

A Whisper In The Shadows

A Rangers of Laerean Adventure

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Prologue

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He was standing outside a cave, in some part of the vast forest, surrounded by oaks and maples, with a few elms here and there. The tall grass covered his ankles as he slowly entered the large cave opening, moving forward into the darkness. Yet, somehow he could see despite the obscure and clouded visibility.

The cave opening was a tunnel, leading deeper into the rock, and he followed it slowly. He wondered why he was not armed, as he carried no weapon, and yet he did not fear what lay ahead. He felt no sense of danger to himself, as he continued down the wide tunnel.

The tunnel opened into a large cavern, and he could see a large bear matron and several cubs lying in the recesses on the sides of the area, but they paid him no attention as he walked to the center of the chamber. There was some strange altar or pedestal and sitting upon it was a small statue of a bear, standing upright, great paws raised and mouth frozen into a roar of challenge.

The statue appeared to be made of pure glass, or possibly diamond, clear and beautiful. As he touched the statue, an image began to materialize before him, the image of the great bear represented by the statue. He was now facing the largest grizzly he had ever seen, standing over twelve feet tall on its hind legs. The beast was huge and powerful and he felt a single swipe of one of those giant paws would crush him like a twig.

Suddenly, he could hear a voice in his mind, the voice of the bear, speaking to him.

“Do you know who I am?” asked the deep, gruff voice.

“You are Odris, the Bear Spirit,” said the large man.

“Yes, and you bear my namesake, Baric of Elsu. You have a destiny and I am bound to guide you on your path.”

“Bound?” Baric asked. “By whom?”

“By He who knows all things,” replied Odris. “You have a long journey ahead of you, a destiny that will lead to great things, but it will begin with something small. Only a whisper. Remember this that I tell you now. Power will corrupt even the most faithful, if their will is not strong. Beware of such power, and keep your will strong.”

“I don't understand,” said Baric, but the image of Odris was fading.

He felt himself being pulled by unseen tethers back out of the cave, away from the vision, back into the forest. The whole scene seemed to waver, like an image reflected in the water of a pool, ripples destroying the coherence of the dream.

Awaking from the dream, Baric rubbed his eyes in wonder. Such an odd dream. Then he turned over and went back to sleep. In the years that followed his initiation into the ranks of the Rangers of Laerean, he forgot all about the dream. It would be a long time before he again remembered his audience with Odris, the Spirit of the Bear.

Chapter 1

Isenjen 17, 2026 F.E.

The late summer sun shone down brightly on the busy city of Laerean. The day was clear and mild, with only a few small, billowy clouds high in the sky. The walled city of Laerean was home to around four hundred thousand people, surrounded by wooden barricades with high wooden towers, and occupying about fifty square miles on the western edge of the Laerean Forest.

Typical of many minor cities of men in Hir, Laerean was made notable by the large keep that served as the headquarters for the renowned Rangers of Laerean, the great structure known as Greenkeep. A large complex, built almost entirely of wood, it was second in stature only to the stone palace of Duke Roland IV, who ruled Laerean and the surrounding lands in the name of King Thaed, ruler of the region of Elsu.

The entrance to Greenkeep was a wide staircase leading up to a large set of intricately carved double doors. To the left side of the keep was an entrance to the stables. Climbing the stairs to enter this magnificent structure, was a man who grew up on legends and stories of the great Rangers. He had always dreamed of becoming a Ranger, a dream that had come true for him at the age of twenty-three.

In the four years since, Baric had distinguished himself as being someone exceptional. The current commander of the Rangers, Captain Ronan, had come to trust Baric and depend on him to get things done, just as he was doing today. Ronan had sent word for Baric to report to his office immediately.

Entering the keep, Baric walked through the great Hall of Heroes, which contained memorials and monuments dedicated to those Rangers who had lost their lives in service to the people of Hir. The large room was lit by two great candelabra hanging from the ceiling, each holding a score of candles that were always kept lit and replaced when needed. Two Rangers always stood guard in this room, constantly at attention. They remained unflinching as Baric went by.

Baric rushed through the room and into the spacious hallways beyond, his huge bulk forcing others to the side. Baric's muscular frame stood six and half feet in height and weighed a good two hundred and fifty pounds. He took up a good portion of the narrow, wood-paneled corridor he now entered, that led to the Captain's modest office.

His green linen cloak, of a cut and design that identified to all that he was a Ranger of Laerean, flowed behind him as he moved swiftly down the passage. He was dressed in a hardened leather jerkin and pants, with soft leather boots that thumped on the wooden floor. A long dagger was sheathed in his belt, the only weapon he carried at the moment. Stopping at the Captain's door, Baric knocked and waited.

“Come in,” came Ronan's voice from behind the door, and Baric opened it and entered. Ronan looked up from his desk as the large man entered his small office, and smiled. Ronan was very

familiar with the tanned, full-bearded face that looked at him expectantly. The hood on Baric's cloak was down, revealing his long, thick brown hair, and his blue eyes gazed at Ronan cordially.

“You wanted to see me, Captain?” queried Baric, wondering at the urgency of the request that he had received only a short time ago.

“Ah, Baric,” sighed Ronan. Ronan was an impressive man, not for his size or stature as much as for his commanding presence. He had been Captain of the Rangers for twelve years now, and had the respect of all his fellow Rangers and the ambassadors of the rulers of Lower Hir, whom he had to treat with daily. His forty-six years with the Rangers had earned him that honor and recognition. He was a tall man, of slight build, with hair that was beginning to gray and highlight his ruddy complexion.

He stood, walking around the desk, and extended a hand. “How was your last assignment, lad?”

Baric grinned and shrugged as he shook Ronan's hand in a brotherly clasp. “Nothing to speak of. The farmers are happy now that their livestock are no longer being carried off by that worrik.”

Ronan nodded as he returned and sat back down, and Baric sat in a seat in front of the desk. “Nasty creatures, those. Vicious as wolves, and twice as cunning,” said Ronan.

“Fortunately, there was only the one,” stated Baric, remembering the difficulty he had killing the giant wolf-like creature that was almost as big as he was. “You’ve another assignment?” Baric asked.

Ronan nodded. “We have a request for assistance from the Vaar'da. This is an abnormal request, as you know. We do not usually get involved in the affairs of Upper Hir without a direct petition from the ruling governments there. As always though, in such cases, I seek volunteers rather than order a Ranger so far from home. So it is up to you if you wish to pursue this mission.”

“What’s the request?” Baric was intrigued, but wanted more information.

Ronan smiled slightly and rose to open his office door, speaking to a Ranger standing guard out in the hall. “Bring the Vaar'da emissary to my office.”

“Yes sir,” said the Ranger and he rushed away. Ronan shut the door again and returned to his seat.

“The Vaar'da have sent an emissary with their request,” said Ronan. “I will let her give you the particulars.”

Baric raised his eyebrows. “Her?” He had seen male Vaar'da before, but never a female. They were a small, lithe and graceful people, dark-skinned, with large almond shaped eyes and pointed ears. He was curious about the appearance of their females.

Ronan nodded and grinned, knowing exactly where Baric's mind was wandering. “Yes, and she

is quite exotic.”

Baric smiled, realizing Ronan had guessed his thoughts. The office door suddenly opened and the Vaar'da emissary stepped into the room. Baric and Ronan both stood up respectfully as she entered and gave her a short bow.

She was indeed exotic, and beautiful. She stood only five feet tall, taller than the males Baric had seen, and she had large, pale blue, almond shaped eyes. Her skin was smooth and silky in appearance, a golden brown color, and her full lips glistened with a hint of pink coloring. Her nose was slight, what some would call a button nose. Her features were soft and almost child-like, yet she was not a child. She was, in fact, nearly as old as Baric, who appeared as a giant standing next to her.

She wore a hooded, black robe that flowed around her slim body almost to the floor, hiding her figure. The hood was down, showing her long, side braided black hair that went past her shoulders. The braids kept her hair back on the sides and framed her pretty face, adding to her exotic appeal and drawing attention to her pointed ears. As the men before her bowed, she returned the bow, her movements poised and alluring.

“You asked to see me, Captain Ronan?” she inquired with a soft voice that was like a gentle breeze on a still summer morning.

“Yes,” replied Ronan, sitting back down behind his desk. “This is one of our best Rangers, Baric. He would like to hear your request for assistance.”

Baric offered a chair to the woman, being gallant almost automatically in her company, never taking his eyes off of her as she sat down. Her demeanor was one of poised politeness, like the nobles Baric had met in the past. The Vaar'da were stiff like that, almost always adopting an air of superiority over other races.

“Thank you,” she said to Baric. “As I told the Captain earlier, my name is Raimerestha. I was sent by the Mikado of the Vaar'da with a request for assistance from the famed Rangers of Laerean. The Mikado's daughter has been kidnapped, and a ransom is being demanded. Paying the ransom is not a problem, but we Vaar'da do not take kindly to threats from such captors. We would prefer that she be rescued and her captors punished.”

“Raimer ...” Baric said, trying to pronounce her name, but failing miserably.

“If you find it easier, you may call me Whisper,” she said dispassionately.

Baric wondered about that nickname and what it might mean. “Do you know who her captors are, Whisper?”

She nodded. “A band of Zumarian criminals. Our people have tenuous relations with the Zumarians. We have never gotten along well and the peace we now have hangs by a thread. The Pasha of Zumar, their equivalent of a Mikado, or king if you prefer, assures us that these

kidnappers do not represent their people and are, in fact, bandits and thugs, robbing even other Zumarians.

“After lengthy negotiations with the Pasha, we have received his permission to hire the Rangers to track down the criminals and rescue the daughter of our Mikado.” She looked now to Ronan. “You have found all the documents to be in order?”

Ronan nodded. “Indeed we have, and the payment offered is more than acceptable. I have offered this assignment to Baric, but it is up to him to accept or reject, as he desires. If he does not wish to take this mission, he will not be forced, and we will simply inquire of other Rangers. I wanted to offer this to him first, as he is experienced and efficient, one of our best.” Ronan again looked to Baric.

“How would we proceed?” asked Baric, his attention on Whisper.

“The starting point would be in the foothills of the Skyhaven Peaks, in Vaar'da. That is the site of the abduction. We will track them from there.”

“We?” asked Baric.

For the first time, she smiled, an intriguing smile. “Yes. I will be working with you.”

Baric wondered what her skills might be, as she appeared to be more of a diplomat rather than someone that could chase down kidnappers. “Can you fight?” he asked bluntly.

In an instant, she was gone. Vanished right before his eyes. In the next instant she was behind him, a curved dagger at his throat. Baric's eyes popped open wide with absolute surprise, as did Ronan's. “What the...?” Baric suddenly froze, feeling the cold steel on his neck.

“I have many skills. Fighting is the least of them.” Whisper was smiling arrogantly as she slowly removed the dagger from Baric's neck and slid it beneath her robe into a concealed sheath.

As she again sat down, Baric looked at her differently than he had mere moments before. She looked fragile, but she was far more than she appeared, and he now understood the nickname, Whisper. Baric began to smile, and the smile grew into a boisterous laugh.

“I accept this assignment, Captain,” he said with a chuckle as his laughter trailed off. He looked back at Whisper, an amused grin on his face.

Whisper kept her cultivated bearing and nodded without a smile.

“When do we leave?” asked Baric.

“As soon as you are ready,” she said.

Ronan sat back in his chair, his hands behind his head with a look of wonder on his face.

“Meet me at the stables in an hour,” said Baric to Whisper. He rose from his seat and bowed, exiting the room. She rose as he left and removed a large pouch from under her robe. She threw the pouch onto Ronan's desk.

“Thank you, Captain,” she said. “I believe these gems will more than suffice.” Ronan just looked at the pouch and knew that whatever it contained was worth the promised payment of ten thousand gold coins. This would go a long way in keeping the Rangers fed and supplied. Whisper turned and left the room, and Ronan could not help noting that her movements were as silent as the whisper that her name implied.

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The road from Laerean to Chartol was over a three week journey. In Chartol, they would be able to book passage on board a ship to Kelfar, a trading port city in Vaar'da. Baric rode his chestnut horse, Namax, a large stallion that easily carried his bulk. Whisper's horse, Gilrin, was a smaller pinto breed.

The day was pleasantly mild, with few clouds and only the slightest breeze from the south. It was now late afternoon as they rambled along the road to Chartol through the Laerean Forest. The road was a well-trodden dirt road, the main road between Laerean and Chartol.

Baric attempted conversation now and then, but she was unusually silent, saying little. He wished to know more about her and her skills, feeling it was prudent that he know exactly what she was capable of. He broke the silence yet again.

“That ability you have,” he said, “I assume it’s some form of magic? To be able to simply vanish and reappear somewhere else?”

Whisper understood what he wanted to know. “It is magic. It is known as Shadow Walking. In truth, I travel through shadow, unseen in the physical world, but only for as little time as possible. Only for short distances. Such travel is not without risks. There are things in the shadow world that are dangerous. It takes a learned skill to use such magic.”

“I see. So it’s not used without true need?” he asked.

She nodded her head. “Precisely.” She looked over at him, perceiving that he wanted details. “You wish to know how I can be of use in danger.”

“I think if we’re to work together, we should know each other's capabilities.”

She returned her gaze to the road ahead. “I have other skills in the use of shadow magic, which is uncommon, even among my people. I was trained as an assassin. I have skills with dagger and poisons, as well as stealth and magic. Using my magic, I can create illusions and manipulate weak-willed minds when the need arises.” She looked over to Baric again. “I am not a warrior as

you would consider. I fight from the shadows and with deception. Not face-to-face, as I am sure you do.”

Baric was not fearful of magic, but there was something odd about her story for this mission that he had not yet figured out. It was obvious to anyone where his own skills lay. Sheathed on his back was a great broadsword, a large, double-sided blade weapon that could be used with one or both hands, requiring strength to wield.

There was also a longbow and a long sack filled with arrows which were strapped to the livery on his horse. All Rangers had both ranged and melee skills, and he was not new to stealth. Her attitude seemed to indicate she viewed his skills as inferior, but her manner did not actually bother him.

“I can be stealthy when needed. I’m a Ranger. Concealment is something we’re familiar with, though I don’t use magic. There are Rangers who are magicians, however. I’m familiar with herbs used for healing and food. Rangers are taught to be self-sufficient. I can hunt and cook, sew, and can use camouflage. I can fight with sword or dagger and have excellent marksmanship with a bow.”

Whisper nodded. “I have heard of the Rangers and their skills, even in Vaar'da,” she said. She was impressed by his size and how he moved more gracefully than she would have thought that one so large could move. Her eyes lingered momentarily on his huge arms and chest, and then swiftly returned to the road ahead.

Baric was alert at all times. A Ranger is trained to always be observant, and he was aware of the road ahead and the forest surrounding them. He had also noticed her examining gaze. She maintained this assuming demeanor, but he observed it as posturing. She seemed to want to hide her feelings.

Without looking toward her, he smiled and said, “The pleasure is mine, Whisper.” She turned her eyes, but not her head, in his direction for only a second, wondering what he meant by that.

They spoke little for the rest of the day, and as the sun sank low in the west, Whisper began to wonder if they would camp on the side of the road for the night. The fading light made the forest seem menacing. Baric seemed unconcerned and kept riding until it was almost dark. The forest was no longer flat, and rocky outcrops and hills could now be seen ahead as the light swiftly faded.

He stopped near one of these rocky slopes and dismounted. “We’ll camp here,” he said.

Whisper also dismounted, and was about to start unpacking her sleeping roll when she saw that he was leading his horse around some rocks, so she followed, leading Gilrin behind her. Moving about twenty feet away from the road, around the ridge, Baric led them to some brush with rock behind it. She saw a symbol carved into the rock, a cross inside a circle.

Baric pushed the brush aside and revealed a cave opening behind it. He gestured to her, “In

there.”

She led her horse into the cave. Baric followed her in with Namax. He lit a torch he had taken from Namax's pack using a flint and steel. The light revealed a large cave with a high ceiling. There was an opening about a foot in diameter at the top of the cave, a flue for the doused campfire that sat in the middle of the dirt floor. Wooden crates were stacked up against the far wall and there were metal loops embedded in the wall of the cave for tethering the horses.

She looked at Baric questioningly. He explained, “Rangers have such way-stops scattered across Hir. Much safer than camping in the open and warmer on cold evenings. They’re kept stocked with supplies for any Ranger in need.”

Whisper tethered Gilrin and sat down on a stone bench near the campfire as Baric ignited it with his torch. He tethered Namax and opened one of the crates, taking out a few pieces of split wood for the fire. From another crate he produced some dry blankets, handing one to Whisper.

“I see Rangers come prepared,” she said, taking the blanket.

He threw a couple of pieces of wood onto the fire and then took a bag of dried meat and a couple of skins of weak wine from the pack of his horse. He handed a skin to Whisper.

“This is travel wine. Mostly water. The wine purifies the water and improves the taste.” He also handed her a couple of strips of dried meat. The meat was lightly salted. “Travel rations,” he said.

Whisper took the offered drink and meat with a nod. Baric sat down next to her on the stone bench and began to eat. The cave warmed quickly with the fire as the sun's heat vanished out in the forest.

“It’ll take a good two months to get to the Skyhaven Peaks. Tracking down these Zumarians is going to take a long time. Are you certain that the Mikado's daughter will be safe for that length of time?” Baric did not expect her captors to be so patient, and that made him wonder about the truth of this whole mission. He had been thinking on this the whole day.

She looked up at him as she chewed a bite of the rough meat. “They will not get a ransom if they harm her.” She looked convincing, Baric admitted, but there was more to this story. He was sure of it.

Baric's trained senses as a Ranger were also useful in judging people, even those of other races. He could see the slight fluctuations of the irises in her eyes, the almost imperceptible twitch at the corner of her mouth. He could hear the sudden, but nearly silent, short intake of breath at his mention of the time involved.

“You’re hiding something,” he said. “I won’t press it, but eventually you’ll learn to trust me. I can tell that you don’t.”

She eyed him intently, still not trusting anyone, not even another Vaar'da, at this point. She kept silent, eating without speaking.

Baric finished eating his portion, having drank half the contents of the skin in the process. He laid out his blanket near the fire and lay down, his face turned away from her. "Good night, Whisper," he said with a hidden grin, and closed his eyes.

Whisper finished eating and looked at the sleeping giant near her. Could she trust this man? He was correct, she was hiding something, and he had sensed it. That impressed her even more. She laid out her blanket and lay down to sleep, almost afraid to close her eyes.

As she wondered about Baric and trust, her mind drifted off into sleep as the night grew dark and the howl of a wolf could be heard in the distance.

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The shadows swirled around her, shifting and flowing, constantly moving. It was the perfection of chaos and ultimately disorienting. There was no up or down. There was no left or right. She was a disembodied presence in a world of turmoil, but somehow she could feel her surroundings.

The air was thick and heavy, and there was heat. She saw no flame, no radiating redness, but she could feel heat as if the shadows were aflame. She felt lost in those shadows, consumed by them.

Then, came a sound. A small voice, soft and barely audible. A whisper in the shadows. "Help me." What direction had it come from? She could not tell. The voice sounded weak, pathetic. As if the owner of the voice were dying, fading away. "Please, help me."

Whisper sat up quickly, jerking awake, returning to reality. She was in the cave. She had fallen asleep. The same dream. Always the same. The voice in her dream pulled at her, tugging at her very life force, demanding recognition.

She realized she was drenched in sweat. As she wiped her brow, she remembered she was not alone. Looking over the burned-out campfire, she saw Baric staring back at her.

"Are you alright?" he asked. He was looking at her oddly. "You were thrashing around quite a bit. A nightmare?"

She sighed heavily and laid back down. "I am fine. Yes, a nightmare."

Baric stared at her for a long moment. Then, after stirring the fire up again with a few fresh pieces of wood, he lay back down. Something was wrong. He could sense the turbulence of her spirit, her anxiety. He was starting to grasp that there was more to this mission than he had been told. The facts were not adding up in his head.

He considered pressing the matter, but decided not to. At least, not yet. He closed his eyes, but

did not return to sleep. He was attentive to the sounds within the cave, the shuffle of the horses, a cricket chirping at the back of the cave. He just lay there and listened for a while.

Whisper could not sleep either. She kept awake. She knew the voice that whispered to her from the shadows. She knew the voice well, and that was what was causing her such distress. She was finally able to calm her racing heart, but just lay there, awake, waiting for sunrise.

As the sun rose over the eastern horizon, Baric became active. He opened another crate and removed two feed bags of dried oats for the horses, which he hung around their necks. Whisper started to rise as he rekindled the fire and laid out their breakfast, which was more dried meat.

She sat there, her arms folded around her knees for several minutes, saying nothing. Baric also kept silent as he sat down and started eating. When she looked up, she saw he was looking at her analytically. Rising and sitting on the stone bench, she began to eat as well.

Baric could sense that she was deathly afraid of something, but her obstinate attitude kept her at a distance. He knew she did not yet trust him, so he decided to let it go for now. He felt she was in some sort of trouble. He began packing things, getting ready to leave.

Whisper rolled up her blanket, giving it to Baric to return to the crate. Baric made sure they had enough supplies to get to the next way-stop, and doused the campfire. Before long, they had mounted their horses and resumed their journey toward Chartol.

Whisper kept her thoughts to herself, wondering if she could truly trust a human. She feared the dangers that lay on her road ahead, and she was desperate for help, but it was difficult for her to trust. She would think about what to do as they traveled now to the coastal city. There was plenty of time to think and plan.