

# Prologue

Unseen in the darkness, a single boat floated gently near the shore, keeping against the tree line in order to minimise its profile. Over in the distance, a small settlement glowed gently under the light of sconce and oil-lamp, its picturesque appearance nullified by an industrial factory slightly further downstream, bellowing out columns of black smoke from its four brick chimneys that enveloped some of the village and poisoned the water with soot and sulphur.

The two men in the rowing boat, cloaked in long, flowing robes, instinctively turned their noses up at more than just the smell, although one caught himself and reminded himself of something about the place, before taking the oars and pulling on them strongly for a final surge before relying purely on the silent current for propulsion. Though the factory's machinery provided more than enough acoustic cover, they did not want to take any chances, lest a spy or a simple hunter (i.e. an informer) was listening for unnatural and uncommon noise.

A few minutes passed before the settlement glided by on the other side of the river. The boaters kept their heads down, noticing a characteristic tint in their vision that betrayed the nearby presence of a violet elemental, high up in the canopy; what blessed their lightless world with flora also cursed their stealth. Still, they were adept enough to compensate for the fact that their eyes were glowing emerald green by admiring the patterns of grain on the wooden interior of the hull.

As they drew level with the factory, the tint began to fade until it was no longer noticeable; this gave them the freedom to look around once more, although they kept their eyes narrowed and never looked in one direction for too long. They noticed a figure walking through the forest; one jumped slightly and crouched down, while the other nodded towards the figure, recognising it as another of their kind and not a Dragoon Warrior or something equally unpleasant. The boatmen and their companion were converging on a small inlet about fifty yards in front of them. The boat was drifting wide of the inlet, and the pair were still wary over making too much noise with their oars. One of them lifted his hands from inside his robe and seemed to pull on an invisible rope on the port side; a small crest rose out of the water and listed the boat to starboard, pushing it steadily into the inlet. Since the factory was producing many waves of its own on the river, an extra one would go unseen.

Their companion materialised from the forest and rushed out to help stop their boat from noisily running aground, stepping lightly into the cool water to hold it steady. Neither of the two men batted an eyelid at the fact that she was completely naked, save for a few flowers braided into her unkempt hair and a holster around her waist for carrying a large, serrated knife, its ornately-carved hilt polarised against the terrifying blade.

Once they had secured their boat to a tree trunk, one of the cloaked men retrieved a broadsword, a bow, a quiver and a helmet before blending into the forest together, heading downstream to where the sound of rapids could be heard in the distance. The girl silently weaved amongst the trees with almost supernatural speed and grace, not stepping on a single plant or loose twig despite only starlight and a pair of crescent moons providing illumination, the third one being above the horizon yet. As for the two boatmen, they walked side-by-side in her general direction; despite the younger man's impatience, he kept a slow and careful pace, partly because his friend would make too much noise if he moved any faster in the clunking metal armour hidden under his cloak and also because their attuning to the forest was nowhere near as strong as their female comrade.

Their destination was a small grove near the rapids, bathed in a yellow-green light from a Glowing Mushroom that stood four feet high and stretched the same distance across. Upon entering the grove, in between the river and the mushroom, the girl immediately jumped out from behind the giant fungus and gave each man a hug and kiss.

“Hey guys; how did it go?”

“Not all of us are Earth Shamans, Âlfar!” The younger man playfully chastised the girl.

“My apologies, Gorta, but you know how my guide doesn't like to be kept waiting!” Âlfar gleefully replied with a child-like giggle.

“Even some spirits are hyperactive,” the other man sighed with a more serious tone, although to him it was upbeat.

“Indeed they are, dear Pyseiz, but you'll get used to it,” Âlfar darted her face into his vision playfully, tilting her head and smiling sweetly. “Don't sound so tired and old.”

“You're not making it easy on me!” he retorted. That's when Âlfar's expression dropped slightly as her gaze lowered onto his cloak.

“You shouldn't be wearing your armour, Pyseiz,” she warned, despite it not being visible.

“I'm a Dragoon Warrior as well as a Fire Shaman, Âlfar.”

“And a fine one too, old man,” Gorta chirped in.

“What, a Fire Shaman or Dragoon Warrior?” Âlfar joked, bouncy once again.

Pyseiz had to smile and laugh with them. In a way, Âlfar's optimistic and spirited attitude kept everything from being so morbid in his life, even if her eccentricity did puzzle him at times.

“I hope I'm not late,” a fourth figure, much older than any of them, joined them from the darkness; “are we ready to talk with our spirits?”

“I always talk to my tiger!” Âlfar replied with a playful tilt of her head, before jumping into him with her trademark hug and kiss.

“You could have been a Dragoon Warrior sneaking up on us to take us prisoner; we should have paid attention,” Gorta said in a low voice; this seemed to startle Âlfar briefly, before her logic told her that that would not happen. It was Pyseiz who answered all of their worries though.

“I’m the Dragoon Warrior here, not Qelôqas; besides, we’re all aware enough to sense danger approaching, and there is none here.” Âlfar smiled, tilting her head again as if she had a tic. “And yes, let us convene with our spirits.”

The four of them sat around a small pile of sticks and tinder in cross-legged poses, their backs against trees to hide their silhouettes. Pyseiz drew a feather from inside his cloak and began to chant and wave the feather towards what would be their fire, but stopped short when Âlfar flicked her hand, igniting the tinder instantly. She giggled when orange flames erupted from the pile. Gorta was quite impressed, considering she was an Earth Shaman who just created fire. Qelôqas seemed accustomed and indifferent to Âlfar showing off. Pyseiz, on the other hand, was not at all happy.

“Will you *stop* trying to make me feel *old!*”

“Aww, come on Pyseiz,” Âlfar chirped. “We need to have some fun these days to lighten our world.”

“Okay chaps, let us hush for now and speak with the spirits,” Qelôqas suggested. At that, the four of them closed their eyes and meditated. While only the rushing river broke the deafening silence, their minds were listening into a hive of activity in the spirit world, while they occasionally trembled their lips to commune in response. Their trance would have lasted for hours if Pyseiz’ guardian spirit had not warned him of an approaching patrol. He opened his eyes, held his hand out, and closed it into a fist forcefully, and the flames quickly retreated downwards before vanishing in a puff of smoke.

“We are not alone, my friends,” he announced as they returned to the physical plane with suppressed alarm.

A patrol of three Dragoon Warriors entered the grove for no reason other than to sample some of the edible foliage, being more commonplace around Glowing Mushrooms. They were about to leave again when one noticed the charred remains of a bonfire. He crouched down and scooped a handful of ash in his gauntlet, sniffed it a couple of times, then crushed it in a clenched fist.

“WHO GOES THERE?” He yelled suddenly, standing to full height and whipping out a large broadsword to jab it at a dark opening between two trunks. The other two were quick to follow suit.

“Is there a problem?” Pyseiz asked them coldly as he walked towards them, adjusting the round hemisphere of metal covering his crotch; upon seeing Pyseiz in glistening armour and the standard issue green cape, they sheathed them again, heaving huge sighs of relief..

“For crying out loud, Pyseiz! What are you doing out here?” the lead Dragoon Warrior demanded, “Where’s your group?”

“We were patrolling the Northern Fields,” he replied, opening the visor on his helmet. “My shift ended a while ago and I was having a rest stop on my way home,” Pyseiz took note of the crescent moons on his interrogator’s shoulder plates, faintly visible under the mushroom’s light, indicating that he was talking to a Dragoon Chieftain.

“You shouldn’t travel out here alone. Predators don’t take note of wanderers in Dragoon armour, and shamans take special note.”

“They’d be wise to take note of my sword though. My apologies for scaring

you, Chieftain. But I'm done here now, so I'll return home.”

The Dragoon Chieftain scanned him for moment, pondering.

“Very well, Pyseiz. Safe journeys.”

Pyseiz drew his sword and held the hilt to his chest, blade pointed down, in salute. “Safe journeys too, Chieftain.” With that, he sheathed his blade and walked into the darkness once more, heading towards a bridge beyond the rapids.

“Stay safe, my friend,” Âlfar whispered to Pyseiz as he walked, although her location he could not pinpoint.

Pyseiz' broadsword banged against his left leg and his bow and quiver shook awkwardly on his back as he trekked over the bridge and onwards, beyond the factory and into the settlement. Though eternal darkness made it impossible to determine the exact time of day without some form of timekeeping, he assumed that it was late evening because the streets were empty and most of the torches that lined them had been snuffed out.

He sighed deeply, thinking about tonight's actions, not so much about the Dragoon Warriors nearly catching them, but what he and Gorta were doing on the river. He was wondering if there was any point in burning the pollution from the river and purifying the water so that fish could swim in it again. It seems that as soon as one section of the river is purified, the numerous factories pollute the rest of it even more. It was a losing battle. Trying not to breathe in too much sorrow and soot, he located the front door to his house and entered to greet his family.

“I'm home,” he announced, removing his helmet.

“Hiya, dad!” Zotâg greeted him enthusiastically. “How was work? Did you catch any shamans?”

“No, they are good at evading us”, he answered as sincerely as possible as he removed the cape and started to detach the shoulder pads from his breastplate.

“When I become a Dragoon Warrior I will make sure none evade me!” he said proudly, holding up his right arm as if it was a sword.

“Heh, I'm sure you will!” Pyseiz patted his son's head. “Can you help get my armour off?”

“Sure thing!” He smiled and helped to unfasten his boots and leg pads as Pyseiz folded his cape and placed it on a shelf with the armour he had already removed.

“What's cooking?” Pyseiz asked, sniffing the air.

“Mum's home-made stew,” Zotâg responded, a little downbeat. “No meat again.”

“Ah, it's good for you, Zotâg; you don't often get to choose your meals in the barracks. Be glad you have food at all.” Zotâg took his father's comment to heart and was quite a bit happier about the thought of his mother's stew!

The Dragoon armour frequently got very uncomfortable, so it was a blessing to just be in his undergarments for a moment. However, he enjoyed the sensation only for a few brief moments before donning a set of regular clothes, as his wife was a stickler for decency.

Rolling his stiff shoulders with audible clicks, he entered the kitchen to greet the master chef. Their servant turned to bow gracefully before resuming a saucepan-scrubbing job, but Qâprar was too engrossed in the pot of food simmering on the range to notice him at first.

“Good evening, Qâprar,” he approached her. “Everything okay?”

“All's good, my handsome Dragoon Warrior!” Qâprar turned to kiss him on the cheek. “Dinner will be ready shortly.”

“Kids been good?”

“Zotâg won't stop talking about wanting to be like you, Qêl does what babies do best, and Fiqi... hmmm...”

“Is Fiqi okay?”

“Oh, she's fine, just very quiet, like something's on her mind. She won't talk to anyone, not even me.”

“Let me talk to her; maybe she'll tell me what's bothering her.”

“Thank you, Pyseiz,” Qâprar smiled before turning back to her cooking. “I don't want it affecting her schooling.”

“I doubt it will,” he replied before leaving the kitchen and heading towards the lounge where the children had congregated.

While Qâprar was putting the finishing touches on her stew, she noticed Pyseiz and Fiqi walk past the door, towards the stairs, presumably to discuss Fiqi's worries in the privacy of her bedroom, she thought. About a minute later, someone banged loudly on the front door.

“Can you get that please, Seita? I've got my hands full here,” Qâprar asked her servant as she carried the stew-pot off of the range and onto a small metal grille on the wooden table.

“It's for you, ma'am,” was Seita's response upon opening the door to a battalion of Dragoon Warriors.

“Erm... Yes?” She approached them, a little taken aback, but doing well to keep her composure.

“Madam,” the Dragoon Captain answered, “we believe you are housing this man.” He held up a small painting of Pyseiz.

“That's my husband, Pyseiz; wh-what has he done?”

“We have reason to believe that he is practising an illegal system.”

“What are you talking about?” she almost snorted with laughter.

“Shamans, Missus,” the Dragoon Warrior replied. Her face dropped.

“Under the seventeenth seal of the late King Oqâzior...” he pulled out a scroll and let gravity unravel it, “... I am ordered to place your husband under arrest and commit him to a reconditioning camp. Resistance to reconditioning will not be tolerated and is punishable by execution”; then, with a mixture of sarcasm and brimming anger, he added “May we come in?”

Qâprar was now clearly terrified and upset, and had little choice but to show them in. “Please don't hurt my husband.” She pleaded.

“If he resists, we may have no choice.”

“Pyseiz,” Qâprar called out, heading towards their small lounge, forgetting

that he had gone upstairs. Qêl was starting to stir from her crib, sensing the commotion, but other than her, only Zotâg stood there, a bit surprised himself but also rather excited at the concept of Dragoon Warriors visiting his house.

“Zotâg, where is your father?” She asked.

“He said he had to talk to Fiqi. Bit strange... he was writing something and then he said that he must speak to her alone right now. Seemed to be in a hurry all of a sudden. Dad’s a bit weird, mind you...”

The Dragoon Captain rolled his eyes and snorted lightly; “Find him!” he called, gazing to the side slightly at his lieutenant, a Dragoon Chieftain, before turning his angry glare towards Qâprar and Zotâg, making sure that the golden pentagrams on his shoulder plates were in full, clear view. The Dragoon Chieftain saluted with his broadsword as he and the lesser Dragoon Warriors started filling every room in the house, not caring so much of the fact that their boots were leaving unsightly footprints on an otherwise clean floor.

“Captain, over here!” a Dragoon Warrior called out from Fiqi's bedroom. Hoping to find the soldier with a subdued Pyseiz, he and a few other Dragoon Warriors marched briskly upstairs; instead, he was met with an open window, the Dragoon Warrior pointing at it frantically, and Fiqi staring at it expressionlessly, clutching a rolled-up scroll of parchment.

“He's outside, find him... NOW!” He screamed to his subordinates. Most of the platoon stampeded outside on his order and started to organise themselves so as to prevent Pyseiz' escape, assuming he was not already long gone. A few instinctively stayed in the house in case the Dragoon Captain needed another task performed.

“What is your name, madam?” He asked Qâprar.

“Qâprar ...” she started.

“Qâprar, I am arresting you on the suspicion of harbouring and aiding a known criminal.”

“What? But...”

“Are you going to come quietly?” He clutched the hilt of his sheathed sword.

“O-Okay,” she quivered, “b-but, what about the children?”

“Your servant can take care of them for now. Chieftain, take Qâprar into custody.”

The remaining soldiers started filing out of the house with Qâprar, leaving just the Dragoon Captain in the room with Fiqi and Zotâg, with Qêl crying somewhere in a different room while Seita did her best to comfort her.

“Pyseiz always spoke fondly of you, Zotâg,” he looked down at the ten-year-old; “about how you always wanted to be a Dragoon Warrior ever since you started walking. Would you like to come with me to see my barracks?” If Zotâg had any reservations about the Dragoon Warriors being the cause of his mother's arrest and his father's exodus, that offer just dispelled them.

“Yes please, sir,” he eagerly called out, rushing to his side. As they were about to leave, he stopped to glance at Fiqi, who was still staring silently out of

the window, not caring that she was catching a chill from the draught.

“Will you be okay, miss?” the Dragoon Captain asked, concerned for her welfare; she didn't reply, but she did clutch the scroll tighter.

“She'll be okay, sir; she doesn't talk to strangers,” Zotâg explained; though that fact was true, the Dragoon Captain suspected that Zotâg was covering for her, but he brushed that off as a big brother protecting his little sister.

Once Fiqi was alone, only then did she unravel the scroll to read the runic symbols that her father had written; his last message, his last gift, to his daughter. Tears rolled down her juvenile face, but not once did she utter a sound.