

Chapter 1: Sign of the Dragon

It was early in the morning, the only visible light was coming from the stars and the two moons to the west, hanging in a cloudless sky. The greater moon, Sianor, was a little larger than the lesser moon, Tibel. Tibel was just beginning to eclipse the greater moon, which was always full and bright. Sianor never changed. Tibel was a tiny sliver, only days away from a new moon. The stars filled the sky with a stark and brilliant splendor.

A young boar nudged the ground with his nose as he looked for the tasty capor roots found in the forest. He did not notice the eyes watching him from the shadows of a thicket behind him. All four were green with catlike pupils, all in a row. It was impossible to tell if they belonged to one creature or two. They did not move or blink. The only sound was the boar grunting in a low growl as he nudged the soft earth, pushing the dirt away to reveal the roots beneath.

Suddenly, there was a whooshing sound, and a shaft of wood seemed to grow out of the neck of the boar. It gave a gurgled squeal and fell over dead. The four eyes in the shadows began to move, slowly appearing out of the thicket and revealing there were two creatures. The first to appear was a large cat with saber toothed fangs and almost jet black fur, standing over three feet tall on all fours. Its movements were completely silent, making not a sound.

The second to appear was a young girl dressed in black fur clothing. She carried an intricately carved long bow made from oak. Her long, black hair was tied back into a high knotted pony tail and her ears were slightly elongated, coming to a point at the top, as the ears of the elves. Standing about five and half feet tall, she had a slender, athletic build. She appeared to be a young girl that was in her late teens, but her stealthy movements and apparent hunting skill showed she was more than just a young girl.

She moved as gracefully and silently as the cat as she grabbed the arrow stuck in the boar, twisted and pulled, freeing it. Wiping the head of the arrow on the grass, she returned it to the quiver that was slung on her back.

“We will have a good breakfast this morning, Morlok,” Delina said, speaking to the cat at her side. Morlok nudged her thigh affectionately and gave a low growl as if speaking to her. Rubbing the cat's head softly, Delina smiled as if she understood what Morlok had said. “The next kill is yours. I promise.” Grabbing the boar's legs in both hands, Delina slung it over her fur clad shoulders with ease.

“The sun will rise soon. Let's get back home,” she said. Despite her small frame, she seemed to have no trouble carrying the eighty pound boar, displaying a strength that could not come from muscle alone. Walking quietly through the brush, Morlok followed. Not a sound could be heard in the still silence of the morning. A faint light was starting to peek above the nearby mountains to the east.

Sitting on a high backed throne in a massive chamber was a brooding visage of a man. The throne had intricate carvings of skulls and demonic faces, and was black as pitch. The circular room was a hundred feet in diameter and its furnishings were made from some smooth, black stone. The twenty foot high ceiling loomed overhead. The artwork on the ceiling and on the walls flickered between shadows and light from the candelabra around the room. It was disturbing to look upon and caused any sane person great discomfort. A small open balcony was on the opposite side of the room from the open double doors that led to a hallway outside.

High Lord Kargoth himself was an imposing figure, wearing long black robes with a black hood

covering his head. The shadows of the hood made his already frightening, bearded face even more frightening. His cold, steel colored eyes gleamed with malice from under his hood at the two red robed figures now standing before him. They carried many scrolls in their arms, as if they intended to show something to him, but he did not seem interested in the scrolls. His cold gaze pierced them as he spoke with a blood curdling, deep voice.

“I do not want your vain explanations of the scrolls! I want to know if a dragonblood yet lives in Almar!” he shouted. His voice seemed to shake the stone of the surrounding room.

The two robed figures bowed deeply in fear and obeisance to Kargoth. “Your Eminence, the scrolls say a coming eclipse of Tibel over Sianor will reveal this. In a few days, when the eclipse is full, if a dragonblood still lives the sign should be revealed.”

They struggled to not reveal their fear, but he could detect the freezing shivers that ran up their spines. He allowed a slight, malicious grin to cross his lips, enjoying their fear and discomfort.

“Then go! Return to me when you have an answer!” he waved them away with one hand, turning the gaze of his eyes off of them, indicating they were dismissed. They felt themselves lucky to still be alive, bowing deeply and scurrying out the door as fast as they could.

Kargoth stood. He was well over six feet in height, but had a slight frame hidden beneath the long robe that dragged on the floor as he walked out onto the balcony. He looked into the sky at the two moons of Almar. In a few days there would be a total eclipse, with Tibel crossing over Sianor. He would then know if the prophecy was indeed true. He had heard the prophecy many times before.

These thoughts set his mind wandering through memories and he remembered a winter day, some twenty years ago. Deep snow was piled around a huge cavern and a small army of black armored soldiers was with him. He had signaled them to enter and remembered the sounds of screaming, dying men. The clash of arms in battle and the final roar of the dragon, Jeraldin, as he died. The day he came to power with the death of the last dragonblood in Almar. He remembered the red stain of Jeraldin's blood on the pure white snow after the battle and that memory brought a smile to his thin lips.

He had declared himself the High Lord, ruler of the known world. None dared to oppose him, except for the Followers of the Blood. A small band of rebels whom he considered only a nuisance. With no dragonbloods remaining, they were helpless. Even so, it bothered him that he had not been able to totally eradicate them. They kept moving and hiding from his soldiers, kept recruiting others into their ranks. He needed to know if the prophecy was true.

His scholars had found the prophecy years ago, in the Scholar's Cave, and had been trying to determine what it meant. A prophecy that spoke of a sign that would indicate if a dragonblood still lived in Almar. They had finally determined that the sign of that return was the alignment of the two moons when Tibel would be a new moon. If the sign appears, then it would indicate that there is still a dragonblood alive in Almar. Kargoth felt sure he had killed them all, but he must be certain.

He grimaced at the thought that there could be another living dragonblood. Without them, no one could oppose him. He wondered if King Jeraldin had a secret heir? Well, if that were true, then he would hunt him down and ensure that he met the same fate as his father. Kargoth returned his thoughts to the present and looked again at the moons of Almar. Soon he would know.

Merric crouched low in the brush of the forest and intently looked back the way he had come. He was positive that he was being followed. He thought he had heard the snap of a twig, though it was very faint. He narrowed his eyes and surveyed the surrounding foliage. If he was being followed, he

knew he must not return to the Fellowship. He would have to lead them away. Turning back around he began to veer south, slowly and subtly, making sure they did not suspect that he had changed his course from due east.

As he moved further away from the direction of the Fellowship's lair, he started picking up his pace. He could move through the brush easily enough, but not completely silent. Now and then his step would snap a twig or the sword on his back would snag a limb. He did not care at this point. As long as his home remained hidden, that was all that mattered. He started to hear more noise behind him as his pace quickened. They were beginning to close the distance on him.

He saw an overhang in the rocks ahead of him and started moving towards it. He figured he would make his stand with the rock at his back. As he neared the opening, however, he saw it was deeper than he first thought. It was a cave. He hoped it was not a bear den. It would not be good to face the blackguard with a wild bear behind him, but he had little choice now.

Reaching the mouth of the cave, he turned and pulled the long sword from his back. The opening was narrow, so it would not be easy to get behind him. As he heard them closing in, he readied himself for the inevitable attack. They knew by now that he was aware of them, and the two black armored men came rushing out of the brush towards him with huge broadswords raised above their heads.

Merric ducked as one swung his blade, and Merric felt the blade swish above his head. The force of that swing blew wind through his hair as the sword passed just above him. Still crouched, he spun around and thrust forward with his long blade, aiming for the man's gut. Merric felt his sword glance off armor and find an opening in the man's abdomen. The man grunted with pain, dropping his sword, and stumbled backwards holding his wound. The blackguard fell to the ground with his gut ripped open by Merric's sharp blade.

Merric was too late riposting from that killing blow as the other broadsword sliced into his left arm, just below the shoulder. Blood splattered into his face and blurred his vision. He tripped and fell onto his back. He felt blood flowing freely from the cut and knew he would not be able to recover in time. The blackguard was already leaping toward Merric as he hit the ground and lost his breath from the impact. There was suddenly a loud growl and Merric felt something hit against him. His last thought was that it was a bear den after all. His consciousness faded into darkness.

Morlok issued a low warning growl as Merric began to open his eyes. Delina turned from the pot hanging over a fire against the cave wall. A small natural flue above the fire made sure that the smoke that came from the fire dissipated as it rose up through the shaft to the forest above. Merric was near six feet tall and of muscular build, with sandy brown hair cut short on the sides and back, but with curly locks on top that hung down on his forehead. His chestnut brown eyes showed intelligence and experience, despite his youthful appearance. He did not look much older than sixteen.

Merric was startled as he opened his eyes and saw the giant cat watching him. His attention was immediately drawn to the ten inch long saber fangs. Delina grinned at his discomfort.

“Do not make any sudden moves. She will protect me if she must,” Delina warned as she moved toward him with a wooden bowl. The steam rising from the bowl had an enticing aroma and he knew it was a stew of some kind.

“Thanks,” said Merric, taking the stew. He picked up the wooden spoon in the bowl and took a sip of the hot concoction. It tasted wonderful and warmed his insides. He continued to eat as he spoke. “Who are you? Are you from the elven lands?”

His assumption of her heritage made her snort derisively. “Just because my ears are pointed does not make me an elf. My name is Delina, and that is all you need to know.” She returned to stirring the stew which she had made from the boar she had killed that morning and the capor roots she had gathered.

Though she was helping him, she did not appear all that friendly or sociable. He noticed that his arm wound had been bound, quite expertly at that. He also noticed her eyes. Not the eyes of an elf, nor of any race he knew. His memory was tickled about something, but he could not quite remember what it was. He wondered about the cat, which was unusual for this area. Morlok sat near him, on the cavern floor, front paws crossed as she licked them with her huge tongue.

“What happened to the blackguards?” he asked, remembering that he was about to be killed, or so he thought.

“You killed one, Morlok took care of the other,” she said nonchalantly with a shrug. “They are food for the birds and beasts now.” She had stripped their bodies and carried them out into the forest, far from her cave. She could trade the items she took from them later, in Grewald, as she did from time to time when she had something to trade. She looked at Merric with some interest. “Why were they after you? Did you steal from them?” She wondered if he might be a thief that got caught trying to steal from the High Lord's men.

Merric's reply did not hide the distaste he felt, “I am no thief. They were following me.”

Delina raised her eyebrows at his retort. He was one of the rebels. She was almost sure of it. She remembered the tales she had heard from other travelers that she encountered from time to time.

“You are a rebel then?” she asked. Merric could not suppress a slight smile as he realized she was not only resourceful, but intelligent too. He was beginning to like her, but whose side was she on?

“And if I am?” he asked, hoping her answer might give him a clue as to where she stood.

Delina shrugged her shoulders. “It does not matter. I care not for the struggles of humans.” Merric wondered what race she was.

“If you are not elf and not human, then from where do you come?” She did not answer him, and instead, moved toward the cavern exit.

“Watch him, Morlok,” she said over her shoulder and disappeared into the darkness of the night.

Merric looked at the cat. Morlok was indeed watching him. Looking around, he did not see his sword. Without it he did not stand a chance in a fight with such a creature. Morlok was easily twice his own weight and strength, not to mention the claws and teeth. He laid back down after finishing the stew and decided to wait and rest. It did not take long before the stew warmed him and made him drowsy, and his mind drifted off into sleep.

A few days later, Merric was starting to feel his strength return. He was able to travel again. He must have lost a lot of blood from that wound, but his shoulder was feeling better. Delina had been putting some kind of salve on it and redressing it for him each day. It seemed to be healing much faster than normal, unnaturally so. Despite the length of time he had now spent here, he still had no idea who Delina was or where she came from.

Delina was in a smaller connected cave that she used as a hunter's rack. She was currently skinning a buck she had brought in earlier. Merric watched her analytically. She was a skilled hunter and knew what she was doing. He watched as she skinned the kill and started slicing off choice cuts of meat. He

had noticed her catlike grace, and due to her healing abilities, he wondered if she knew how to use magic. The use of magic was a rare skill and magic was generally frowned upon these days.

He suddenly remembered stories he had heard from the men of the Fellowship. Some had claimed they had seen or heard of a woman called the Woodwitch. It was said she appeared as a beautiful woman who used magic to put a spell on her victims, usually men, and then sucked the blood out of them. However, she had not tried to suck his blood and he did not feel like he was under a spell.

Merric just asked bluntly, "Are you the Woodwitch?" Delina looked up from her task and gazed at him with those unusual, but beautiful, eyes.

A small smile crossed her lips. "Does that frighten you?" she asked, still cutting meat from the buck.

"No", replied Merric, though it did, a little. "I have heard stories, but stories are usually exaggerations of the truth."

He is not a fool, Delina thought. He had a head on his shoulders. He was different from those she had encountered in the past. She was starting to like him. They had conversed over the past days, but mostly about his fighting skills and her daily life living alone in the woods.

"There are those who have called me that," she said, "But you are right. They exaggerate."

Merric felt his bandaged arm. "Your healing skills go beyond what I have seen before. What is that salve you have been using on my wound?"

"Just a simple healing salve I make from the flowers growing near Lake Wisp, south of here," she said with a shrug. "I discovered their healing properties years ago, and learned how to cook them into a salve using tree sap from the oaks in the forest."

"You are very resourceful for someone so young," he noted with admiration. She glanced up at him and chuckled.

"And just how *young* do you think I am?" she asked with amusement. She was not much older than he, but she had lived alone in the woods for many years, since she was a child. To Delina, Merric appeared too young to be the warrior that he appeared to be. She thought of herself as his elder, but she was only twenty years of age herself.

He shrugged and smiled, "Well, if you were an elf I could say fifty and not be wrong. But you said you were not an elf." Delina laughed. It was the first time Merric had heard her laugh aloud. Delina liked how intelligent he was and how well he remembered what she had said days ago.

"I am sorry," she said, "I have been mistaken for an elf every time I met someone and I have gotten tired of it." She was now more relaxed around Merric than she had been at first. Her lifestyle had always been one of caution, but she had gotten to know him better the past few days. "I am human, as far as I know. My mother was human. I never knew my father, so he could have been an elf." Her smile faded a bit as old memories came forth. Her eyes had frightened people.

She remembered her childhood and how the villagers had shunned her and her mother because of her eyes, calling them witches and demons. She shook her head, not wanting to remember the past. She finished cutting up the buck and laid the skin aside. She would later stretch and cure the hide. She put the antlers and skeleton, and parts not used for food, into a bag for disposal, and gave a good chunk of freshly cut meat to Morlok. Taking the meat into the shadows, Morlok began to eat.

Merric had noticed her thoughtful frown and changed the subject. "How long have you lived out here?"

She shrugged. "At least fifteen years now. Ever since Morlok found me. She protected me from other beasts when I was a child. I don't know why. But we have become very close friends." She clarified the relationship she had with Morlok, "Morlok is not a pet. She is my companion. I do not control her, and she does not control me. We are friends. We look out for each other."

"Definitely a good friend to have, living in the forest as you do," said Merric with a smile. He knew there was something special about the cat, as well as her, but he had not yet realized what it was.

"What about you?" she asked. "What were you doing out there alone, being chased by the High Lord's men?"

"I was leading them away from my home. You have heard of the Followers of the Blood," he stated rhetorically, knowing she had.

She nodded. "You oppose the High Lord. But how can you possibly hope to defeat him?"

"I don't know," he said sadly. "But some say the dragons will return, and we will keep opposing him until they do."

"I have never seen a dragon," she said thoughtfully. "Have you?"

"No, I haven't. The last died before I was born. But there are some in our group who remember the dragons and how good things were before. Someday, I hope to see one. Someday." Merric also looked thoughtful as he kept thinking there was something he knew, but could not place it. Something about her eyes.

"Well, you are healed enough to leave whenever you are ready," she said, looking at him expectantly. "I only ask that you do not speak of me to others. I don't normally like company."

Merric wanted to know more about her. That salve would be a great help to his people, and she might know other things as well. She was putting something on the meat and packing it into a sack. He wondered what she would do with it now.

"If you don't mind my company, I would like to stay a little longer," he said. She looked at him with a slight smile. She had started to enjoy having someone to talk to that could talk back, someone not afraid of her because of her eyes. Maybe a little longer.

"As you wish." She slung the sack of meat over her shoulder almost effortlessly, though it had to weigh a good hundred pounds. Merric found amazement at her strength. She did not look that strong. "Come," she said, "I will show you how I preserve the meat." Merric followed her with interest.

Kargoth stood on his balcony with the two red robed scholars nervously behind him. They all watched the lunar eclipse that was taking place. Sianor was now only moments away from a full eclipse by Tibel. The greater moon was a white ring surrounding the dark face of Tibel, which was now a new moon.

Kargoth ignored the scholars, his gaze was fixed on the moons. He scrutinized the darkness of Tibel, anxiously watching for any hint of a sign that might indicate that there was a dragonblood that still lived in Almar. He would not admit to anyone, not even himself, that he feared a dragonblood might still live. The prophecy told of the defeat of the darkness by the dragonblood, but could the prophecy be true? Or was he just being superstitious? The words of the prophecy played through his thoughts.

*Ring of the heavens,
Shining so bright.*

*Darkness the lessor,
And greater moon's light.*

*When the ring glows bright
As the moons above turn,
Red shows the sign
Of the dragons return.*

*A dragon reborn
From an innocent child.
The power will grow
As emotions run wild.*

*The dragon shall rise
When all hope is lost.
The darkness will pay
The dragonblood's cost.*

*The dragonblood comes
And darkness will die.
The dragon wings spread
And the dragon will fly.*

“Here it comes,” Kargoth said, never removing his gaze from the moons. “Now we will see if there is any truth to this prophecy.”

The scholars trembled, fearing the High Lord's wrath, as Tibel was firmly centered in front of Sianor, the light of the night lessened momentarily as Tibel covered much of Sianor's light. Then Sianor began to burn brightly and became a brilliant, glowing ring in the night sky. For a moment, the scholars thought perhaps it was a false prophecy, and they relaxed a little, but there was something happening in the dark center of that white ring.

A red glow began to fill the darkness of Tibel. It appeared as if someone was pouring blood into a mold as the entire surface of Tibel glowed with a red, unearthly light. They now saw a white ring with a blood red center. The prophecy was true. A dragonblood lives in Almar.

The two scholars started backing away, back into the throne room, as they realized what this meant. They could almost hear Kargoth's rage brewing inside him. He turned suddenly on them and his eyes burned into their very souls from the hatred within him.

“It's true! That beast, Jeraldin, had a child!” His rage was directed at the scholars. “You should have known this sooner! You impotent cretins!” He raised both hands into the air and the scholars turned to run, but it was too late.

Dark fire streamed from both of Kargoth's hands in jets of black, searing flame that engulfed both of the robed figures trying to flee. There were horrifying screams of agony as they were totally consumed by the deadly power Kargoth had loosed upon them. Within seconds, only smoldering piles of ash remained on the floor where they had stood. Kargoth dropped his hands in frustration and stormed toward the throne room door.

“Guards! Guards! Get me my generals! Now!” Whoever this dragonblood was, he would make sure they never lived long enough to be a threat to his power. He will scour the entire world if he has to. He

will not let another threaten his rule. He is High Lord Kargoth! He is supreme!

Delina had shown Merric how to preserve meat using a powder that she had learned to make from capor roots and the flower she used for the healing salve. She would crush both plants into a pulp in a bowl, then let it dry in the sun for a day. The results were a fine, yellowish powder that she would dip the meat into, covering it entirely. Then she would hang the meat in a cool, dark place in the cavern. This process would keep the meat fresh for over a week, she had said. Merric thought how useful this technique could be to his people, and how useful the healing salve would be as well.

Now evening, the sun had set and Merric was at the entrance to Delina's cave watching the lunar eclipse. He had never seen such an eclipse and marveled at the bright, white ring of Sianor in the clear night sky. Just as the eclipse was full, Merric saw the blood red glow forming in the center of the bright, white ring. Delina had just come out of her cave and stood beside him, Morlok at her side.

“That is odd,” she said looking at the eclipsed moons. “What is that?”

“I don't know. I have never seen that before.” Merric was fascinated by this phenomenon and did not notice the strange, pained expression appearing on Delina's face.

Delina suddenly screamed, putting her right hand over her chest, just above her breast. “It burns!”

“Delina? What's wrong!” Merric reached for her, but Morlok was suddenly between them, growling at Merric, protecting Delina as she sensed her friend's pain and knew that something was wrong.

Merric was truly concerned, but he could not get past the great cat to help her. He felt helpless.

“Morlok,” Delina gasped between pained cries, “Not him.”

Morlok seemed to fully understand and relaxed her snarling teeth, allowing Merric to grab Delina and hold her. As he cradled Delina in his arms, she seemed to be relaxing a bit. He looked up and saw the blood red center of the white ring starting to fade. The eclipse was ending.

“Are you alright?” Merric asked, looking back to Delina worriedly. She took a few deep breaths and nodded. Standing, she stepped aside and faced Merric.

“Something burned me, like a hot iron,” she said, moving the fur shoulder piece aside. A painful red mark was burned into her flesh. The skin was burned and blistered in a pattern, in the shape of a dragon.

“What is happening?” she asked. There was a slight look of fear in her eyes.

Merric looked at her intently, especially her eyes. His memory was jogged now, and he remembered what he had heard from the stories as a child. Delina's eyes were those of a dragon. He remembered the stories now, of dragons in human form, that those of dragonblood could change into dragons. If Delina was a dragonblood, how could she not know? Then he remembered what she said earlier, that her mother was human and that she did not know who her father was.

He looked at Delina, unsure how she might react, but he felt it was necessary to reveal what he knew.

“Your father,” said Merric with certainty, “He was a dragon. You are a dragonblood.”

Delina's first reaction was fear, then anger, then realization as she felt deep inside that what he was saying was true. She did not know how she knew, but she knew.