

Ullr's Fangs

Prologue

A dark shadow glides across the moon, briefly interrupting her continuous gaze on the drowsing city below. Masked faces turn up to the slit-like window high overhead, pausing to watch the unaware owl glide ever onward. Reassured of their safety in the doorless tower, they cautiously breathe a sigh of relief.

Turning back to their circle, obsidian masks eternally grimace from under heavy-hooded cloaks like dismal effigies of their creators centuries ago. Hearts pound quickly, though muffled by the thick weave of their encasing garments. Time is running out. Soon they will be forced to disperse back into the shadows of the kingdom.

Almost inaudibly the youngest of them, still past his prime, alters the course of the conversation with three words.

“What of her?”

Silence coils around them like a snake squeezing the life's essence out of its prey. Slowly, several of the Ancients turn to one another and nod before the eldest speaks. “Her destiny has been sealed since the time before her inception. She is on the correct course and should not be interfered with. Her fame is only pushing her forward on her predestined path, which will soon lead her to the others. When that happens, the day we have been waiting for since our initial formation will have finally arrived.”

The fear in the mind of the youngest does not abate at these words. He asks anew. “And

what of her prince? There are rumors...”

He is quieted by the appearance of the elder’s knobby age-tarnished hand. The dusty voice speaks again, “She is destined for another. That we all know. Her fate is etched in the stars. Fear not her partner, their paths will diverge soon enough.”

“And if they don’t?”

Something moist glints behind the two slits of the Ancient’s mask.

“Then we intervene.”

Chapter 1

The Parting

Only a steady scratching sound was heard as quill pen scrawled over paper. The sheer impulse to write had awakened Lluava in the predawn darkness. After several minutes of contemplative scribbling, the teen paused to appraise her work.

Satisfied, she bent over and blew on the still-moist lettering.

Carefully folding symmetrical creases one upon another, Lluava reached for her partner’s seal and wax on the far edge of the small writing desk. The flickering candle gave off enough heat to melt the golden rod. As the liquefied droplets fell onto the parchment, Lluava quickly pressed the royal insignia into the puddle of wax. Even though its form was minuscule, she could discern a crowned raven perched above a prostrate lion. Gliding her finger over the cooling

image, she could not help but think, Long live the king.

The grumbling of wooden floorboards in the neighboring room alerted Lluava that others had awakened. The day had begun, and the town, on the mend from the summer's war, was beginning to stir. Soon the steady thud of hammers and the snarl of saws would accompany multiple melodies of builders' songs.

Pocketing the letter, Lluava donned her simple uniform, a white short-sleeved shirt and black pants. Snatching up Issaura's Claws, her well-used weapons of war, she headed downstairs and exited the grand, three-story house. When the rebuilding had begun, the mayor and his wife offered to lodge some of the soldiers, including Lluava. Although suspicious that her own invitation into the prestigious household had something to do with her military partner's bloodline, she still appreciated the gesture.

Once outside, she slid the golden Claws over her hands. The three sickle-shaped, protruding daggers on each claw sliced through the chill of the morning air. To have weapons on her hands was now second nature to Lluava, though she had to keep reminding herself that the danger had passed. The presence of Issaura's Claws was comforting.

Knowing that her military partner would soon follow, Lluava headed down the main street of the town. Beams of fresh-cut wood served as pale scars on damaged shops. More than half the buildings were unsalvageable and would have to be totally reconstructed. At least all the charred timber had been removed and the ashes swept away. Although the memory of the newly expanded graveyard dwelt in the minds of its people, the town of Ymen seemed to stir with new hopes and new dreams.

A sharp whistle made Lluava turn. Yamir, standing near the skeleton of a home-to-be, waved to Lluava to join him. Once an arm's length from her, he handed Lluava the end of a rope

and gave her a broken smile.

A voice shouted from above, “On the count of three, pull!”

Lluava recognized Talos’s silhouette in the new morning’s light as he perched precariously upon one of the roof beams.

“All right,” she responded, and waited for her command.

Lluava studied her earthbound friend. Dark circles hugged Yamir’s oval eyes, and crusted patches of mud almost blended into his ruddy skin. He was unusually thin, and his hair was long and unkempt. Its new length made it impossible for him to maintain his preferred spikes without the use of unreasonable amounts of wax. Yamir had intended to trim it, but rebuilding a town had left little time for personal care.

“One!”

Lluava gripped the rope tightly. Her callused hands had become accustomed to the physical labor required in her current occupation.

“Two!”

Yamir stood in front of Lluava. The two were nearly the same height, and Lluava observed his back tense in preparation for their task. Behind her, someone picked up the end of the rope.

“Three!”

At once, the row of people pulled the rope with all their strength. At the far end of the structure, the frame of the fourth and last wall lurched upward. Its weight was considerable, even with the aid of the pulley system. Feet slipped over the slick ground that had been repeatedly aggravated by early autumn rains and the tread of countless workers. Halfway up, the wall swayed as the rope began to slip from their hands.

“Pull!” Talos shouted as he, too, struggled to tug at the mud-encased rope.

For a moment, Lluava thought they would lose their grip. Then, as if finally consenting to their wishes, the wall began its upward trek. As soon as it was upright, several workers with hammers at hand attacked the wall, pinioning it to the frame in a prison of nails.

Turning around to smile at the man behind her, Lluava formally greeted him. “Good morning, Your Majesty. I hope you had a pleasant sleep.”

Her partner rolled his eyes at her playful sarcasm. Varren must have observed that Lluava’s platinum-blond hair had been tied back messily. Several strands floated freely in front of her emerald eyes. The contrast was always striking. “Your hair looks nice when it’s pulled away from your face. It complements your cheekbones.”

Lluava’s laughter caught him off guard. She replied, “I never knew you were one to care about such things.”

“I am an admirer of beauty.”

Lluava could not help but blush at her partner’s flattery. This unaccustomed feeling was still somehow unsettling. She wasn’t sure she would ever get used to it. Yamir, oblivious to the situation, chimed in, “That seemed to go well.”

With the mood broken, Lluava inquired, “How else can we help?”

Before Yamir could answer, their attention turned to Talos, who had climbed off his ledge and joined in the conversation. “Varren, we could use your help with this house. The more hands we have, the quicker the results. As for you, Lluava, Rosalyn requested your help with her rounds this morning. She is already waiting.”

“I’ll see you later, then.” Lluava sneaked a peek at her partner. He, like Talos, always seemed to find time to keep up his appearance. Varren’s thick, dark locks, which had

disappeared temporarily as he pulled his shirt off in preparation for the day's work, now reappeared as loose curls bouncing back into place. Talos, too, had pulled his shirt over his golden head. Both men were prime examples of ideal masculine beauty, and the local women blatantly acknowledged this fact. Lluava, like many of the female Ymenites, loved to watch these aristocrats indulge in manual labor, although Lluava never made an obvious show of gawking. A smile twitched at her lips as she continued toward the sick ward.

After the slaughter, Ymen had designated a quadrant of the devastated town to serve as a medical ward for any townspeople or soldiers who required aid. Rosalyn used her skills where they were most needed. Having had some nursing training, Lluava helped when she could, always under Rosalyn's authority.

The putrid smell of infected flesh and crusting blood had dissipated over the past weeks as the number of tents for the wounded shrank. Now only a half-dozen tents still held their unwilling captives. Since the weather was rather pleasant, many of the injured lay on rows of stretchers that had been moved outside. Rosalyn believed the fresh breeze somehow encouraged quicker healing. Although the local doctor had originally balked at this treatment, even he had had to acknowledge the unusually high recovery rate.

Rosalyn looked like a spirit of grace, with porcelain skin enshrouded in a pristine white nursing uniform. Her raven-black hair, in stark contrast, heightened the image of an unearthly presence. She knew everyone under her care by name and always took a moment to talk to him or her individually. They all adored her. Excusing herself from conversation with a soldier recovering from a leg amputation, Rosalyn smiled at Lluava and asked her to tote fresh water from the town's well to the large cauldrons. The few spare strips of cloth needed to be boiled in order to clean them before bandaging wounds.

For the rest of the morning, Lluava busied herself with her new task, occasionally taking the longer route to the well to check on the men's progress. Each time she passed by, she and Varren would share a smile. By noon, she was helping to refresh bandages after Rosalyn cleaned wounds.

"Talos received a post from Byron yesterday." Rosalyn's melodious voice rang clearly, moving away from their light gossip. "He says he is doing well, although he is still looking for a new position."

"I wonder how hard it really is for him, since he's only known an active soldier's life. How's his leg doing?" inquired Lluava. It had been several weeks since any of them had seen Byron. Breaking many a girl's heart, he had left in the hope of finding work at Fort Terk.

"He will never be able to do what he did before; however, he told me that he has made peace with his injury and his discharge from military service," noted Rosalyn as she inspected a particularly nasty burn on a little girl's hand.

"That's good. Will Talos follow his partner? Terk is way up north." Lluava was curious whether the rumors about Talos finding a position in the south were true. If so, what had Talos decided?

Rosalyn gently rubbed salve on the child's hand. "I know he wants to stay near his partner, but he must wait for word about the possible offer from Durog. He believes that a drill sergeant's life will be much safer for us once we are married." Rosalyn waited while Lluava wrapped the burn with ragged strips of cloth, then hesitantly began, "That brings me to something I want to talk to you about."

Lluava raised an eyebrow.

"Tomorrow, a large number of the injured will be released. As my services are no longer

required, Talos is going to escort me home. We will visit Selphy on the way to Amargo. Did you know she is better now?" Without waiting for Lluava to respond, Rosalyn continued, "Anyway, as soon as I return, Talos's father and mine will begin the wedding plans."

"That's wonderful!" exclaimed Lluava. She knew that Rosalyn had waited a long time for this. Although Talos and Rosalyn's betrothal had occurred in infancy, they were fortunate to live in neighboring estates and had fallen in love with each other years ago. When the draft was instated, Rosalyn volunteered to represent her family so she could be close to Talos. Lluava found their situation highly romantic, though a bit crazy. They were not even twenty. "When will the ceremony take place?"

"If all goes well, in the next few months. Selphy is going to be my maid of honor, but I would be truly blessed if you would be one of my bridesmaids. I cannot imagine myself getting married without you there."

A full-blown smile streaked across Lluava's face. She reached out and gave her dear friend an enormous hug, careful not to squeeze her too hard. Rosalyn always looked so delicate. "Of course I will! I'm honored that you asked me."

Upon release, Rosalyn gave a sigh of relief. She had known not to be worried, yet she could not help herself. "Last night, Talos invited Yamir to stand with him; he will ask Varren today."

"Isn't Yamir leaving tomorrow as well?" Lluava inquired as she realized that all of her friends were about to disperse across the kingdom.

"Yes. He is heading off to Cartel to care for Chat's parents. Adopted or not, Chat was their son, and, well..." Rosalyn stopped. They both knew that this had something to do with Chat's last request. Although Chat had been like a little brother to all of them, losing him had

been hardest on Yamir. He was never the same afterward; a darkness seemed to have enveloped him. It was a good day if they could tease out a half-hearted smile. Lluava hoped Yamir would find some peace once he arrived in Chat's homeland.

"What will you do when you leave Ymen?" Rosalyn politely inquired. Neither wanted to dwell on the past.

"Well," Lluava began after a pause, "I guess I'll return home for a bit. I really miss my family." Lluava's thoughts drifted to her mother and her siblings before returning to the present and to helping Rosalyn turn an unusually frail old man onto his side. While Rosalyn tended to his wounds, Lluava admitted, "I have been craving my mother's cooking for a long time."

"Will you stay in Rivendale, then?"

"I guess. At least until Varren needs me at court."

"Oh, yes. You are a future Head Councilman. You will love the capital and the court. Its splendor is remarkable. I recommend that you visit the palace gardens. They are always in bloom."

"Good to know." Yet the words carried little importance, since Lluava's thoughts were on her own homestead. Her sister's school year must have begun. How well was her baby brother talking? It would be very different without Gramps.

Rosalyn left Lluava to her thoughts while they finished the rounds. After a late lunch, it was time to start all over again. By nightfall, Lluava was gladdened by the prospective discharge, tomorrow morning, of so many of those under their care. Several patients were released that evening, and they thanked their lovely caretakers profusely.

In the failing light, Lluava sat her weary body down on one of the cut logs that served as benches around the ever-blazing cooking fires. She ached from an exhaustion that was more than

physical. In her hand, she held a steaming bowl of clumping porridge, or maybe repurposed hash. Although its taste was barely better than its looks, this mysterious gruel was the only thing the town could provide to feed the army for their extended stay. Lluava had grown accustomed to its bland taste and grainy texture. It might not be ideal, but it kept everyone's strength up when they needed it.

“May I sit next to you?” Varren's formal upbringing emerged even when there was no need.

Nodding, Lluava shoveled down the sludge. Eating quickly was her trick to keep the so-called food from sticking to the back of her throat. In contrast, Varren sat down, whispered a prayer of thanks, and began to eat. They remained silent until Varren had finished.

Wiping his mouth, he said, “I would like to head back to the capital tomorrow. Since you are my military partner—no, that is not the reason.” Varren seemed flustered. He was not one to fumble with his choice of words. Eloquence had always come naturally to him, so why could he not state a clear thought now?

“Yes?” inquired Lluava, hoping to coax him to continue.

Varren stood up in his most formal manner and asked, “Lluava, would you come with me to the royal palace? I want to introduce you to Grandfather and the High Council and, well...I would like you to be with me when I return to court.”

Lluava understood his fear of what he was about to do, for altering an age-old law was all but unheard of. Nevertheless, excitement fluttered inside her like a newly fledged bird. Varren wanted her near him. This was his way of admitting how much he needed her at his side. This day had truly brought wonderful news.

She was about to say yes when a new thought crossed her mind. “How long do you

expect to be at court?”

“I do not know. Why do you ask?”

Lluava fingered the carefully folded letter in her pants pocket. “Well, I had hoped to visit home. I haven’t seen my family since the draft.”

Thoughtfully, Varren said, “I will not force you to come. You can leave at any time. However, I would like you to be with me when—”

Lluava interrupted. “Don’t worry. I’ll be standing by your side from now until eternity.” She grinned at her pathetic attempt at poeticism.

“That is good. That is great!” Varren could not hide his relief. “Well, I will say good night to you now. Tomorrow will be a new and exciting day.”

With that, Varren gently took Lluava’s hand and kissed it, which sent a tingling sensation up her arm. As he left, Lluava thought, Oh, what am I getting myself into?

Next morning, Lluava ran to the shanty that served as Ymen’s dispatch headquarters. Since a large portion of the Southern army was stationed here, the king’s messengers came to the town every two weeks. Lluava had to hurry so as not to miss the chance to send off her own letter. She had forgotten to do this errand the day before, and with her departure imminent this was the only chance she would have before she left.

Attempting to catch her breath, Lluava retrieved the letter from her pocket. It was surprisingly unwrinkled. Perhaps the gods were watching over her. She handed the parchment to the small man loading full satchels onto his horse. Annoyed at the last-minute arrival, he began to lecture Lluava on the importance of punctuality. She in turn quietly reprimanded herself for her forgetfulness. Satisfied with his thorough scolding, the letter carrier asked Lluava in a disinterested manner, “Are you human or Theriomorph?”

This simplest of questions caught Lluava off guard. An inner heat coursed through her body as she growled out the formal reply.

“I am Lluava Kargen, daughter of Haliden Kargen, and I am Theriomorph.”