat of the giant as he loomed over Thorn. Somehow it seemed slow. But what right did that giant have to a heart beat, to life, when all that Thorn knew was dust?

The axe swung and Thorn looked up.

He saw the demon in the blade smiling at him as the blade descended; its massive maw filled with razor sharp teeth was opened wide, as its roar joined that of Pyrus.

To him, the blade moved slowly. What right did Pyrus have to life!?

Thorn reached up and stopped the blade a span from his face. Its blade rested quivering upon the palm of his hand.

Pyrus staggered with the force of the blow. It was as if he had struck solid rock.

Thorn wrenched the axe blade from Pyrus, and swung it upwards. Pyrus' head span away from his body, and blood fountained into the air, as the corpse tottered before collapsing.

'Feed while you can demon' said Thorn and then cast the blade at the mountain where it exploded with a wail, in a flash of green fire.

## **'The Fallen Herald'**

### **Chapter 11**

#### **Corruption**

The faltering heart within the giant Pyrus' body pumped the remnants of his blood, across the violet rock, from where it created tiny scarlet rivers.

Thorn felt nothing as he stared at the headless corpse. He was as empty as this desolate world, this mockery of a realm, beholden to the child of a god. Why did he not feel elated? Why did he not feel sated, somehow? Justice had been done; he had avenged his mother. Instead, there was just this emptiness. For the first time in his life he had been able to stand up for himself, he'd put something right and he felt – nothing.

And yet, how had he done this thing? What he had just done would have been beyond even Alazla, beyond.....anyone.

'I'm changing' he said simply, rubbing at the blue stain in the palm of his right hand.

The tiny stars within it were bright this morning.

‘Of course, you are.’

Thorn had not heard Veylistra walk up beside him. Her eyes were wide with compassion, the golden flecks within bright as fireflies.

‘You carry the seed, of a fallen avatar within you Thorn. You must embrace your destiny now; become so much more than you ever were!’

A sudden understanding struck Thorn then as he watched the orbiting stars within his palm. ‘It was you that night wasn’t it? It was you who killed the Avatar.’

The change of topic appeared to catch Veylistra off guard for a moment and she just shrugged delicately.

It was another, though who replied to Thorn. An aged man, with frosty white skin and wearing a long scaled grey coat that shimmered like fish scales arose from his throne. His voice was soft, barely above a whisper as he walked toward Thorn, with deliberate slowness, but surprising fluidity for his age. ‘You cannot fool this one Veylistra and you are the fool, if you think to. His mind it seems is likely the equal of any here.’

‘Keep out of this Rivadus-Hex’ spat Veylistra.

‘No, I don’t believe that I shall’ returned Rivadus-Hex, and he closed the distance to Thorn, with barely seeming to move. His voice was close now, but still little more than a whisper. ‘What happens now concerns us all, concerns all of the council of seven.’ He said this last louder and swept his arm about, encompassing all of those seated on the thrones.

‘To answer your question Thorn, yes it was Veylistra who slew the avatar and She did so at the behest of *this* council.’

Rivadus turned white eyes upon Veylistra then. ‘This boy is not your play thing, Veylistra – Queen of a broken world. He belongs to all of us.’

This last brought murmurs of assent from all on the thrones.

‘I don’t belong to anyone’ said Thorn, surprised at the strength in his own voice.

‘Of course you don’t’ responded Veylistra lightly, and touched his cheek softly.

Thorn felt passion flush his face at her slightest touch, and his gaze lingered for a moment on her ripe form, hidden only beneath gossamer silk and silver armour.

Veylistra returned his gaze with a smile. Embarrassed, Thorn looked away to Rivadus-Hex.

However, Rivadus’ returning smile was filled with black fangs, and Thorn took an involuntary step back.

‘I want to go home’ said Thorn weakly. It sounded pathetic, even to his own ears. He just wanted to return to his father, to hold him and see Alazla again.

‘Your fate, lies on a different path now, boy’ said a plump lady, with bright rouge on her cheeks and a voluminous pink dress to match, that made her look to Thorn like a fat pink balloon. It should have made her appear slightly comical, but when Thorn looked into her eyes; it was like looking into those of a snake; dark and empty of life.

The plump lady had a tray of sweets on the arm of her bronze throne, from which she grazed continually. As she crammed sweets into her mouth she said, ‘there is no way

back for you boy. You carry the seed of an Avatar within you now....and there are few of those left. And of course, we won't let you go anyway.'

Thorn felt his new anger flare and he stepped towards her, his fists clenched. 'You're going to send me home lady.'

Her chuckle was light, though it never reached her eyes. 'You are deluded child. You're corruption has already begun' and she gestured to the headless corpse at his feet, as she dabbed at her mouth with a floral napkin. 'Have you killed many people before Thorn?'

Thorn was not prepared for that and stared at the headless corpse, as if for the first time. The world blurred and he sank to his knees.

'Heh. Pathetic' laughed Rivadus-Hex.

'Enough!' snapped Veylistra.

Thorn was aware of her presence kneeling beside him, and she wiped his mouth with a cloth as he hung his head.

There was steel undertone in Veylitr's voice. 'He has had enough for now brethren. This session is at an end. Leave me.'

'Leave you?' Rivadus-Hex's soft voice was laced with menace. 'This is a Council Veylistra and just that. You are not a Queen. We go where we please.'

Thorn looked up weakly, coughing, as Veylistra surged to her feet. Her armour flashed bright, and her raven hair streamed out behind her, as a sudden wind moaned across the plateau. 'Equal we may be Rivadus-Hex, and broken though it is, this *is* my

world, my power here is absolute. You will all leave and leave now.’ Her gaze swept about the bronze thrones.

Stony faces regarded Veylistra, though one-by-one they all arose from their thrones and walked to a circular bronze disk in the centre of the plateau, where they were vanished into a column of blossoming green fire.

As Rivadus-Hex proceeded to the disk, he never took his white eyes from Veylistra. ‘Do not seek to betray us Veylistra. The Council would not forgive you. *I* would not forgive you.’

He turned, and pulling his rippling scaled coat about him stepped into the column of green fire, where he vanished.

‘They’re gone, Thorn.’ Veylistras’ voice was soft and compassionate. ‘You and I are alone now. It is just us - on this entire world. You are safe.’

Safe, those words resonated with Thorn. How he had always longed to be safe, safe and protected.

‘I won’t let them back, if you don’t want me to.’

‘I don’t know what I want’ mumbled Thorn. ‘There’s nowhere left for me to go.’

He looked then directly into her eyes, and the look she returned was solemn. ‘Why did you kill the Avatar Veylistra?’

She sighed, and knelt beside him. It was, he thought, an oddly submissive gesture.

‘Though immortal Thorn, I’m also a prisoner. This Rune upon my cheek and those of all immortals (and there are hundreds of us), chains us to the world of Rune and its

moons. We can go no further. We should be able to roam the stars. The universe should be our playground. But, instead, we must live out the countless ages of our lives here, and only here.'

'But why' whispered Thorn, his heart in his throat as he thought of Veylistra a prisoner.

'Because the younger gods are capricious!' hissed Veylistra and for a moment her beautiful face contorted with anger.

The immensity of it was threatening to overwhelm Thorn again, and he struggled with his words. 'Why, why do you need me?'

'You carry power now Thorn. You have it within you to open the door to great power, power that can set me.....set us, free!'

He shook his head. 'How? Why me? I...'

'Enough' She replied and the look in her eyes caught the breath in Thorn's throat. Veylistra lips parted and she leaned into him. The heat of her breath was on his face. The scent of her was intoxicating, it was around him and within him. He could think of nothing else.

Heat swelled within his loins, even as fear and confusion worried the edges of his mind. 'But I've never....I, I don't know how.'

Her lips descended onto his and all confusion and uncertainty was swept away on a river of passion.

They made love upon a mountain plateau, on a desolate world, where the moaning wind whisked away their cries of pleasure.

And as Thorn lay atop her, Veylistra cried out in ecstasy as the fire of his innocence spilled into her and unknown to Thorn, she consumed it.

Later when Thorn slept, Veylistra stood alone and naked upon the edge of the plateau, the toes of her bare feet curled upon the very edge of the cliff, making their silver charms chime in the breeze. She ran her hand thoughtfully through her thick hair. His innocence burned in her, she could feel it like a fire in her belly, adding to her strength. He was bound to her now.

Veylistra had felt Him approach; none could enter this world without her consent.

‘What have you done?!’

‘Only what I needed to Cinder’ she replied turning, though still balanced lightly on the cliff edge.

The immortal son of Oldoth, god of sun and storms, stood smouldering before her. His eyes were like fiery coals, and his ebony plate mail steamed with the heat from his body, setting the fiery whorls and patterns on it ablaze. His great flaming sword Kalak-Dade was sheathed across his back.

Cinders’ glowing eyes roamed freely over Veylistras’ nakedness. She scowled and a simple woollen dress appeared to cover her.

Concealing her irritation further she took Cinders’ arm, ignoring the tremendous heat from his body. ‘In my position, would you have done any different?’

Cinder laughed and disengaged his arm. ‘No probably not, but the other Council members will not think it as amusing as I.’

‘He is bound to me now Cinder and only to me. I can feel him where he sleeps and feel the heart that drives the blood about his body. I can see the childhood dreams that chase through his sleeping mind.’

Cinder did not reply immediately, his craggy black face deepening in thought, his mane of yellowed hair, making him appear somewhat feline. He stared far out across the barren plains below. Finally, he replied. ‘The others may not be as understanding as I. You and I, we have always been.....close.’

Veylistra took a step away from him as she said. ‘They will have little choice but to support me. They cannot undo this.’

‘It seems that none of us has much choice’ grated Cinder. ‘But he is not yet yours, or ours. He is bound by ties of love to his home and to his friends, especially Alazla. This remains and you must break him of it.’

‘Alazla holds a demon blade Cinder. You forget. That blade will eventually drive him to evil, unless it consumes him first.’

‘We don’t have time Veylistra.’ Cinder clenched a gauntleted fist for emphasis, which promptly burst into rippling flame. ‘The divine orders could uncover this at any time! And, if they know, then the gods know.....at which point being chained only to Rune will be the least of all our problems!’

Veylistra turned away from him, and sighed, hugging her shoulders. ‘You are right Cinder. I will do what I must.’

Later, when Thorn awoke from a deep and untroubled sleep, he saw Veylistra sitting in a simple woollen dress near the cliff edge. Her knees were drawn up to her chin, and somehow against the mountains and towering bronze ruins, she looked very small and vulnerable.

He threw off a blanket and realising he was naked hastily drew on his clothes, barely noticing how torn they were, and covered in dirt and blood.

Veylistra looked up, as he approached, a welcoming smile on her face. ‘That my handsome prince will never do, and with a wave of her hand his dirty clothes vanished, to be replaced with an emerald silken shirt, woollen trousers and bright black boots. Running a hand through his hair, he realised that it had even been combed.

Grinning a little self consciously, he sat beside Veylistra at the cliff edge, but did not touch her. He felt a little unsure of himself, as if she was a precious object that he didn’t know if he was allowed to touch again, when all he wanted to do was reach out and hold her.

‘Don’t I get a kiss then? Or have you gone off me already?’ She quipped.

Thorn grinned and leaned in to kiss her. Her lips were warm and parted hungrily beneath his. He felt his ardour stir again, like a stoked fire, and he reached out clumsily for her.

Veylistra pulled back and placed her head upon his shoulder instead. 'There are things that we still need to discuss, Thorn.'

'Can't it wait?' said Thorn, not so easily deflected.

'No, there are things happening in the world, even as we sit here. This cannot wait.'

'Fine, what is it?!' he grouched.

'You must embrace the seed within you Thorn, accept what you could be. Only then will you realise your potential.'

'What?!' said Thorn, so shocked for a moment that his hand slipped on the cliff edge.

'You want me to accept the seed of an Avatar. That's ridiculous! How can I, I'm just Thorn! I can't even comprehend what that even means!'

'No! You are so much more than that already. Look at what you did yesterday. Pyrus was a trained warrior from Zamad-Dun, part of a warrior cast and bound with magic. You slew him Thorn....and in doing so, righted a great wrong.'

Thorn knew that she was right. He felt different. There was a strength in him now, and he found that he liked it; strength had replaced the fear, fear that he had carried his entire life, a fear that had always forced him to hide behind Alazla. 'It's good not to be afraid Veylistra, but that's it, I'm still just Thorn. I think I always will be.'

'I know, and that is why there is more that you must do.'

'What?' Thorn replied cautiously.

‘You must avenge yourself! Cut your ties with your past and overcome it. Become what you were destined to be. Those that picked on you Thorn, where you once lived, they are nothing more than worms! Yes, I know of this, I see the fear rise in your eyes once again. You must visit them Thorn and repay them. Alazla too, yes, your friend, were it not for him, you would not have had to hide your entire life!’

The very thought of Lorm and his pack of college bullies made butterflies dance in Thorn’s stomach. His heart began to hammer. And Alazla was his friend, a lifetime friend, were it not for him Thorn knew that his life, such as it had been, would have been an utter misery. ‘No. I won’t do it. And Alazla is like a brother to me. Can’t I just stay here with you?’

‘You must do this thing Thorn. Avenge yourself! Overcome your fear, overcome your past and then do, do...what you think is right.’

‘No, I won’t hurt them and I won’t betray Alazla!’

‘The strong take from the weak Thorn, it is the way of things, but you don’t need to hurt them Thorn, not if you don’t want to.’

‘Why can’t we just stay here Veylistra, you don’t need those others....you’ve got me now.’

Veylistra sighed, and took his hand in hers. He decided that it was a nice feeling, her holding his hand.

‘Please Thorn, do this for me. I need your help. Without what you could become I’ll never be free of this world, or of this cursed Rune that scars my face. None of the

Council will be free. Only if you awaken the power within you can this be done  
Thorn, my love, please.’ Her eyes were wide and with her head on his shoulder he felt  
her presence like a heat, and he understood then, that he would do anything for her.

He raised her head from his shoulder and gazed into the golden sparks that orbited  
with her wide eyes, and though he knew that it was wrong, Thorns’ resistance utterly  
crumbled. ‘Okay.’

Veylistra smiled, and the heat of her lips met his.