

## CHAPTER 1

By the golden glow of a lantern, Slade studied one of the few remaining pages from his mother's ancient book of fairy tales. He carefully turned the delicate page over to see the other side.

The once colorful pictures had faded.

In spots, the pictures were so crisscrossed with spider webs of lines that they were hard to make out. But their life-like renditions still intrigued him. They seemed so real, it was hard to imagine they had never existed.

His finger thumbed a beautiful, blonde woman wearing a white gown, accepting a trophy. His eyes didn't need to read beneath the picture. The words had long been memorized, as had every other word in the tattered book: *Cameron Diaz accepts her third Grammy Award for her role in Starstruck. She also received the nomination*

*for Best Actress in Renegade and Best supporting Actress in The Beginning.*

He continued scanning the pictures slowly, though he had seen them so many times he knew the exact details of each one. It was peaceful; quiet surrounded him in the room, but outside the shuttered windows the hooting of an owl sounded in the night.

Suddenly a long shriek ending in a groan sounded from far away, muffled through the curtain-covered wooden shutters. He jumped to his feet, head bent, listening. His chiseled profile showed a furrowed brow, piercing green eyes focused in concentration at the sound. It came again, a keening wail, and then silence. His eyes screwed closed with intensity. It *was* his mother.

Slade laid the sheet of paper on the bed and dimmed the lantern. He tossed aside the curtains and unlatched a shutter, carefully easing it open a crack. The moon shone just above the treetops, and the hackles which he had kept at bay rose again.

He had had a feeling there was a bad reason why she was late, but he had told himself not to worry. Now he regretted not

tracking her down when he first realized she hadn't arrived at nightfall as promised.

It seemed impossible that he should be hearing a cry of pain from her. What could possibly have caused it? Humans like himself were dwarfed beside her eight foot frame, and her long-honed skills at avoiding them made it unlikely that she had stepped into one of their traps. But there wasn't time to sit and peruse what threat might have caused her injury. She needed him. Divinity willing, he would arrive in time to help her.

Slade latched the window again and pushed the curtains together. If he was going to go up against a group of humans he had best be prepared.

A wardrobe on the rounded wall dwarfed the furniture in the room. He opened it and began slinging his weapons on. Bow, arrows, knife belt, small bag holding essentials: a treasured square piece of clear plastic, a flint, and several mouthfuls of dried meat. He covered his black hair with a dark hood and pulled on a sturdy pair of leather boots. It had taken hours to design and make them, but the

bear's tough hide proved worthy of the tasks he required.

Slade unlatched the square door in the floor and took the spiraled over-size stairs downward two at a time, finally dropping onto a flat landing. The torches hung on the walls had not been used in weeks; he hoped they were still viable. He brought the tip of one to the top of the lantern and was relieved to see the torch flame up with a sizzling hiss, casting rays of light deep into the dark tunnel which lay before him. With a breath, the lantern was blown out and he began to run, shaking away the horrifying pictures his imagination offered for what he might find. He had never heard such fear in her voice.

The tunnel's rounded walls were shining with cold damp, and he had to dodge the occasional stalactite, but the way was well-known to him. After running at top speed for two minutes he dropped the torch and went forward out of the range of the light for another fifty yards, until it curved where the tunnel ran upwards towards a crevice. He stopped at the corner, listening, but no sound other than his own ragged breath came to his

ears. The light of the moon showed the crevice as a gray craggy line in the rock. He knew the opening was invisible from the outside, obscured by brush and by a jagged line of cliffs.

Sniffing silently he sat on his haunches inside the cave, just on the other side of the crevice. With his hands cupped to his mouth, he called out a distinctive whistle, and moments later, the Night Watcher, a large black red-headed bird flapped onto a branch outside the cave, and then called the all-clear. Relieved, he stood and eased his way through the crevice, moving the bushes aside. The bird fluttered down to rest on his shoulder and with a smile he pulled a small piece of meat out of the bag and held it out.

She twittered, cocked her head and snatched at the meat, gulping it down, and then cocked her head again as if to ask for more.

“No, no more, now Nochnoy Dozor. I must save it,” he said under his breath to the bird. Slade began to pick his way down the cliff, stepping between boulders, silent, swift and sure. The bird flapped up and down to

maintain her balance, but remained on his shoulder, her large black eyes taking in every movement around them. At the bottom of the cliff the trees began to crowd each other, dipping down into hollows where springs formed small pools, and then rising up again with the terrain as it sloped up and down in uneven glades and hills.

The Night Watcher left him and flew ahead, prepared to call out a warning. His booted feet lightly touched the ground, making almost no noise in the underbrush as he ran, dodging trees and branches, jumping over fallen tree trunks, bracken, and limbs.

Finally he reached a massive oak and collapsed against its broad gnarled side. He slid down to the ground, trusting the bird to announce anyone who should approach. His heart was racing, but more with fear and anxiety than the exertion of the run. After a moment of catching his breath, he rose and skirted the area, looking for signs of his mother. His eyes combed the area in the moonlit dark. The slight indentation from a large shoe heel in the soft bare ground showed at the base of the tree. He nodded to

himself, sure she had gone in the direction he thought she had.

The hart she had been determined to snare made its home somewhere in the hollows on the other side of the west ridge, towards the edge of the forest, where the trees stopped and the human world began.

Slade readjusted his pack, and began his fleet-footed run again. The moon was high in the sky. As the minutes passed it seemed to recede and grow smaller. His feet were sped by worry and fear, but he set those distractions aside, focusing only on the task at hand: his measured breathing, making the least noise possible, watching for traps or anything out of the ordinary. He would be of no help to her should he fall into one.

For years Slade had felt secure in the forest, secure in the knowledge that the humans thought the Ogress a legend of the Iron Wood. Now, having heard her pain-wracked appeals for aid, his gut was queasy with the anger and worry that filled him. He picked up his speed and did not slow until he had reached the ridge.

Off to his right the Night Watcher called to him, a different sound. She had found something. She led him, calling, flying ahead and waiting for him to catch up. He ran on, following the bird down into the hollows.

He heard them before he saw them. The sound of a hiss, and then the thick chug-click that indicated a bullet leaving the chamber of a steam gun, reached his ears. It was a sound he had heard before, when there had been an impromptu execution in Dyme, the closest village. The sound of the steam gun going off seared its way into his brain. His mother gave a creaking moan of pain and he slid between the trees to see the combatants, restraining himself from rushing wildly into the clearing. What he saw made him burn with a cold fury.

The moon, aided by a dim lantern, illuminated five men dressed in black with gold trim. Another four lay still on the ground in various forms of disarray, victims to his mother's defense. She had toppled on her side like a felled tree, her patchwork animal skin tunic giving her the appearance



of a mottled boulder. She weakly lifted an arm in a vain attempt to defend herself.

Using the shadows to help obscure him, Slade whipped an arrow off his shoulder and let it fly. It thudded into the shoulder of the man closest to him and he collapsed to the ground with a cry. His companions jerked around at the sound and, after an argued exchange, moved closer together, their swords to the ready.

Slade changed positions, staying in the shadows and circling around the camp. They didn't know where he was. Finally one of them had the sense to kick over the lantern in order to be able to see their opponent better, but by then it was too late. Slade let another arrow fly. Before it struck, he was nocking another.

The remaining three men darted for cover, the closest bulk being his mother. Slade bit back an expletive. He couldn't shoot at them now. Not without risking his mother.

The hissing of a steam gun announced their return fire, but the shots were sent

blindly in the direction whence the arrow came and he was long gone from there.

His feet were silent in the brush. He listened as the men argued with each other, uncertain and apprehensive. And who was B'yond? Why would he want his mother dead?

A new sound registered in the distance. The undulating throb of an approaching dragon. Within moments a beam of yellow light knifed through the trees and flooded the clearing. Slade sank to the ground. His clothing would camouflage him, but he didn't care to present them with any silhouettes. He continued to creep through the underbrush and then found an opening.

He sent an arrow into one of the men, but the added light meant they saw his movement.

The man jumped in alarm as the arrow punctured the side of the tank at his back before piercing him. The thick, poorly made, and highly pressurized aluminum split open and heated water sprayed out of the fissure. The man next to him began screaming and

threw himself away as the spout of near-boiling water caught him in the face.

Too late, he realized he was backing toward Slade. He brought the steam gun up to bear, but before it had reached its height, Slade's blade was sweeping down. It sliced through the flesh of his opponent's arm and rasped on bone as Slade withdrew his sword. The man screamed again and dropped the gun to clutch at his near-severed arm. The remaining opponent rushed at Slade, a knife in his hand.

The light dimmed. The dragon moved away toward the open field past the forest's edge. And then the man was upon him.

Slade brought the sword up as the militiaman struck down. The sound of their weapons coming together rang in the small clearing. The soldier launched a punch with his free hand and Slade's head snapped back, his eyes filling with stars. It was no more than a second, but by the time he had recovered the soldier was running. With his bow too far away, Slade had little recourse but to use the sword. He threw it end over end, hoping it would reach its target.

It thumped into a tree trunk as the man reached the tree line and wove in and out of the brush. Slade gritted his teeth and sprinted forward. He tugged his sword free and then raced into the trees in hot pursuit.

The black clothes of the soldier hid him well, but the crashing of his feet through the bracken, fallen limbs, and twigs gave him away. Slade followed swiftly. The man earned grudging respect for the fact that Slade did not seem to be gaining.

Slade reached the edge of the field without catching up to his opponent. The dragon hovered fifty feet away, its bright yellow lamp casting a cone of light on the tall grasses. Before Slade, a cleft in the grass indicated the runner's path, but then, as the dragon began to sweep away into the night sky, Slade realized continuing the chase was futile. Dangling beneath the dragon, precariously hanging off the side at the bottom of a rope, his prey rose into the air. The man raised a fist in salute before starting to climb the rope hand over hand.

Slade shouted his frustration and swung his sword, mowing down a three foot section in front of him. He had been so close.

He shook his head and turned to find his mother. Why would they have targeted her? The hollow was just outside the area the humans used for hunting. They rarely ventured so far. But he couldn't imagine the simple villagers having the clout to bring in a dragon anyway. Not to mention those men had the look of belonging to a lord. B'yond?

As his feet flew over ground near-pillowed with decaying leaves, anxiety raced up his spine. His mother would need a healer if she was going to survive. But the closest one was in Dyme and he wouldn't be able to get her there without help. Maybe he could ask the missionary, Pere Andress?

By the time he had made it back to the clearing, the Night Watcher was calling the all clear. The remaining soldier whose arm he had cut was long gone. Bitterly, Slade hoped the man perished in the forest. He refused to feel remorse for the thought, not when his mother lay dying before him.

Slade went around to face her. He lifted her massive head onto his lap, biting his cheek against the intensity of the emotion throbbing in his breast. He saw immediately that she was beyond a healer's aid. Even a skilled witch could not help her recover from losing so much blood. It pooled beneath her, seeping between the stitching of his leather pants to soak his knees.

“Mother?”

B'yond's green eyes attempted to pierce the looming fog, but the cover of night and the thick trees protected the men well, even with a full moon. He leaned over the side. Below him, the waves of wheat swelled and dipped as the breeze blew over their silvered tops. The dense rolling cloud of fog would cover the area within moments, but until then his gaze searched for the group of men, almost expecting them to come running out of the trees with a behemoth of a woman bellowing on their heels.

Assignments from Petel didn't usually require his personal involvement, but since Petel, in his tiresome paranoid way, had insisted on it, he would comply... for now.

Movement at the edge of the Iron Wood caught his eye and he adjusted his goggles for a better look. A man clothed in black was running toward the dragon. That in itself, not counting the other members of the team failing to appear, spoke of the mission not going according to plan. But no Ogress followed on his heels. B'yond spun his hand in circles, signaling to the airship captain to lower the craft in the middle of a field near the men.

The dragon lowered close enough to the ground to drop a rope ladder off the side of its iron hull. A figure stumbled to a stop at the edge of the tree line.

"Go! Go!" The man clinging to the rope ladder shouted up at him. The dragon lifted into the sky and moments later a man built like a bulldog, thick muscles laid slab-like across his shoulders and arms, approached him.

"Dmitri. Where are the rest of the men?"

“Dead. Or dying.”

“Who was he?”

“I don’t know.”

B’yond’s hands clenched on the handrail. Leave it to Petel to withhold vital information. Like the fact that the Ogress had a companion.

“But the mission was successful? Did she put up a fight?” B’yond asked, raising his goggles.

“Yes. Took all of us to get her down, but I was able to give her the coup de grace.” Dmitri shook his head back and forth. “I lost my uncle’s knife.”

“Did you recover it?”

“Didn’t realize it was gone until a second ago.”

B’yond looked at him with a cold stare. Around them the wind whistled against the lines and whipped their hair out of place.

“That was stupid.”

“Who’s to say anything? Plus the fact, it’s not even my name on it.”

B’yond back-handed Dmitri’s with his mechanical arm. The crunching sound of



Dmitri's nose giving way was accompanied by a sudden gush of blood.

"No, it's not your name on it, you fool," B'yond spat. "But your uncle is a retired general. How would it look to the populace if her death was tied to the militia?"

"...Good riddance? She's Annearol. No one misses one of the Unearthly," Dmitri said, his voice muffled behind his hand. B'yond shook his head.

"Maybe. Go clean yourself up." B'yond turned away and readjusted the goggles on his face. The loss of Dmitri's knife threw an unfortunate blot on his otherwise perfect operation, but what Petel didn't know wouldn't hurt him. What concerned him more was the loss of his men to an unknown. He could put a bounty on the man's head, if he could discover a name. Or better yet, if he could be brought in, he might prove a valuable asset.

Slade's mother coughed and drew in a gurgling breath.

“Slade.”

“Yes, I’m here,” he reassured her, pushing back the thick ropes of red curling hair from her face. It was a face rough with age and hard living – hard for having so much exposure to elements, for being scorned by the human world and forced to live in the wilds, for having to carve out an existence in the dark depths of the Iron Wood.

Her oversized features would be considered fearsome by human standards, but to him they were as familiar and loved as his own.

“Chest,” she wheezed.

“I know. I know. The chest. I will open it,” Slade bit his lip again and blinked back tears. Had she always know it would end like this? “You’ve prepared for this for years. I know what to do.”

Her heavy brows drew together as if she were struggling against something.

“N-no. *My* chest.”

Slade was confused. He tentatively laid a hand on her heart. She nodded her head, just barely.

“Take it,” she gasped.

Her heart? Slade shook his head, not knowing what to think. She must be losing her reason as death approached. If only Pere Address were here to help her on her way.

“I can’t. What am I going to do with your heart, mother?”

He fisted her tunic in his fingers, willing that this not be happening.

A tear started at the corner of her eye as she shook her head to one side in seeming frustration. Or perhaps regret?

She opened her mouth and breathed out three syllables before her voice broke and she expelled her last.

Slade bowed his head. He didn’t accept it. She wasn’t gone. He put his cheek close to her mouth, feeling for the slightest movement of air even though he knew it to be futile.

“No,” he half-whispered. She was a good person. A loving mother. She didn’t deserve to die like this.

The blood that covered her front and pooled out beneath her was inky black in the near darkness, and where the light caught it,

glistened blue. His shoulders began to shake as he attempted to contain himself. He fisted his hands in her hair and the shoulder of her rough woolen handspun sweater as he tugged what he could of her head and shoulders onto his lap.

Moments flashed through his mind like winged birds that were here and gone in an instant. Memories of her at the fire cooking, mending his garments, taking him on her knee with a gentle hand and singing ancient lullabies, teaching him to read, to sew, to hunt, to trap, to track, to defend himself, to use the bow, the knife, the sword, to listen, to watch, to call the animals, and to climb the stone wall of their round tower.

It was heartbreaking and strange that he would never see her hair light up like gold as she sat before the fire telling him tales and legends of the Ancient Times. How her eyes would gleam as she spoke, almost as if she remembered those times, her details bringing the stories to life. Too many times to count, when he was a child, he had lain on his thin mattress and watched as she moved the little handmade wheeled toy across the top of the

blanket. She would tell him the story of the “car,” the legend of the cart that could move without a horse or anything pulling it.

Now she was gone. There would be no more moments of catching her looking at him, just as if he were king of the world. And how had he repaid her? Too many times with uncaring and hard words.

He regretted every moment of defiance he had ever subjected her to, every hurtful word that had passed his lips, every time as a child, few though they were, when his anger had let vent in a fury of insults, telling her she was ugly and unnatural.

She had always shrunk away from him in those moments, her eyes flooding with tears, her lumpy face with its bulbous nose and immense jaw, registering a hurt that he knew no one else could inflict on her but him. But when he came back to her, shamefaced and fearing she might reject him, she had ever forgiven him without a word and welcomed with open arms.

She had been an unparalleled mother to him, of that he was sure, though his experience of other mothers was little for his

limited contact with the human world. Nothing had daunted her dedication to protect, nurture, and love him. And now she was gone. Slade clenched his fists, anger welling up in him at whoever had perpetrated this crime.

Eventually, his breath returned to normal. He smoothed her lids down and combed the twigs and leaves from her hair as best he could. With the tail of his linen shirt he wiped at the dirt smudges left on her face.

His mind traveled to her last – interrupted – phrase. *Me-dal-ya*. He repeated the sound again to himself several more times before the answer came to him. His brow furrowed. A medallion? On her chest?

Slade carefully felt around her neck. The feel of metal met his fingers. A chain. He pulled it out revealing a gold length. The medallion snagged on her clothing before tumbling out in his palm.

It was smeared with blood, but its surface was visible enough. It bore a barred U, within which was surmounted a lion's head, mouth agape, snarling. He flipped it over. There was only one word: SLADE. He

thumbed the raised letters. No village blacksmith had made such a medallion. Perhaps a jeweler. But the only jewelers capable of such fine craftsmanship would be at the capital, Slaisvow. What secret was this?

He picked up his head in thought and that's when he saw it: a knife, moonlight glittering on its blood covered edge. Slade carefully laid his mother on the ground and crossed to where it lay, some six feet away.

It was not a knife he had seen before. It had a ridged round handle, thick blade, and sharp curved tip. He picked it up, but then dropped it, his hand coming away slick with blood. His eyes smarted again, but blinking the tears away, he picked it up and wiped it off with a corner of his tunic. By the faint light of the moon filtering in through the leaves, he could see that the butt was round, with the same curious mark, a barred U, but this time in the center of a crossed circle.

He held the blade up to the light. It was not her knife, as was obvious by its size and weight. Close to the base of the blade, so small he had initially thought it a shadow of

blood, a name had been etched into the metal: Vladimir.

The realization that it was a human knife brought out a wrath and hatred for them he did not know he could feel. He fisted the knife till his knuckles turned white. His breath came in short swift bursts as he attempted to quell the rage.

Around him the silence continued. The Iron Wood was as settled as it ever had been. Only here was the normal continuation of life disturbed.

Slade crouched down again and picked up the chained piece from across his mother's body where it had fallen. He held the knife in the other hand and compared the two markings. It was as if the crossed circle was striking the barred U out of existence.

Did this apply to the lion too? What did they mean, and what did they have to do with his mother? He had no answers.

With a sigh, he put the medallion into a pocket and slid the knife in under his hip belt. After checking his mother over for any other clues, he piled rocks on her to help keep away the animals. He prayed prayers for the



dead while he worked. He repeated them countless times, all the while consoling himself with the thought that the Divinity reads hearts. By turns, anger and sorrow took him. Anger that there was no recourse to justice. Who could he apply to for this assassination? There was no one. The law worked only toward the king's interests – or the local lord's.

It was after sunrise by the time he was finished to his satisfaction.

He sat back on his haunches, surveying the long neat column of boulders and rocks. He felt drained, thin with exhaustion. The muscles along his shoulders and back ached, but he was too tired and angry to rest. His anger had eventually died down to a simmer, but he was resolved.

“I promise you, I will find whoever did this, and avenge you, Mother,” he whispered. With a final last thought of love for her, he stood and began tracing his way back in the direction he had come. He had no doubt that whoever had sent the assassins would soon return with a greater force to flush him out. His home was deep in the Iron

Wood, but the time had come for him to leave.

Slade came to a stop at the edge of the clearing. In front of him, in the middle of a forty foot circle, stood the tower, its pinnacled top at the height of the trees.

The tower was as he had left it. But his heart broke as he remembered that *she* had built it with her rough, long fingered, knobby-knuckled hands. He had not been there to see it, but he had many times heard the story of his coming into this strange people-less world of the Iron Wood, her discovery of an aelfling, an abandoned child in the woods, shortly after completion of her fortress.

He stepped up to the tower, smoothing the roughness of one of its stones with the finger pads of one hand. This tower was safety, home, love. He almost felt that if he placed his cheek against the pitted rock, that it would thrum with hidden life. His fingers found thin ledges along the rock wall surface, and with the toes of his boots

meticulously placed in well-used indentations, he began scaling the wall, ascending by sheer strength and technique.

His goal was one of the windows he had left unlatched, and when he reached it he swung himself inside, landing nimbly on his feet in the shaded room. The mid-morning sun had failed to pierce through the curtains, but the gloom was dispelled on his throwing open the curtains and shutters on all three of the windows.

He had made a promise. In order to fulfill it, he must go into the human world, and not just for a day trip.

Under the oversize, simply wrought bed that lay in one corner was a small wooden trunk, amateur carvings of beasts, birds, and curl motifs etched into its sides. He picked it up and set it on the table in the sunlight where its gleaming leather-covered lid, stamped with more designs, shown golden brown.

Its lid depicted an oversize woman, an ogress, holding an infant human child, himself. Slade brushed the lid with his hand and then pulled it open. There would be time

enough on his journey to reminisce; for now, he must prepare himself.

His heart thrummed with anticipation, anxiety, grief, and anger. The prospect of going out into the world filled him with a terrible excitement. His curiosity about the wider world of men, and not only what he saw in Dyme, would be satisfied.

But the reason for his going filled him with an implacable dedication to his quest, and a persuasion that things like this foul murder happened because of the human world. It was a world where foundless hate, dislike, and greed had divided the people, resulting in a chaotic society of those who had, those who hadn't, and those who would take of men and everything other than men.

For years, the chest had been prepared for this moment. Every so often she would pull it out into the sun and recheck its contents, switching the packets of powders out for fresh ones she had ground that week. She would check the sinew bindings on the thin oil-cloth wrapped stack of maps, carefully oil the cork stopper on a vial of tincture, finger the collapsing wooden scope

and then close the lid. Then she would tell him about the box, the use for each of the powders, the tincture, what the maps were for, and how to use them. Finally, she would tell him that it was not to be used or opened until the day of her death. That day had come.

He unwrapped the oil-cloth covered maps and unfolded them one at a time. A thin sheet of vellum fell out, the large writing of his mother covering both sides. His eyes grew troubled with questions and he picked up the sheet.

*My son, Slade,*

*If you are reading this, then I may assume my long life has finally come to an end. I write this in the event that I am unable to say these things to you myself, even though it is not what I would wish. I have loved and cared for you, my son, as much as, I believe, any mother could. You have been the light in the darkness of my life these many years, and I have never regretted the day I took you up, screaming and red with anger, fight, and will to live.*

*Your mother has been thought of as a gruesome creature, hated by humanity, but time there was when those of my line were much the same as they, if not entirely the same. My mother lived in the Ancient days. She had been conceived after the Event that changed the world. It was hoped that her deformities were a temporary product of the Event, but after her marriage to my father (for even when humanity is suffering its worst, love will always find a way to rear itself) and my subsequent birth, it was discovered that the secrets of the blood had changed forever, that the deformities were permanent.*

*In time, we were hounded from one place to another, feared for our size, or our misshapen features. My mother once told me the world before the Event was much bigger, and the people were numerous, that they had great cities of unimaginable numbers of people. This she knew from the mouth of her own mother who had seen it with her own eyes. In the Ancient Days, she said, the people had many wonders, and much strife, but acceptance for one another as well, and*

*those who were born with deformities were looked upon with pity and sympathy, rather than aversion. So she told me. But then the Event occurred, the world's population dwindled to a fraction of what it was and barely was able to make use of the wide tracts of land that remained inhabitable in certain parts of the once-frozen world.*

*Like many creatures of whom I have spoken, we, the Annaearol, have been forced away from society to fend for ourselves. Many of the Unearthly are angry over this and have taken to warring on the humans. Can I blame them, who, at one time felt the fiery tongue of humanity's blade on my skin? What is the right answer?*

*I cannot say, but I do not wish to condemn myself. And so, I decided to live apart in the Iron Wood. I cannot say how much of what you know as fairy tales are truth, and how much are tale. Perhaps there is some of both. I only know, and have told you, as was told me. But one thing there is that I have never spoken of.*

*You know that I found you as a mewling infant and brought you home, but I never told*

*you how it was that you came to be an aeftling. I do not know or understand all that I saw, but I saw who it was that left you. Two men came into the forest one dusky night, carrying a screaming infant. I tracked them deep into the forest, to just past the ridge, but they did not move further into the wood than that.*

*One of the men had a hard face, eyes like iron, with a grim line for his mouth, and a distinctive scar that ran the length of his head from above his brow to below his chin. The other was a short, delicate man, fawning, fluttery. They had an argument over what to do with the child. The shorter, younger man had been trying to convince the man the entire two day journey through the forest to give him the baby to sell. The taller man had not made response to his companion, only kept onwards, until he bade the man still his tongue and threatened to mute him with his sword, if need be.*

*The fool gabbled his apologies in fear, and then, to my horror, the taller of the two dropped you on the cold hard ground and they left.*



*I waited some time, in fear that they would return, but I also feared to wait later, lest you should succumb to the elements. After hours of listening to your screams, my heart could not but reach out to you. I loved you, sorrowed for your fate, and determined that I would intercede.*

*I do not know who this man was, but the back of his leather jerkin had an imprint, the same that was on the medallion I found hidden in the layers of your swaddling. The short man had called him, 'my lord.'*

*More I do not know, my son, but I cannot but think that you were a threat to someone, somewhere, and that your existence had to be done away with secretly. Perhaps you may never discover who you are, perhaps you do not care to know, but now that I have, selfishly, kept you by my side 'til the end of my lonely days, I release you from the bonds of gratitude and love which have kept you with me. I bid you seek to discover who you are, and why it is that men of power should have sought your death.*

*My son, remember in your prayers to the Divinity one who had longed for peace and*

*death, but after finding you, was not willing to acquit this life. I have many hatreds for which I must repent, and many sorrows which have caused me suffering. Pray that my soul will rise to meet its Maker one day, that same Maker who created you and me, and all creatures be they human or Annaearol. May the Three-in-One speed your coming and your going.*

*Your mother, the Ogress  
Malada*

Slade read the letter twice, confused by her withholding the secret of his arrival in the Iron Wood, saddened for his loss, infuriated by the treatment she had received, and further persuaded that he could not but hold humanity in contempt.

It was one thing to discover that he had been abandoned. But it didn't sit well with him to think that he might be a bastard. Someone had wanted him dead. And now his mother was gone. Divinity grant that the two events weren't connected.

Truth be told, he had no wish to discover who he was. It was sufficient that he was his

mother's son, the Ogress' Son. But vengeance he would seek. In a land that was without law, that allowed criminals to kill others without compunction, did not those who murdered deserve punishment? Yes. And it would be he who would mete it out.