

I dedicate this book  
to my friends and family in  
The Thieves' Guild,  
a community theater organization in  
Gainesville, Florida.

On the continent of Arperia, there were many kingdoms. Two of the neighboring kingdoms enjoyed peace for many generations. These were the Kingdoms of Sandraia, governed by King Olan, and the Kingdom of Artemis, governed by King Daraius.

All was well until King Daraius' brother returned from the Dark War. A kingdom to the North had been overtaken by the dark magic of a sorcerer. King Daraius had sent his brother, Lord Varis, with elite soldiers to defeat the sorcerer. Many months passed with no word. Finally, Lord Varis returned, but something was wrong. Instead of destroying the dark sorcerer, it was unveiled that Lord Varis actually WAS the sorcerer. He had needed an artifact to take over all the kingdoms on the continent.

He used the souls of the elite troops to obtain the artifact and fuel his dark powers. Upon his return, he would overthrow King Daraius and separate the alliance of the two kingdoms.

The young lady steps out of the candle shop to see a group of large, barbarian men approaching. She quickly runs across the road to see them take up defensive positions outside the shop. The largest of them has a bearclaw necklace. She looks closer to see that it is, in fact, a necklace of owlbear claws. Owlbears are many times more dangerous than the largest of bears. Fearing for the safety of the candlemakers inside the shop, she darts to the town hall to inform the Magistrate.

Other citizens, seeing the men approach, are already fleeing and informing others, “The Ruffs are here!”

Inside the shop, a tall, but slightly stocky young man stands behind the counter. He is carving a candle as the Ruff enters.

He looks up as the Ruff steps to the counter and places both hands on it. He leans over and the stench of rotten flesh and unbathed animal musk chokes the young man. “I am seeking Cardan, the Man-at-Arms from Artemis. I was told he owns this shop.” The Ruff says with a scowl. The young man holds back his breakfast so as not to give the Ruff his first bath this month. “I am sorry, Sir.” He states. “My Father’s name is Andir, and we are from Caldaria.”

He raises his hands from the candle and shows a gesture of compliance.

The young man leans backwards and turns his head towards the back room. “Father! A man is here looking for the store owner, but I think he is in the wrong place!” He says without any hesitation in his voice.

A weary looking older man enters with a severe limp and walking with the assistance of a Bloodthorn cane.

He steps next to the son where he can see over the counter and suddenly his eyes open wide.

The elder candlemaker pulls the son behind him, directing him to the safety of the back room. He looks at the owlbear necklace and says, "Hello Tragan. Long time no see." Tragan snarls. This was not a polite statement as it referred to a certain scar that graces the side of Tragan's face.

The scar started at the Ruff's hairline and crept down to his lower jawbone. In the middle was an eye that had clouded over from the injury.

The Ruff tightens his grip on the counter and it begins to separate from the wall. He leers at Cardan, “Now that I have found you,…” he shifts his gaze back to the young man and continues. “Then, YOU must be the Prince Ladir!” “We have been hired to take your head back to your Uncle!” Tragan smiles at Cardan. “That is, unless a crippled old wetnurse thinks he can stop us!”

Tragan rips the counter from the wall and throws it across the room like a loaf of bread slung over a shoulder. “Get to the back room!” Cardan yells. Prince Ladir hastily runs to the doorway but stops to see that his Father is not behind him. He turns to see Cardan standing before the Ruff.

Looking like a dwarf before a giant, Cardan spins his cane and strikes the Ruff on the chin. Tragan reels slightly then lunges for Cardan. The Man-at-Arms loses his limp and steps aside. Like a panther, he strikes Tragan three more times; in the stomach, back and leg. He rolls forward dodging another attack from Tragan. Like a ball of yarn batted by a housecat, Cardan moves about the room with an ease, not had since his youth. This was a battle!

He has longed to be in conflict for many years! His blood is now pumping through his body like a firestorm through dry brush! Tragan calls to his men waiting outside. "RUFFS! TO ARMS!"

A new foe enters the fray through the shop window. Cardan kneels and twirls. He rises with his cane striking the new enemy in the stomach. He continues his motion, launching the Ruff back out the window as quickly as he entered. Tragan manages to catch the Man-at-Arms' stick as it whirls around towards Tragan's face. Snatching the cane from the hands of its owner, he snaps it into splinters. This is a feat even for the mighty Tragan as his anger boils over.

Ladir had never seen his Father move so fast! He was leaping against walls and running across counters like a mad rat, defending its meal from another.

Two more Ruffs enter the doorway and Tragan yells, “KILL HIM! I’LL GET THE BOY’S HEAD!” He turns his attention to the candlemaker in the doorway.

Suddenly, a giant beast, filled with hatred and greed is heading Ladir’s way! He quickly becomes concerned for his own safety. He steps into the back room looking for anything to use as a weapon. Cardan sees them disappear into the back, knowing his son is ill equipped to deal with this danger. He grasps the handle of a pot filled with melted wax. He spins over the table and splashes the steaming hot wax into the eyes of the first Ruff.

It sears into his eyes, blinding him instantly. Cardan drops to the floor. He strikes upward lifting the second Ruff off his feet by a hit to the groin.

The Ruff begins to feel the intense heat as he lands on his back on the floor. He begins to smell searing flesh coming from an area, already numbed by the pain. He rips the cauldron away from his body taking part of his manhood with it.

Prince Ladir looks into the eyes of the monster towering over him. The Ruff slaps the boy with the back of his hand. Ladir flies over a table and hits the wall hard. Tossing the table aside, Tragan raises his war axe. "I'm going to cleave your head from your miserable body."

His head suddenly jerks back as Cardan grabs the pony tail of hair on Tragan's scalp.

He climbs Tragan's back as easily as a monkey climbs a tree. His weight throws the Ruff off balance.

Cardan's elbow smashes down into Tragan's face, removing two teeth in a spray of blood. Tragan slams to the floor in a daze. Cardan and Ladir hear a whooshing noise and peer into the shop. One of the Ruffs has set the shop ablaze and run out onto the street. Realizing they have no other escape, Cardan shoves the pantry cabinet aside. Doing so reveals a hidden door in the floorboards. Ladir is confused. "We have lived here all my life. I never knew that was there!" He points to the door as Cardan heaves it open. "It wouldn't be a secret if everyone knew about it," Cardan replies with a smile.

Cardan disappears into the tunnel, followed closely by Ladir.

A hay bale flips aside as another tunnel door opens from beneath.

Now in the nearby stables, Cardan orders the prince to saddle a horse. As Cardan grabs a saddle Tragan's head lurks from the tunnel. "THEY ARE IN THE STABLES!" Tragan calls to the road. Cardan sees the Ruffs start running in his direction. He turns around as Tragan begins climbing out of the tunnel. Cardan kicks down on a shovel and the handle rises quickly to meet his hand. He spins the tool like a pinwheel and slams it against the side of Tragan's face with a clang. Ladir mounts his horse and his father steps to his side.

Cardan looks up to Ladir with concern. “Find the Woodsman of the forest of Carillon. Tell him that,…”

Suddenly Cardan’s body jerks, cutting his words from his mouth.

Prince Ladir looks down to see a Ruff arrow jutting from his father’s back. Cardan raises his hand to slap the horse on the flanks. “FIND THE WOODSMAN!” He yells as his hand stings the horse’s hind quarter. The horse rears and Ladir holds on tight. Cardan turns around as two more arrows thud into his chest. He falls to his knees, then onto his side in the hay. “Tears of sadness and anger well up and flow down Ladir’s face. He watches as the Ruffs start jumping horses over his Father’s body in pursuit.

Prince Ladir knew how to ride a horse, but to say he was any good at doing so was an overstatement. He barely buckled the bridle, and did not know where two straps went on the saddle. He was having great difficulty not falling off. He enters the Forest of Carillon and branches begin to swat him in the face. One in particular stings his eyes, almost blinding him. He leans down in the saddle and feels the sudden stopping power of a large branch as it knocks him from the saddle. He lands hard in the dirt. His chest is feeling like a broken egg at breakfast. He hears the Ruffs thundering towards him. They are not far away. He stumbles to his feet and begins running down the trail towards the Woodsman's House.

The Ruffs' horses trample the small brush aside as they enter the forest. Prince Ladir struggles to keep his feet from tangling in the many roots of the footpath.

One misstep suddenly throws him to the ground in agonizing pain. His ankle has twisted under a root and the pain is unbearable. He attempts to stand and the joint gives way. He collapses to the ground and crawls to a large felled tree. With his back to the log, he grasps a large branch for a club. He is barely able to raise it from the pain of his ankle. He looks down the path to see the horses slow their approach. Two Ruffs leap from their steeds and approach. More are coming behind them.

Ladir knows this will not last long as the ruffs arrive. They are drawing their hefty swords and smiling at him.

“Look what I found, just lying in the forest,” the Ruff calls back to the others.

“It is the trophy head of a Prince, just waiting to be claimed,” he says with a grin. The Ruff raises his sword. His body jerks backward slightly as a dagger embeds itself in his chest. He looks down at it and his eyes roll back into his head.

The Ruff falls backward like a tree falls in the forest. Ladir looks back over his shoulder to see a burly man standing on the log above him. It is the Woodsman standing with a battle axe in hand.

He draws his second axe with his other hand and raises them in front of him. They begin to glow with an eerie green aura around them.

Ladir notices that the Woodsman's eyes are glowing in the same way. He thinks to himself, "The Guardian of the Forest is a Magister!"

A horse rides up, followed closely by two others. Tragan slides off as the others also dismount. He strides up to stand before the body of the Ruff. Tragan watches as the dagger glows green and fades away. "An Ether Blade?" Tragan thinks to himself.

He looks up to see the Woodsman in combat readiness.

A voice booms from the Woodsman. "I am Veran! Man-at-Arms of the Elder of Artemis, King Daraius!"

Tragan scoffs, “Don’t you mean the DEAD King of Artemis?”

Veran turns his gaze to the Ruff.

“Tragan of Neder! Clan of Dominicus! Your self-proclaimed King, Varis, will soon be the dead one!” Tragan steps over the dead Ruff and pulls the sword from the fallen’s hand.

The ground beneath it shimmers with a green glow and roots stab upward encircling Tragan’s swordhand and his arm. The roots wrap around Tragan’s shoulder and neck pulling him down to his knees. The Woodsman calls down to him,” Release the weapon and return home. Continue to fight and you will die where your knee touches the ground!” Feeling the vines tightening their grip about his throat, Tragan complies and drops the sword.

Slowly, the roots recede back beneath the soil. Tragan stands up and steps backwards.

He turns his back to the couple and climbs onto the saddle. He looks to the other Ruffs and says, “We know where they are now. We will report back to camp and find them again, soon.”

The Ruffs turn and ride off as Tragan glares at the Woodsman. “Soon! Very soon!” He says to Veran. Tragan rears his horse and it spins around. The horse thunders down the trail, back towards the village. The glow fades from the Woodsman’s eyes and axes as he lowers his weapons. He leaps down from the log, landing in front of the Prince. “I don’t think it’s broken, but it sure hurts,” the Prince says.

Veran reaches into a pouch on his belt and pulls out a rolled bandage.

He begins wrapping Ladir's ankle and looks into his eyes. "Where is the Candlemaker?" Veran questions.

Ladir's eyes well up and tears pour down his face. Abruptly, he widens his gaze and yells, "Look out!"

The woodsman spins on his knee to see a Ruff standing next to him about to strike a fatal blow. A flash is seen behind the Ruff. It is quickly followed by two more. A thumping noise is heard as energy bolts strike through the Ruffs armor. The Ruff falls forward, dead on the ground. His back is opened and seared. The armor is melted as butter in a hot pan. Standing behind him is Cardan. A faint golden glow crawls from his hand, up his arm to his chest. A momentary brightness is seen and it fades out.

He steps forward and falls to his face in the mud. The woodsman removes the arrows from Cardan's back and rolls him over. He reaches into the Candlemaker's tunic and withdraws a pendant from the man's neck.

He snaps the center ring out of the pendant and grabs the Prince's hand. He shoves the ring onto the Prince's middle finger and holds up Ladir's hand. "What? What are you doing?" Ladir stammers.

Veran looks him in the eye, and says, "Kovarus! Rolmanus! Ante! Domina! Repeat it!" The Prince looks confused and the Woodsman yells at him. "Kovarus!" Ladir repeats, "Kovarus!" The Woodsman sees Ladir's palm start to glow white. "Rolmanus! Ante! Domina!" Veran yells.

Prince Ladir complies and finishes the phrase, “Rolmanus! Ante! Domina!”

The Prince’s whole hand glows bright white and Cardan’s body begins to glow the same. His wounds heal themselves. Veran smiles and sighs in relief. Veran watches the glow fade from Cardan’s body, but not from the prince’s hand and he yells to Cardan. “NO!” The glow fades from Ladir’s palm and he lowers his hand. Cardan opens his eyes and looks up at the Woodsman. “Even the Ring of Healing cannot help me now.” He says. Cardan looks to the Prince and says, “I’m sorry for lying to you. Fulfill the prophecy. Seek the Oracle in the Village of Tamaric.”

Cardan turns his eyes to the Woodsman. “Veran. Take the Prince home! He must become King!” Cardan grasps the hand of Ladir and smiles. “You have grown strong!” Cardan says. “Be a great king.”

He twists in pain and slowly slumps down into the dirt. Veran closes his own eyes and bows his head.

Ladir, cries out, “Father!” Veran opens his eyes and places his hand upon Ladir’s shoulder. “This man is not your Father, though he loved you as one.”

Veran stands up and steps back. His eyes begin to glow green again. He raises his hands and spreads his fingers. The ground begins to glow green around his fallen friend’s body. Roots and vines erupt from the ground covering Cardan’s lifeless corpse.

The ground softens beneath his body and the roots pull him under the ground. The soil reforms above him as he disappears, buried in the heart of the forest. The glow fades from Veran's hands and eyes. He looks to the Prince and says, "It is time for you to reclaim your Father's throne." As Veran helps the Prince onto a horse, he tells the story of Artemis. "Many years ago, a Sorcerer claimed the Northlands of Neder. He sought an artifact that could increase his dark spirit and power his magic indefinitely. Your father, King Daraius, sent his brother to fight the sorcerer. What your Father did not know was that Lord Varis, his brother, WAS the dark sorcerer. Varis corrupted the souls of the guards that were sent with him.

He used their corrupted spirits to capture the artifact and absorb its power for himself. Then he returned to Artemis to claim the throne. When your Father refused, Varis killed him.”

“King Daraius’ Man-at-Arms took the Queen to their ally’s kingdom of Sandraia.

Only there did anyone other than the Queen know she was with child, you.”

The Woodsman pushes aside a branch as he climbs upon his own horse. He grabs the reins and continues his tale.

“Varis was intent on keeping even your Mother from reclaiming the throne so he sent his Ruff assassins to kill her in Sandraia. They succeeded but being reckless, they also attacked King Olan’s family. Olan ordered you to be hidden in another land far away.

Your identity was to be hidden from you and others until the time was right.” Veran guides his horse between some tall rocks. Veran raises and kisses his right hand.

As Veran passes the rocks, he slides his kissed hand across one of the stones and mutters something quietly.

After Ladir passes, a faint glowing wall is created and fades away between the rocks behind them. The man you knew as your Father was actually your own Man-at-Arms. I was also sent here as a Guardian. We were sworn to watch over and protect you, until we could return you to your Father’s throne. The Oracle prophesied that you would return after the Crystal of Doliman had risen from the Pillar of Stone, but before the Red Moon of your twentieth year.

Ladir looked puzzled. “This is my twentieth year, but what is this crystal?” Veran called back to Ladir, “The Ice Crystal of Doliman rests inside a cave, West of the Ryn River.” “Only the Oracle of Tamaric knows its exact location.

You will need the weapons of your family line, the Crystal, and the Gift of Lagos to defeat your Uncle. So says the prophecy.”

Prince Ladir looks at the ring on his finger. He sneers at the Woodsman. “This morning, I was a Candlemaker, carving wax.” He turns his hand to inspect the bauble. “Later in the day, I am a Prince on the way to become a King!” “Never saw that one coming!” The woodsman laughs. “Wasn’t exactly on your agenda for the afternoon, ay?”

Prince Ladir smiles, "Yeah, not exactly." The Prince looks up the trail at a house nestled into the trees.

"Where is this?" he asks.

"My home," replies the Woodsman.

"Tis my home away from home."

Approaching the home, Veran whistles loudly. From the doorway exits a beautiful young lady with raven hair flowing around her neck. The Prince's eyes open widely having never beheld such a beauty. The woodsman looks back at the Prince and says, "Prince or not, that's my daughter that you are eye-balling, boy!"

Quickly the Prince regains his composure, "My apologies, Sir!" Ladir says, in hopes of not having his manhood removed while he sleeps.

The Woodsman smiles and turns to the young lady. “Gather gear for Artemis! It is time.”

She replies, “Yes, Father,” and she darts back into the cottage.

“We will continue to the barn for other equipment.” Veran says to Ladir.

Dismounting outside the barn, Veran and Ladir tie the horses to the door.

The Woodsman leads the Prince to a hay bale and knocks it over, revealing a door in the ground. “Of course!”

Ladir jeers. “The old hidden door under the hay trick.” Veran is leaned over grasping the handle of the door and looks up at Ladir. The Prince snickers and says, “Nothing. Just being a,…” Veran completes Ladir’s sentence under his breath and snatches open the heavy door.

They descend into an armory of swords and shields. There are racks of maces and bows, unstrung on every wall. Veran hands a sack of weapons and a saddlebag to Ladir. “Please, take those to the horses, Your Majesty.” Veran smiles at Ladir.

“Aye, Captain.” Ladir says faintly.

Veran finishes loading packs onto the horses and saddles his Daughter’s horse. Climbing into the saddle, Veran looks at the Prince. “Do you know how to use a sword?” Veran questions. Ladir smiles back, ‘Pointy end into the bad guy?’ He replies jokingly. Veran rolls his eyes and they ride back to the house with the third horse in tow.

Veran dismounts and steps to the door of the cottage. He looks back to Ladir. “Stay out of trouble while I’m inside.” He says to the young Prince.

The door of the cottage opens and Veran's daughter steps out. She is stunning! She is dressed in form fitting black leather from ankle to neck. From wrist to wrist it hugs her every curve as it does everywhere else.

She smiles at her Father. Veran looks back over his shoulder at Ladir. "Be kind to him. He is having a Ruff day! He just found out he's a Prince today."

Veran flicks her belt and smiles.

"We're wearing black this time?" He questions. She smiles back. "It looks good on you, Father. Perhaps you'll catch the eye of a lady courtier."

Veran looks her in the eye. "Just remember OUR place is NOT theirs. Remember your place and all will be well." He continues into the house.

The girl puts her hands on her hips framing her well fitted fur vest.

“So. You know the truth, now. How does it feel, Your Majesty?” She asks. She bows to him and rises.

He stares at her, speechless for a moment. Gathering his courage, Ladir opens his mouth, but only a squeak exits. He clears his throat. “I’m still adapting,” he replies. Ladir watches her stride to her horse and straighten the pack with her back facing him. He looks down and feels a strong urge to adjust his saddle for comfort. Her hair is pulled back into a long tail, draping between her shoulder blades. She flicks it over her shoulder as she looks back at him and smiles. He realizes his mouth is hanging slightly agape and he snaps it shut. She giggles and turns back to her gear. Her ear rings dangling back and forth as does his heartbeat.

. “So, uh,…” he clears his throat.

“Ahem, are you a Princess in disguise?” He asks.

She leaps gracefully onto her horse and looks back at him.

“No. I am the Daughter of Veran.”

“He is an appointed Guardian. We are sworn to protect you. As the Daughter of the Man-at-Arms, his appointment is mine as well. King Olan of Sandraia ordered you hidden and protected. We had to leave our home to come here with you.”

She seems irritated that she had to leave her home to protect the little rich boy. She looks to the doorway of the cottage as the door opens. Veran steps out wearing black leather that almost completely matches hers. “He raises his arms to the sides and spins around.

“Black Roguewear is all the fashion. Or so I’ve been told.” He smiles at his Daughter. Veran climbs atop his own horse and looks at the two kids.

He sees a dangerous mood stirring between them. “Let’s get moving. The village will be overrun by the time we arrive.” He states. The girl turns in her saddle and looks at Ladir. “My name is Serena.”

She spurs her horse and rides past her Father. He looks back to Ladir.

The Prince looks at Veran with a slight fear of Fatherly instincts. He raises his hands and shakes his head side to side as Veran glares at him and spurs his own horse. Ladir Thinks to himself “Let not the father kill me, nor the Horse throw me!” He digs his heels into the horse’s flank and it bolts down the trail.

He rides past Veran and Serena, bobbing like a leaf on the ripples in a pond. Serena and her father laugh as Ladir's horse slows. The Prince almost falls from his horse. Serena looks to her Father, "Let's hope he can fight." Her father snickers. "Or can at least ride a horse further than a few feet."

The crew settles in and begins trotting down the road towards the village where their morning began.

Tragan and his crew arrive at a Ruff encampment East of the village. He dismounts and strides heavily into the Command Tent. A Large Orc looks up from the battle map and sneers at him. "Tragan, I see no trophy. Did I choose badly for your clan's leader?"

Tragan bows up slightly, “Veran is here.” He replies defensively. “Hmm. That is a problem.” The Orc responds. “Where are they now?” The Orc asks. Tragan straightens his posture. “We encountered them in the Forest of Carillon and believe they are headed back to Kelvan Village.

“You BELIEVE?” The Orc questions, “Did you not leave scouts trailing them?” He drills Tragan verbally.

“I did! Then we left him to come here. I have not heard from him, yet. If they go elsewhere, he will leave notice and markings of direction.” Tragan responds curtly.

“I may have underestimated you, Ruff.” The Orc says. He turns to a Troll subordinate and barks orders, “All non-essential troops mount up!”

The Troll bows his head and replies, “Aye, Sir! Mount up!” The Troll spins and runs out of the tent.

He can be heard yelling at the men outside. The noise is deafening as they clamor for weapons and armor.

The Orc picks up a broad axe and motions for all to leave the tent.

“Not you, Tragan.” He bellows.

Once the tent is cleared of all but he and the Ruff, the Orc steps closer. He towers over Tragan. Now Tragan knows how the Candlemaker felt. As he looks up to see the Commander leering down at him, he holds his breath. “Succeed in this and you will be very powerful, Tragan.” The Ruff lets out his breath. However, fail me and the Prince’s head will not be the only one on display in court!” The Orc pushes past him and exits the tent.

The knot in Tragan's throat releases and he swallows his pride. He picks up his sword and steps out of the Command tent.

Looking around the Ruff camp, Tragan sees a mixture of beings. There are Neder Elites, Ruffs, Orcs, and Trolls. Some ride horses, some are on foot, but all are suiting up for battle.

Veran, Serena and Ladir approach Kelvan Village. It looks deserted. They slow their pace as they pass the burned down building that once was a candle shop. All that Ladir knew in life has changed. Gone was yesterday. Today he awakens into a new day that seems as a dream itself. He lowers his head thinking of the only Father he ever knew, now buried in the forest.

They continue on the trail until nightfall. Veran leads them off the trail and up the hill to a cave entrance. “We will setup camp here for the night.” He says to the kids. They dismount and start clearing areas for bedding. Veran calls to Ladir. “After your Uncle killed your blood Father, he found out that your Mother had been taken to Sandraia. As your Mother could still be named Matron of the Land, he had to eliminate her as well. He sent Elites to Sandraia to kill her. Only she knew that she was with child until you were born.” Veran unfolds his bedding and begins making a circle of stones for a small fire. Ladir asks, “Did they kill her?” “Yes, unfortunately.” Veran replies. Ladir bows his head.

Veran starts stacking twigs in the circle. “Your Mother knew that Varis would never let you live so she hid you in the castle when they came for her. After she died, the Ruffs went after King Olan as well. They killed his Queen also, but failed to kill him. The Oracle came to him with a prophecy that you would return to defeat your Uncle, end the war, and reunite the kingdoms in peace. King Olan called your Man-at-Arms, Cardan. He is the man you have known as your Father all these years. He ordered me to take my daughter, Cardan, and you and come to Kelvan Village to hide you from your Uncle.”

Serena breaks in as she unrolls her bed. “Not that you couldn’t take care of yourself without us,” she says with a smile.

Veran continues, “The Kingdom of Artemis fell into ruin. Your Uncle declared himself King of Artemis and declared war against Sandraia. Fortunately, the elders of Sandraia still have a tenuous alliance.”

Veran mutters something beneath his breath and a small fire ignites under the twigs. Soon, a crackling fire engulfs the firewood. Veran unrolls his bedding and crawls inside.

“My daughter, Cardan and I, have been watching over you and keeping you safe. Although Cardan is gone, we will continue to protect you as best we can. You must return to Artemis and destroy your Uncle’s hold on the kingdom.” He says.

Veran rolls a mat into a pillow, then lies down and draws a blanket over his shoulders.

“For now, we will get some rest. In the morning, we will travel to Tamaric and seek out the Oracle. She will grant you the weapons you need. Once you have them, she can direct you to the Ice Crystal.” Veran finishes his speech and rolls over.

Prince Ladir looks at Serena. She smiles at him and rolls over. He lies down and covers himself with a blanket and gazes into the fire. He thinks to himself, “How can I rule a kingdom when I have never been out of my own village?” He considers how little life experience he has, especially compared to the Man-at-Arms and his daughter. He remembers his Father, the Candlemaker, teaching him about respect and responsibility. Ladir slowly drifts off to sleep listening to the crackling of the campfire.

Suddenly, Prince Ladir is awakened by a hand covering his mouth to keep him from making noise. He looks up to see a Ruff raising a knife to stab the Prince.

Ladir begins thrashing and manages to grab a large stone from the fire circle. He slams it hard into the Ruff's helmet. The Ruff composes himself and snarls. He raises the dagger again and gets knocked off Ladir as Veran rams the Ruff like a mountain goat. The Ruff lands hard against the cave wall. Veran spins and stands up drawing his short sword. The Ruff stumbles to his feet and charges towards Veran like an angry bull. Veran sidesteps and the Ruff trips over the stones of the fire circle. He falls on his face in the dirt with a thud.

The Ruff climbs back to his feet and turns. Veran stands at the ready as the Ruff turns around to face him. This time the Ruff charges, he hangs out his muscled arm at the last instant and catches Veran in the throat. Veran collapses to the ground trying to catch his breath. The Ruff walks over to stand above Veran. The Ruff picks up one of Veran's axes and raises it over his head. "Now you die!" The Ruff says. A shriek is heard from behind the Ruff and his eyes jerk open wider. He drops the axe to the side and Veran draws a dagger from his back sheath. He shoves it upwards into the Ruff's stomach. Veran twists the dagger and snatches it out, then rolls aside. The Ruff drops to his knees and falls forward, dead.

Standing behind him is Serena, holding two bloody short swords. She looks to Ladir, "Are you injured?" He brushes himself off and stands up. "No. Thank you." He says. Serena smiles at him. "Nice hit with that rock." She says to him. Serena slings the blood from her blades and wipes them clean on the Ruff's chest. As she sheathes them in her back scabbard, Veran starts gathering his gear. "We need to move out." He tells them. "When this scout doesn't return, they will come here to find him." Gathering their gear, Veran looks up the ridgeline and sees the sunlight peeking over. "Mount up!" He yells. They ride off down the trail and the view shimmers like the surface of a pond.

The view fades back to see their image reflected on the surface of a large scrying pool. A twisted form waves a hand over the pool and says, "They continue to Tamaric Village to seek out the Oracle, My Lord." The dark seer looks up to her master, King Varis. "He growls slightly as he turns and stomps away. He points to a sculpture of a small gargoyle on the wall. He stretches open his fingers and his eyes begin to glow a pale red. The eyes of the stone creature also begin to glow and its stone skin fractures. The creature sheds its skin in pieces as a reptilian gargoyle shakes his body and steps forward. "Notify Commander G'Rosh that they are headed to the Oracle of Tamaric!" The gargoyle screeches and bows to King Varis.

The gargoyle extends its wings and takes off like a bat out of Hell, with a message from its master. Varis walks over to a wall and it dissolves in front of him revealing another cavern. He walks through and the wall reforms behind him. The scrying seer smiles. “Be steadfast, Prince Ladir. Fulfill the prophecy. Restore our lands to balance.” She says into the pool.

She withdraws a small crystal necklace from around her neck. It begins to glow bright white and she speaks to it. “The Ruffs are coming to destroy you. The boy is on his way to you. Prepare for his arrival.”

The view focuses on her necklace then fades back to reveal the Oracle of Tamaric holding a similar necklace.

She speaks to her necklace,  
“I understand, Sister. We will prepare.”  
The glow of the necklace fades away  
and the Oracle places it into the  
neckline of her shirt. She looks over to  
a Village Elder. “An attack is imminent.  
Varis is sending his forces to stop the  
Prince from fulfilling the prophecy. I  
must return to my home and prepare  
for his arrival.” The Elder nods and  
steps back to leave the room. He  
rushes out as the Oracle kneels on a  
mat. Her eyes glow green and her  
body shifts into a mist form. The glow  
of her eyes disappears into the mist. It  
rises to the ceiling and escapes  
through an opening in the roof.

Outside the building, the Village  
Elder is informing troops about the  
upcoming attack.

The villagers are scrambling to gather their belongings and head North. Children are loading into wagons. Ruffs will be here, soon.

Veran leads Serena and Ladir into a village. They approach the general supply depot and dismount. Veran steps inside and calls back to the others. “Bring a large saddlebag when you come in.” Serena answers, “Yes, Sir.” She unties one of her sidebags from the saddle and looks over at Ladir. He is watching her intently. She asks, “Why do you look at me like that? You know I am not permitted as a Courtier.” He smiles, “So you would be willing to be one?” She huffs and snickers. “My Mother died when I was a small girl.”

“My Father’s duties kept him near the throne so I was around the Queen a lot.” She continues.

As the Queen had no children of her own to continue the throne’s bloodline, she took me under her wing.”

Serena, threw the bag over her shoulder and walked to the other side of the horse. Untying the second bag she continued her story. “Although I was not a noble, nor was I a Princess, she treated me as such. She showed me the majesty of the court, as well as showering me secretly with gifts. If the courtiers had known of my favors from the Queen, situations would have been much worse for me. The problem is that I saw how arrogant the courtiers were. They were spoiled brats who lied and stabbed each other in the back to get what they wanted.”

She finished untying the bag and tossed it over her other shoulder.

“Honestly, I was often happy to return to our simple life in the forest. When your Uncle had her killed, I had lost two Mothers. I was happy to leave.”

She stepped up into the merchant’s building followed closely by Ladir.

Ladir puts his hand on her shoulder for a moment. She turns to look at him. “If I could go back and change things, I would. I’m sorry I have caused you so much pain.” He says.

She touches his hand with hers. “I know it’s not your fault. I’m sorry for blaming you. Can we start over?” She smiles at him. Prince Ladir smiles back. “You may not be a princess by blood, but you definitely are one in my heart.” He grins and walks past her.

She lowers her face, licks her top lip and smiles. She watches his rear as he walks through the doorway in front of her. She catches herself staring and smiles.

The hooves of the warhorses cut heavily into the soil as they ran. The horde of marauders is closing in on the Village of Marsa. Villagers see the Ruffs coming and scamper for their lives. One man grabs a pitchfork to defend against a horseman. The villager takes a defensive stance, but is suddenly slammed in the side by a dire wolf. The creature is almost as large as the horses and dispatches the villager with a snap of its jaws. A Ruff on horseback crashes through a living room wall. He rips a section of wall off and lights it in the fireplace.

He jabs his steed forward and throws the torch into the loft upstairs. The wall shatters as he thunders onto the street, trampling villagers beneath the hooves of his beast. This village will be torn asunder in the wake of the Ruffs.

Ladir and Veran tie the last of the saddlebags onto the horses. Serena climbs upon her horse and turns towards the trail. She watches Ladir struggle to mount his horse. She snickers, “Did you never learn to ride a horse?” He slips and fumbles as he claws his way onto the saddle.

“No. I never learned a lot of things.” He thinks to himself. She smiles and goads her ride down the trail. Prince Ladir lowers his head, disappointed in himself.

He tries so hard to impress her. He knows they can never be together according to the laws of nobility. She is not permitted as a courtier. At the same time she sees him as weak and untrained. Ladir has not led the life she has. He has been a simple candlemaker. She is a tough girl raised in a simple life of survival.

They reach their next camp area above a mountain pass. Serena slides gracefully from her horse, taking a step forward and grasping the reins all in one move. Her fluid movements are captivating! Whether she is fighting Ruffs, or simply walking along, her body moves like a panther.

Ladir clamors down from his horse and approaches Veran. "Can you teach me how to fight and defend myself?" He asks.

Veran smiles at Ladir and grabs a saddlebag. “I’ll teach what you can learn.”

After dinner, Veran tosses a battle axe to Ladir. He catches it, but the weight is unbearable. It jerks his body down and slams to the ground.

Looking like a clumsy oaf, Ladir can barely lift the axe. Veran had just wielded the weapon one-handed. Serena watches and snickers. Veran grabs the axe and tosses it aside. He draws a longsword and tosses it to Ladir. Prince Ladir reaches out to catch it from the air and misses. The blade passes his hand and strikes a tree behind him. It falls to the ground clattering. Ladir lifts the blade with both hands. He is not strong enough to hold it with just one. He looks over to see Serena looking on.

He tries to be manly, but the blade is just too heavy for him. Veran shakes his head. "Perhaps, a lighter weapon still?" He says. "You might see if Serena can teach you to use a dagger." Veran turns and walks back towards the horses to prepare for the night. Ladir drops the sword and thinks, "How indignant I must appear."

Serena walks over and places a dagger in his hand. "Hold it like this." She says as she positions the knife in his hand. Her warm touch is very reassuring. Their eyes meet in a soft gaze. Her eyes warm his heart. He wishes for more of her touch, but knows the laws of the land forbid it.

Serena steps away and stands at the ready. "Attack me with a thrust." She beckons. Ladir stabs forward in a clumsy manner.

Serena gracefully sidesteps the blow. She grasps his wrist with her opened hand and pulls him off balance. In a swift and graceful move she spins around him like a dancer. He falls to his face as she disarms him. He hits the ground and rolls to his back as Serena leaps on top of him.

Straddling his chest and pinning his arms with her knees, she crosses her blades at his throat and leans in. Their noses almost touching, she whispers, "That, sweet Prince is how you do NOT attack someone." She smiles at him intently. There is a pause as he smiles back at her. Their faces draw nearer. He smells her sweet breath and takes it in. She feels the heat of his body and face beneath her. Suddenly, she composes herself and stands up.

“Enough for today.” She says as she glides away, breathing heavily. Strutting away she stabs the daggers into the sheaths on her back thinking to herself, “Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!” Knowing she cannot be with him burns inside her.

There is an anger against him for the destruction of her life, but at the same time, a craving for his touch. “He is so weak and untrained. How could he ever be a strong King, or even a husband?” she asks herself.

Prince Ladir plops down next to the fire across from Veran. Ladir looks up with humbled eyes. Veran tosses him a wad of freshly cooked meat. Ladir catches it and looks at his hand. Veran smiles, “When you think, you move too slowly. React with your spirit and your strength will show forth.”

Ladir takes a bite from the meat and gazes at Serena, bedding down for the night. Veran sees his gaze and follows it to look at Serena. “Mind your station Prince. She is no courtier and to treat her as such will cause you nothing but pain.” Veran says with authority.

Veran continues, “In the morning, we will reach the Village of Marsa, on the edge of Sandraia.” He states. “It was our home for many years until your Mother arrived in our kingdom. Serena was treated like a courtier by the Queen who had no child of her own. When I was not required in court we lived in Marsa. After you were born, we were ordered to hide you elsewhere and Serena was torn from our village. Everything she knew was there.” Veran stomps out the fire and unrolls his bedding.

“Tomorrow will be the first time she has been home in many years. It was the place where her Mother died. After there, we must head to the Oracle in Tamaric. There you will receive your Father’s ring, The Ring of the line of Artemis.” Veran pulls his blanket over his head.

Lord Varis looks over the Scryer’s shoulder. He watches the view of the trio sleeping as it fades away. “So, young Prince, you fancy the Woodsman’s Daughter. This I can use!” Varis smiles and turns away from the pool. The Scrying Witch grasps the pendant about her neck. “Take heart young Prince, for your true strength is in your heart.” The Scryer looks back over her shoulder to see Varis seated on a stone.

He is rustling through some scrolls and lost in his own attentions. The Scryer mutters something in an ancient language and her pendant shifts to become a pendant of a crescent moon turned to the left. “The time of prophecy is upon us.” She thinks to herself. “Soon, Lord Varis will meet his end and the true King will find his throne.”

Elsewhere, the Oracle’s pendant also glows brightly. It shifts to become a crescent moon facing to the right. The Oracle looks upon it and smiles. “Soon, they will reach Tamaric. I must prepare.” She says as she walks into her meditation room. “Soon, my Sisters and I shall gather together and be reunited as the lands beneath the Prince’s feet.

She touches a tapestry on the table. She smiles and vanishes into a cloud of mist floating about the room.

Not far away, another mist moves in a cavern. This is the cavern lair of Lagos, the Draconite. A murmuring is heard in ancient tongue, something of relics and reunion.

Another crystal shifts. This pendant is of a crescent moon facing downward. In front of it, a large, dragonscale covered claw opens a book.

The page begins to glow and a shadow is seen on the back wall of the cavern. A dragon of monstrous proportions stirs. Lagos has been awakened.

Veran, Serena and Ladir approach the Village of Marsa and begin to smell smoke. “Ah, the smell of a hearth and a fine meal,” Ladir says.

The look on Veran’s face shows something else. “That is also the smell of roof thatch and flesh.” He says. Veran draws his sword and charges forward. Serena kicks her steed ahead and Ladir follows. As they crest the hill, the village comes into view. It is totally decimated. Few buildings still stand. Serena jumps ahead and rides to a set of homes near the center of town. Ladir stays close behind her.

This is like nothing he has ever seen. Bodies lie strewn everywhere. Women, children and men lay slaughtered in the streets. Some buildings have people pinned to the walls with swords and arrows.

The young Prince is getting his initiation into the world of war. Staring at a man's body that looks like a pincushion of arrows, he hears Serena scream. Ladir jerks his horse to the side and rushes around the corner. Serena is on the ground on her knees. He leaps from his horse and drops at her side. Before her is a group of village children impaled on posts. She reaches up to touch one girl's foot and mumbles, "Katarina."

She begins to sob. "She is my best friend. Was,... was my best friend." She stammers and drops her gaze. She spins on her knees and buries her face in Ladir's chest. He embraces her and holds her tightly as she falls apart into his arms. "I am so sorry." He tells her. He runs his fingers through her hair, as he holds her close to his heart.

Veran steps up and tosses a blanket over the children. Ladir looks up at Veran. Ladir's own voice begins to crack at the horror of the situation. "Why do this? They were children." He asks. Veran pours oil around the base of the stakes and begins piling brush at the base. "Your Uncle is trying to destroy anyone that could help you. We must get to the Oracle before it's too late." Veran says.

Serena wipes her tears away and looks at Ladir. "She is dead because of you." She says as her grief turns to anger.

Veran lights the pyre and faces her. "They are dead because of a corrupt King who also killed Ladir's family.

This was not done by his people, nor by him.

The creatures that did this were mercenaries and Ruffs from the Outlands. An evil tyrant did this. Do not hate Ladir or his people for it.”

Veran, Serena and Ladir spend the next hour gathering villagers’ bodies into a building. When finished, Veran ignites the building.

Walking away, Ladir sees the body of a Ruff with a sword in hand. He picks up the sword and looks at the body. “I swear that I will end this!” He yells.

Serena walks past the burned out building that was her home for many years. She stands in the doorway and sighs. She closes her eyes and remembers her old life of joy.

A hand grabs her ponytail and jerks her head backwards. A large Ruff raises a fist and Serena calls out to Ladir.

The Ruff's fist comes down to silence her quickly. Ladir turns the corner to see the Ruff load her unconscious form onto a horse and mount up. Ladir shouts to Veran and charges the Ruff. From a nearby building, another Ruff sideswipes Ladir, knocking him senseless. He staggers to his feet and swings his sword, catching only air. The Ruff laughs and steps forward. Ladir calls out, "Serena!" He watches the horseman ride off and gets hit again by the Ruff. Anger wells up inside Ladir and he looks up at the Ruff. Ladir's eyes begin to glow white.

His unarmed hand holding him off the ground glows as a white mist stretches out from it. The mist encircles the Ruff's feet and slams them together. Quickly the mist rises wrapping the Ruff like a mummy.

Gasping for breath, the Ruff's eyes beg for release. Ladir stands raising his hand. "Where is he taking her?" He demands. The Ruff mutters, "A war camp on the other side of Tamaric." Anger burns inside Ladir as he clenches his fist. He can hear the Ruff's bones cracking as the mist tightens. The Ruff's eyes roll back into his head and his body goes limp. Ladir drops his hand and all glows fade away. The dead body falls to the ground with a thud. Ladir looks at his hand and realizes he has just killed a man.

Veran steps up and looks at the body on the ground. "They took her to Tamaric." He says to Veran. "Then we ride." Veran replies.

“Excellent work!” Lord Varis exclaims.  
“Now we have him by the throat!”  
Lord Varis mocks Veran, “We ride.”  
Varis runs his hands through the sand and picks up a rock. He throws it into the scrying pool next to the seer. The splash disrupts the vision of the men riding toward Tamaric Village. The Gargoyle calls out, “Tamaric has been destroyed, but they did not find the Oracle. Varis strokes his chin. “He will lead me to her and we will end this once and for all!” Varis spins around waving his arms triumphantly. “Pity the boy! His love, his solace, and his life, all gone in a day!” The Scryer lowers her head. “Yes, Milord. Soon, it will all be over.” She knows that Varis will fall.  
Varis picks up a sword and marches off. Watch the house, Witch. I have a kingdom to secure.” He shouts boldly.

As he exits the room, the scryer lifts the chains that bind her to the stone scrying pool. “Hardly secure.” She says with a smile. She watches the Gargoyle as its skin covers with stone and becomes a statue. She closes her eyes and her necklace begins to glow. She fades into mist and the shackles drop to the ground clanking. The mist form rises to the ceiling and finds a gap in the stonework. Soon, all will be as it should.

Veran and Ladir ride upon another village destroyed by the horde. Fortunately, this village was warned ahead of time. Casualties are minimal.

The Magistrate stands in the center of town. Veran recognizes him as a friend from his childhood and smiles.

“Veran of Marsa, Man-at-Arms to King Olan of Sandraia! Welcome to what is left of Tamaric!” The man calls out. Veran laughs and dismounts. “They elect you Magistrate and you run the place into the ground!” Veran says with a chuckle. Veran waves his hand to Ladir. “May I introduce Prince Ladir? Son of King Daraius, and the rightful heir to the throne of Artemis!”

With this, Ladir dismounts, but snags his leg on the saddle and plummets into a mudpuddle, face first. The Magistrate raises an eyebrow and begins to snicker. Veran laughs.

“Not the most graceful of creatures on horseback, but an heir nonetheless.”

Ladir stands up and wipes his face. He looks at Veran as the woodsman tosses him a towel. Veran steps up and takes the Magistrate’s hand.

“Falor, it is good to see you alive.” Veran says. “What of the Oracle?” He asks. Falor looks past Veran at the Prince. “She is waiting anxiously for the boy. Once he is cleaned up, of course.”

Falor leads them to his home and directs the servants to assist Ladir.

Falor pours a drink and Veran plops down at the table. Falor places the tankard in front of Veran and draws one for himself as well. “Where is Serena during all this?” He asks. Veran finishes his first gulp and lowers the mug. “Taken by Tragan’s founs. “They must have her in the war camp West of here.” Falor says. They’ve been tearing everything apart looking for the Oracle. I am sure they have scouts watching the village.

Veran slugs another gulp from his tankard and looks at the fireplace. He smiles.

“Is the back door still open?” Veran asks. Ladir steps in toweling off his hair. Falor lifts one corner of the mantle and the hearth slides open revealing a passageway behind it. Veran looks at Ladir and jeers, “OH, LOOK! Another HIDDEN door!” Ladir scowls as Falor and Veran walk through. Prince Ladir follows behind as the hearth slides closed again.

The three emerge from behind a shrub in a hillside. A river is nearby. Falor leads them to a waterfall. He looks back at Ladir and boasts, “Two baths in one day. The Prince must feel right at home.”

Prince Ladir jeers back, “Actually, I’ve lived my life as a pauper. A candlemaker’s son. Thank you for making me feel so noble, Magistrate.” Falor looks back as he slides a large rock aside. “Take it not to heart, boy.”

They enter a passageway behind the waterfall and continue through the cave. They arrive at a dead end and Falor raises his hand to the wall. His eyes glow a deep green and the rock melts to the sides revealing a well lit room behind. “Hurry, in case we were followed.” He says to them.

They enter the room and the stone seals behind them. The Oracle steps out of an anteroom. She beckons them to follow her. They enter a room filled with a million candles. Veran says to the woman, “We must hurry. Time is of the essence.”

The Oracle raises her hand to silence him. “Time is as it is. It flows at its own pace. We are but leaves in a stream. By the candle, we are right on time. A few minutes early, in fact.”

Ladir looks around at the million candles filling the room, “Which candle?” The Oracle points to the only candle in the room without a white flame. This one burns with a dark green hue. Gold flickers and pops around its edges as it burns. Veran rolls his eyes. “Oh. THAT candle.” He points to a chair nearby. “Have a seat, we may be here a while.”

The Oracle lifts the candle from its plaque and places it in front of Ladir on the table. This candle was made by your Father, the candlemaker.

It contains a gift from your Father, the King. It was lit on the day of your birth and has burned every day of your life.” Ladir looks stunned. “A single candle has burned for 20 years?” He questions her math quite confused.

“Yes, my Prince.” She replies. This is the light of prophecy. “The time of reception is near.” The candle begins to pop and sizzle and something begins to rise from the wax. A silver ring encircles the wick of the candle. Prince Ladir reaches into the hot wax and draws the ring out. The candle blows out as he lifts the ring. It has a drawn bow and arrow engraved on it.

“This is the Ring of Artemis.” The Oracle explains. It was your Father’s ring, and his Father before him.

To rule this kingdom, you must harness the strength of the ring and the magical bow it contains. Ladir places it on his pointing finger and she redirects him. “It is worn on the middle finger of your bow hand.” She says.

He moves it and feels a sudden sting as the wring grafts itself to his flesh.

He lifts his hand and makes a fist. A magical bow quickly erupts from his hand, his fist holding the grip. “WOW!” The Prince exclaims. “There is no string!?” He sounds confused. She motions for him to draw the bow. As he does, a string and arrow form of magical energy. “The bow will be with you and part of you as long as your heart still beats. It is one of the many weapons you will receive that cannot be removed except in your death.”

She reaches into a pool of water and lifts a handful of it. “Open your sword hand, young Prince.” She asks. She pours the water into his palm. She speaks in a language of ancients as the water is absorbed into his skin. “Lift and close your hand as you did for the bow.” She tells him. He opens his left hand and the bow disappears.

Prince Ladir lifts his right hand and makes a fist. A sword quickly forms in his grip. It has a bold blue blade of magic. “This is the sword of clarity. It can be used to see through magical camouflage. To unhide the hidden and clarify your focus.” She turns and lifts a wax seal from the table. She heats the metal over a flame. “Give me your shield arm. She presses the hot seal into the flesh of his forearm and speaks again in ancient tongue.

The seal sears its emblem into Ladir's arm and he cringes. She removes it and rinses the wound with the water. It heals instantly leaving a tattoo of sorts. "You didn't tell me that would hurt!" He yells at her. "You didn't ask." She replies. She smiles at Veran with a coy look. Veran snickers politely.

She stands in front of Ladir and reaches for a bloodthorn walking Stick nearby. She quickly turns and raises it as if to strike Ladir on the head. On instinct he raises his arm in defense. A green magical shield appears from the tattoo. The shield covers his entire arm. "This shield will grow or shrink to meet the demand of the attack. If someone strikes with a sword, it is a buckler. If driven into the ground, the shield can be used to hold back a ballista strike."

She turns to Veran and smiles. “He has all I have to offer him. Take him to Lagos, and he must claim the Ice Crystal of Doliman. As the trio steps out into the hallway, the Oracle grasps the woodsman’s arm.

“On the day of his coronation, your sacrifices will be repaid.” She says to him. Veran frowns, “My sacrifices?”

The Oracle assures him. “You have lost much in the service of your King and this Prince. All will be as it should.” Veran pulls his arm away.

“I lost my wife, my Queen, my home, and now, my daughter. These are sacrifices no amount of magic can bring back.” He steps out into the cavern as the stone seals behind them. The Oracle waves her hands and everything in her room fades away.

Left with naught but bare stone surrounding her, she fades into mist form. Her voice can be heard as it fades away as well. “All will be as it should.”

The trio exits the waterfall and looks around. “We wait until nightfall to go after Serena.” Veran says to Ladir. Ladir nods his head in agreement. They close the hidden bush entry. Nearby, an Orc scout watches.

At the war camp, a giant firebat lands and Lord Varis slides down from the saddle. “Where is the girl?” He asks. Tragan approaches with Serena, her hands are bound. She spits in Varis’ face. Varis laughs at her weak attempt at disrespect. He raises his hand to her face. A gray mist emanates from his palm and envelopes her head.

Serena's body goes limp as she passes out. "Ah, the way a woman should be,... Silent!" Varis boasts. Tragan tosses Serena onto the saddle of the firebat and lashes her down securely. Varis speaks to the Orc Commander. "Tonight, they will come to find her. Post a guard at the river. Inform him that she has been taken to Castle Artemis to service the King." Varis smiles and mounts the firebat. With a heavy flap of its wings, the giant takes flight and disappears into the night.

Veran leans around a tree to see the guard by the river. He raises his hand and his eyes begin to glow. Vines begin to emanate from the ground behind the Orc scout.

They rise until they are at head level. Quickly, they snap around his mouth and neck lifting him off the ground. The vines slam him to the ground. More vines rise up to bind him from flailing. Veran and Ladir walk up to stand above him. The vines lift the guard horizontally to chest level. Veran leans in and whispers, “If you call for help, they’ll snap your neck.” The Orc nods as best he can. “Where is the girl?” Veran asks. The vines uncover the guard’s mouth. He says, “She has been taken to Castle Artemis to serve as the King’s Consort.” Veran turns to Ladir. “We must get to Lagos quickly.” The guard takes advantage of the lapse in judgment and yells out, “NOW!”

Veran and Ladir spin around as the Orc Commander and a dozen warriors exit the forest.

Veran draws his axe. Ladir raises his arm forming the shield. In his other hand, the sword extends. Behind him, a snap is heard and a gurgling noise seeps from the Orc. Veran's eyes return to normal and the Orc falls to the ground as the vines go limp. The Orc Commander steps forward.

"I've been waiting for you, Veran."

The woodsman recognizes the Orc. Many years ago, in a raid on Veran's village, a horde of orcs killed his wife. Veran fought bravely, wounding the orc with a dagger in the neck. He looks to see the scar he left many years ago, shining from the Orc Commander's neck.

“G’Rosh, I’m going to finish what I started so many years ago!” Veran says with a burning in his voice.

“What have we here?” Another voice interrupts. Tragan steps out of the brush. “Hello Prince Candlesmith!”

Tragan retorts. Ladir’s heart begins to burn with a taste for vengeance.

Tragan circles the Prince. “I see you found a weapon you can lift. Can you use it?” Tragan balks. Ladir lashes out with the sword blade, nearly stabbing Tragan in the face. The sword has no weight. Ladir moves effortlessly, but clumsily. He swings numerous times, missing closely. Tragan steps aside and slams his fist into Ladir’s face. The Prince staggers back, losing his concentration.

The shield and sword disappear and Tragan hits him again, knocking Ladir to the ground.

Veran jumps in, kicking Tragan in the side of the leg. It collapses. Tragan's knee slams to the ground. Veran spins around and catches the back of Tragan's head with the pommel of his axe. Tragan falls face down on the ground, dazed. The Orc Commander thunders forth, toward Veran. G'Rosh lifts a massive mace overhead and swings down to crush Veran's head. Veran dodges, rolling out of the way. G'Rosh catches himself and spins around, swinging the mace again. Veran ducks and swings his axe upwards. It strikes the wrists of the Orc causing him to drop his mace. G'Rosh reaches out to grab Veran.

The woodsman steps aside and parries the attack, but gets hit in the back by a large cudgel.

The blow hurts, even through his armored leather vest. The hit drives straight into Veran's lungs, stealing his breath. Veran falls to his knees.

Tragan kicks Veran in the spine, driving his boot deep into Veran's flesh. The orc growls and warriors rush in to bind the two. Suddenly, arrows slice through the night, thudding solidly into the warriors. Six men fall in the first volley. The orc and Tragan rush back into the forest.

Another set of bolts fly in, taking down the rest of the group. A small gang of men, led by Falor rush into the clearing. Quickly, they gather Veran and Ladir and fade back into the forest carrying them to safety.

The group of rescuers takes Ladir and Veran back to Tamaric Village to dress their wounds. This was a defeat neither was prepared for.

Prince Ladir opens his eyes and looks around the room. He is in a palace bedroom being attended by a physician and two chamber maids. One of the girls turns to speak to the Apothecary, "Sir, he is awake." The Doctor approaches and checks Ladir's bandages. "How do you feel?" He asks Ladir. "I have an incredible headache, but otherwise, fairly well." Ladir says with a smile. "Excellent! I will inform the King that you are available." He says. Ladir sits up with assistance from the maids. He groans heavily as his sides ache.

They assist him in dressing and help him to the door.

“Careful of the step, Milord.” One of the girls says. “You know who I am?” He inquires. “Yes, your Majesty, as does King Olan. He is awaiting you in the throne room.” She replies.

Prince Ladir slowly enters the throne room without assistance as the girls step back outside. Ladir approaches the throne to see Veran standing next to the King. The throne room is surprisingly vacant of people. “Where is everyone?” Ladir asks. “How long was I out?” The King looks up and Veran stands at attention. King Olan motions for Ladir to approach him. “Please advance Your Majesty. We have much to inform you of. You have been asleep for two days. We feared the worst.” Olan says.

The King stands and motions to a chair beside him on the dais.

As Ladir sits down, Veran speaks, “Prince Ladir. Time is of the essence. Events are unfolding faster than we can prepare for them. We must travel to the Ice Crystal of Doliman as soon as possible.”

Ladir looks up, his head still throbbing with pain. “Ice Crystal?” “King Olan finishes, “The Ice Crystal Cave contains a crystal gem which must be joined with the Crystal Shard of Neder. Once reassembled, the souls bound within the shard will be released, weakening your Uncle’s power. The crystals combine to create the Crystal Sword of King Bazrah of Neder.

Whosoever returns that sword to Neder will be declared that land's new King. It cannot be your Uncle!" Olan says.

"You must collect the gem, and then seek out Lagos the Draconite for the gift of knowledge. She will give you access to the Book of Kings. It contains the knowledge of your entire family line, including your Father."

King Olan stands and collects a scroll from a nearby guard. He turns and hands it to Ladir. "Only then will you be prepared to strike back at your Uncle's heart!" Ladir unrolls the scroll. It is a map leading to the Cave of the Ice crystal. You must hurry. Gather these items and return to me. I will prepare the remainder of my forces to ride with you to Sandraia to reclaim your throne.

Olan bows to Prince Ladir and Veran and walks out of the chamber with his entourage. Veran walks ahead as Ladir stands and grunts.

“This is going to be a long day.” Ladir thinks to himself. He walks from the throne room out into the courtyard. Veran helps him climb upon his horse, and Veran leaps onto his horse. Ladir opens the map. We head South to the cave from here.” He says.

Serena lifts her head and shakes away the dizziness to see a wall. It has shackles hanging on it and skeletons of victims past. “What do you want from me?” She demands. A hooded figure approaches and removes its cowl. “You are to be consumed by the King of Artemis to sustain his energy! The figure says.

It is the Shadow Scryer from Lord Varis' chamber. "I have news for you." The scryer says. "Your prince will be here soon to free you and take you home."

Serena looks puzzled. "Don't you mean that he isn't coming and I will be horribly tortured to death or something evil?" The witch laughs. "Sorry. I'm not evil. I have been in service of Varis since he attacked my home in the North many years ago. I am one of the three sisters." She exclaims.

Serena shakes the chains and asks, "Are you here to free me?" The scryer looks up at her and answers, "It is not yet time. We must wait until the Prince has acquired the gift of knowledge and rides here with the army of Sandraia."

Serena tilts her head. “Army? He can barely hold a sword, yet he can command an army?” The scryer laughs. “Once he holds the book of Kings, he will absorb their knowledge and the Prince will be fit to be a King!”

Serena scoffs, “I train all my life; blood, sweat and tears, to learn my skills. He gets to learn it all by holding a book for a few seconds? I feel less than appreciated.” The scryer turns to walk away. She looks back at Serena. “Fear not, Milady, for your sacrifices and appreciation will be rewarded soon enough.” She says.

Veran dismounts outside the cave of the Ice Crystal. “I am told you must face this challenge alone.” He says to Ladir.

The Prince sloppily throws himself from the saddle to stand by Veran. “I have to go in all by myself?”

He asks. “Yes, you must earn the right to be King or it means little. Nothing of value comes without diligence.” Veran says.

Ladir steps into the cave entrance and begins walking into the darkness.

He notices that the walls seem lit, although there is no light source.

He reaches the end of the tunnel and steps into a large room. There is an engraving on the wall. It is a raised tablet relief, cut from smooth stone. In the back of his head, he hears a voice. “Ardminus, laftus, rivilus.” He repeats it aloud.

The tablet begins to glow and the cave seals shut behind him.

Prince Ladir is now standing in a room of stone, with no escape. The only light is from the tablet. The wall behind the tablet begins to shift and the stone melts away to become a doorway into another room.

Ladir steps in and the wall reforms behind him. In the center of the room is a vertical stone pillar standing waist high.

The room is made of rough stone. The walls are jagged and pitted as is the pillar in the center. Hovering above the pillar is a very large crystal. It shines unlike anything he has ever seen. He looks around the room to see nothing else. He reaches out to grasp the crystal and his hand passes through it like water. He removes his hand and tries again.

The third time Ladir swipes at the crystal, the stone wall in front of him begins to shift. The outline of a giant stone golem begins to form and step out of the wall. He raises his shield arm and forms a large panel shield. He raises his right arm and clenches a fist, forming the sword. “Stupid! I should have used the sword to search for hidden objects before I came in here!” He says to himself.

Ladir steps back, preparing himself as the stone golem steps toward him. “I have been waiting for you, Prince Ladir.” The golem says. Ladir looks puzzled. “I need the gem!” He yells to the golem. The golem leans over and speaks to Ladir. “It is more polite to ask than to attack.” It says. Ladir raises an eyebrow. “ASK?!” He replies.

“As a King, you will learn that not every situation requires a weapon thrust into an opponent’s chest.” The golem says. “Then, may I have the gem?” Ladir asks. The stone golem smiles. “That’s more like it. Negotiation before mutilation.” The golem says. “Place your sword into the top of the pillar and slowly push downward.” The golem motions for Ladir to take action.

As Ladir does so, the floating gem disappears and a glow begins to emanate from the golem’s chest. The stone crawls away revealing a long, thin crystal. The golem reaches into his chest and withdraws the gem, then hands it to Prince Ladir. The Prince removes his weapon from the stone and lets his shield and sword fade away.

He takes the gem from the golem and secures it in his hip pouch. “Why the illusion of the floating gem?” Ladir asks. “What better way to hide the truth than in plain sight.” Says the golem. “Seek out the lair of Lagos.”

The golem slides back into place within the wall. The stone reforms and the golem disappears. Behind Ladir, the cave opens again leading out.

Prince Ladir walks out of the cave to see Veran practicing fighting moves. Ladir asks, “Do you think this book will teach me how to fight?” Veran slides his sword into a scabbard on the horse’s saddle. “Anything is possible. The magic of the realm is very powerful and unpredictable. Being in the same line as your Uncle, your magic can counter his.” Veran says.

Veran continues, “You will be able to turn his magic against him. Remember though, he can also turn yours against you! According to the prophecy, you will destroy him with his own magic.”

Ladir climbs aboard his horse. Veran mounts his own horse and he opens the map. It looks like the Oracle marked Lagos’ den on here as well.

Veran clicks his tongue and his horse thunders down the path to the mountains. Ladir follows behind at a slower pace, feeling paranoid. After a few minutes, a small gargoyle is seen atop a cliff nearby. It flies off in the same direction as the adventurers.

In Castle Artemis, Lord Varis sits on the throne reading a scroll. A pool of water next to him shakes. The water rises taking the form of the gargoyle.

The gargoyle speaks, “Lord Varis, they have the crystal shard you need. They are heading to the lair of Lagos for the book. I am still following them.”

Varis looks over at the water form, “Excellent! I will send the troops to meet them at Lagos’ lair. Knowledge or not, this boy is getting on my nerves!” Varis says.

Varis waves his hand over the water and the water gargoyle’s shape shifts into the Orc Commander. Varis speaks to the form.

“Commander G’Rosh! The boy is headed to Lagos’ lair. Intercept him and eliminate him!” The liquid Orc replies, “Yes, Sir!” Varis swipes his arm through the water shape and splatters water all over the floor.

Varis throws the scroll across the room and stands up from the throne. He grabs his sword and stomps away.

Arriving at the lair of Lagos, both men dismount and enter the cave quickly. Veran reaches into his hip pouch and pulls out a small glass orb. He mutters a few words and it glows brightly filling the cave with light. They hurry through the system clawing their way through the cavern.

They enter a room with candles all over the walls, as in the Oracle's chambers. On an altar rests a large book. Ladir walks over to it and turns the pages but they are all blank. "There is nothing written here." He says. Veran flips a few pages and turns around. "LAGOS!" He calls out. "We need you!" He says.

A low bellow is heard from the dark end of the chamber. A giant clawed hand reaches out and grasps the edge of the wall. The leviathan form of Lagos fills the cave as she enters.

Veran kneels on the floor and Ladir takes his example as well. The monstrous form of Lagos shifts and twists, shrinking in size and shape. It reduces down to a slightly larger than human version that walks on two legs.

Still towering over the two, Lagos steps past them and places her hand on the book. "I was sleeping well until this week." Lagos groans. "The book does not show what is written to the eyes, but to the mind. Only a King may receive knowledge from the book of kings." Lagos lifts the book and places it closed into Ladir's arms. Ladir's Ring of Artemis begins to glow.

On the spine of the book is a matching symbol. Lagos twists the ring so the symbol faces Ladir's palm. She lifts Ladir's hand and places the ring symbol against the book's symbol.

Ladir's eyes glow bright white and suddenly he screams out in pain. Lagos holds Veran back from touching Ladir. The Draconite begins speaking in ancient tongues as the oracles did.

Her pendant begins to glow the same intense white color. A white mist creeps from the book making circles around Ladir. The Prince falls to his knees and drops the book onto the floor. The books pages begin rifling from front to back as if being read at an incredible speed. The mists absorb into the Prince's body and the back cover slams shut. All is quiet.

The horde tramples trees and shrubs as they thunder towards Lagos' home. Large black dire wolves run alongside huge warhorses, weaving their way between the largest trees.

Lagos leans over to pick up the book and Ladir looks up at her. "How do you feel?" Lagos asks as she places the book on the altar stand. Ladir stands up uneasy.

Veran reaches for him, but Ladir holds his hand up to back him off. "I'm fine." He says.

Veran immediately notices something different about Ladir. Lagos walks back towards the dark end of her lair.

"All will be as it should." She says.

As she steps into the shadows, Lagos fades away into the darkness. Prince Ladir turns to Veran. "We have to get back to Sandraia, as fast as we can."

Veran nods in agreement. As they exit the cave, Veran watches Ladir. This time, as Ladir mounts his horse, he is fluid. He moves as if he has had centuries of training. Veran climbs onto the saddle and they ride off. Arriving at Sandraia's gate, Veran is immediately recognized by the guards and escorted in.

They rush to the King's chamber to meet with King Olan. He is speaking with a man-at-arms, and he has suited up in full armor. As Ladir approaches, the man-at-arms heads out to gather forces at the front gate. King Olan faces Prince Ladir. "Our scouts have informed us that Varis has sent a large force after you. They just missed you at Lagos' lair and are on your heels." He says.

Prince Ladir asks Olan, “I will head to the front gate as well. As they are looking for me it will focus their attentions there.” King Olan nods in agreement. Veran and King Olan catch each other’s gaze and they know something is definitely different about Ladir. He is becoming a King.

As Ladir steps onto the parapet of the gate, he sees torches in the forest heading their way. Veran steps up below onto the drawbridge. Ladir lifts his hands and the shield and sword form. The forest comes alive as black dire wolves attack from the forest edge. He watches as the gates of Sandraia open and a dozen white dire wolves exit. They charge into the black wolves shredding some at first attack.

The archers on the walls begin firing burning arrows at the Orcs and Trolls running toward the castle. Veran draws his sword and charges into the fray. Shortly after he enters the attack, Veran finds his mark, the Orc Commander G'Rosh. Veran smiles at the opportunity to finish this, once and for all. Prince Ladir sees his own target, ... Tragan.

Prince Ladir runs down the staircase to meet Tragan's attack at the bridge. Ladir's sword blazes brightly as it cleaves through the black wolves and orcs in his path. He feels a whisp of air to his left and raises his shield. A loud thud hits the shield and ladir looks to his feet. He sees a crossbow bolt with a flattened head lying on the ground. He looks to the forest to see a ballista being loaded.

He makes the motion of drawing a bow and the sword and shield disappear. In their place, the bow forms with a fiery bolt. He lets it fly and watches it sink into the ballista commander's chest. As the troll falls backwards the firebolt ignites some pots near the base of the catapult next to it. An explosion rocks the area, killing many and wounding more. Both engines erupt into flames.

Tragan launches a small axe toward Ladir. He sidesteps it, catches it and throws it back. Tragan falls from his horse onto the ground. Satisfied that Tragan was fallen, Ladir approaches. Tragan rolls over with the axe embedded into his armor. He draws it out and stands up, bleeding heavily. Ladir forms his weapons and steps up.

Tragan swings with his axe and Ladir parries it with the shield. As Tragan withdraws the axe, Ladir slides in and shoves the tip of his blade into Tragan's chest wound, opening it further. Tragan brings his fist down striking Ladir in the face. As he lifts his arm to strike again, Prince Ladir spins around and sinks the sword to the hilt into Tragan's chest! The Ruff pauses for a moment, looking down at the weapon in his chest. Tragan falls backward, dead.

The blade holds no blood as it is pulled from Tragan's body. Ladir turns to see Veran getting the upper hand on G'Rosh. Suddenly, a large white dire wolf leaps at Ladir. He attempts to dodge a strike, but none come. The white wolf impacts a Ruff who had been charging at Ladir.

The wolf makes quick work of the Ruff and snaps its jaws, splintering the Ruffs neck. The wolf turns to face Ladir and steps forward. It bows its head to Prince Ladir with reverence. It almost has a human intelligence. Veran parries the spear thrust from G'Rosh and drops to the ground. On his way up, Veran draws two daggers and sinks them deeply into the Orc's ribs. G'Rosh headbutts Veran, driving him to the ground in a daze.

Veran catches his second wind as G'Rosh leans over. Veran's eyes glow green and vines erupt from the ground to snag the orc's face. They slam G'Rosh's face into the ground, smothering him. Veran rolls to the side and scoops up a broadaxe. He stands and drops the blade in one motion.

The axe sinks all the way through the orc's neck, cleaving his head from his body. Veran releases the axe and looks to see Ladir and the white dire wolf. The attacking forces have been defeated and Veran approaches the couple. Standing beside Ladir, they both feel at odds with the wolf. It seems familiar, somehow. The wolf begins to shapeshift and stand on its hind legs. Its fur becomes light fur armor as it becomes human. It is the man-at-arms. It is Cardan!

Ladir is confused. Cardan explains. "Shortly after you left me in the forest, the Oracle of Tamaric arrived and healed me beyond what the ring could do. As a human, I was at the end of my rope. She turned me into a dire wolf, which has its own healing abilities."

Cardan looks toward the castle and begins walking. “Instead of rejoining you, she told me what events would transpire. I had to travel to Sabara to gather the others who would return. I wanted to be with you, but my duties took priority.” Cardan walks with them into the castle. “I will be joining the first assault on Artemis Castle.” Cardan says. Prince Ladir ponders for a moment as they enter the throne room. King Olan is being debriefed about the battle.

Olan smiles. “I see you survived.” Cardan responds, “He did quite well. I am very proud of him.” Ladir kneels to King Olan. “Majesty. I request to be part of the first assault on Artemis.” “You will be safe here until the elites have taken the castle.” King Olan says.

Ladir responds, "I cannot ask others to do what I am not willing to do myself. It is also to be my castle, should I not defend it myself?" The King respects this decision and agrees to allow Ladir on the assault. "They have Serena in the keep. We will need to free her as well." Ladir chimes in. Veran smiles. King Olan offers his elite guard for the assault. "They will attack at first light." He tells Ladir. They all part ways to clean up for dinner. In the main hall, it is to be a feast of celebration. Ladir walks down the hall.

Unsure of where he is, Ladir opens a door. He finds two dozen white dire wolves sleeping on the floor of the room. One looks up at him and barks an order in wolf tongue. The dire wolves all awaken and shapeshift to human form.

They kneel to Prince Ladir and all exclaim in one voice, “Your Majesty!” The nearest one steps up and speaks to Ladir. “Sorry, Milord. The elites were told we would be attacking in the morning. They need rest for tomorrow.” Ladir smiles and pats the Captain on the shoulder. “Pardon me for disturbing you.” Ladir bows to them and steps backward from the room. He watches as the door closes. In the room, the men shift back to their natural forms. They must be in the form of dire wolf to sleep and heal their wounds.

Prince Ladir finds his room for the night and beds down. Tomorrow will be a day of reckoning.

Lord Varis reaches into the fireplace and draws out a handful of ash. He walks to the window and mumbles something into his fist. He extends his arm and the breeze catches the ash. It drifts out of the castle and down to the ground outside the moat. It falls into a dozen small piles on the ground. Lord varies watches and his eyes begin to glow green. The piles of ash glow and sink into the soil. His eyes cease and he smiles. Where every pile of ash sat, an enormous clawed paw erupts from the ground. The soil breaks apart as a dozen warlock owlbears climb out of the mud. They stand and turn looking upward to face Varis.

Lord Varis whispers quietly, “Guard the forest. Let none pass.” The Owlbears turn around and walk into the forest.

Varis knows that his nephew will stop at nothing to kill him. It is best that Varis take precautions, should Ladir circumvent his plans.

Veran and Ladir ride atop their horses toward Artemis castle. Around them is an army of creatures and men. There are many white dire wolves running through the forest, dodging trees at break neck speeds. Ladir looks to the left to see a man on horseback tearing through the brush in his direction and realizes it is a scout, returning from Artemis. "Majesty!" The scout calls out. Ladir slows his horse to match the scout. The man is almost out of breath as he approaches.

The scout can barely sit up in the saddle from his wounds.

He has been mauled and clawed over most of his body and is covered in blood. He speaks to Veran. "There are Ruff camps everywhere, Sir. They have your daughter in the dungeon. Varis has summoned owlbears to protect the forest line." Prince Ladir orders a medic to attend to the scout and rides to the front of the assault.

Veran looks at the ravine ahead of them and turns to Ladir. "We could sneak through the gorge most of the way to the castle. We would pass many camps. We do not have the manpower to eliminate everyone." Prince Ladir speaks up. "We need to get to my Uncle. I can end this and we won't have to." Veran agrees and they dismount, and head for the ravine.

A Ruff scout stands atop the ravine watching for movement.

An arrow suddenly pierces his throat preventing him from screaming. Veran appears from the mist and strikes a killing blow.

A watchman in a nearby tower looks over to see the scout missing. As he leans over to get a closer look, Prince Ladir's sword quickly removes the watchman's head in a single blow.

In the ravine, a hundred men and dire wolves move silently forward, through the outpost.

Lord varies sits on his throne, irritated. "Where is she?!" He screams at the soldier in front of him. The cowering man replies. "She is gone Majesty. The scrying room is empty and her manacles are still closed." Varis stands up, becoming more irritated.

Lord Varis paces in front of the throne. “So, her loyalties failed me! The scrying witch of the North has misled me. I can only surmise that she is the reason for our failures. You may redeem yourself. He says to the guard. “Take a contingent of elites to the Oracles home and the lair of Lagos. Bring me their heads! The three sisters shall only be reunited in death!” The guard bows repeatedly as he flees the throne room. “Yes, Milord! It shall be done, Majesty!”

Varis walks to the parapet and looks out into the night. “Where are you, boy? He mutters. I know you are coming. I feel your magic. Somehow you seem different.” Then something glints in the moonlight, catching Varis’ attention. He squints and watches more intently. The ravine is alive.

Veran and Ladir emerge from the forest with a group of elites. There are many guards at the drawbridge and along the parapets. Ladir and Veran slide quietly into the moat. Many of the elites follow them. They take up positions on the back wall of the castle and in the moat. Ladir makes a motion to them and all fire their bows in unison. Every guard falls instantly. This is why these are the elites! Prince Ladir and Veran climb onto the bridge, knowing this is too easy. From above a flight of flaming arrows strikes the water of the moat, igniting it into a firestorm. Ladir looks up to see the parapets, resupplied with more troops than before. Elites are dying in the fire. Some climb onto the bridge or the ground next to the castle wall. Then the forest opens upon them.

Out of the forest step two large Owlbears, flanked by a dozen black dire wolves. They charge the survivors as the last of the men in the moat are skewered by a hail of arrows.

Ladir forms his sword and shield and jams the shield into the ground. It increases in size to become a bubble, completely enclosing himself, Veran and a few elites from the attack. From inside, the elites fire their bows through the bubble striking down some of the black wolves. From above, bubbling hot oil is poured down splattering over everything. Flaming arrows ignite the oil which burns across the surface of the dome shield but does not penetrate it. An Owlbear approaches and slaps at the dome. Its mighty arms have no effect. It claws at the shield, but damages nothing.

Above, Varis watches the battle. He mutters quietly. "As your magic may undue mine I find your weakness."

Varis raises his hands and the moat separates, creating two high walls of water on each side of the bridge. The moat beneath is now void of water. Beneath their feet, the entire bridge vanishes! All fall into the dry moat like a pit arena. Ladir lands like a cat. Veran hits in a crouched position and explodes upwards into an Owlbear's chest. Ladir's sword vanishes as his bow forms. He fires numerous bolts into the Owlbear before it dissolves into ash. He watches as An elite leaps onto the second Owlbear. It is Cardan! The direwolf bites deeply into the owlbear's heavily armored neck. The creature screams out in pain and flings him off. He lands on his feet and turns.

As Cardan spins around, he shifts to human form. His hands glow deep red and a boar spear forms. He quickly spears upward through the Owlbear's lower jaw and the weapon exits the top of its head. Instantly, the creature dissolves into ashes upon the wind. Shortly, the fights dwindle and only ten men are left alive in the pit. "It was a well-placed ambush." Varis thinks to himself. He leans over the wall and waves his hands as the rim of the pit fills with archers. Ladir and his crew lower or dissolve their weapons in compliance. Varis whispers quietly and the water slips in beneath their feet. The water becomes ice and freezes them in their tracks. The ice rises until it replaces the bridge and troops rush in to secure their prey. All are lead into Varis' throne room.

Entering the room, Veran pokes Ladir and points to the dais. At the base, below Varis' feet is Serena. She is seated indignantly fumbling with her shackles. She looks up as they enter. She and Ladir exchange looks and she is elated to see him alive. Veran nods and she returns his motion.

“WELCOME TO ARTEMIS!”

Varis boasts as he rises from his throne. Suddenly a surprised look of mockery crosses his face. He turns and opens his hand pointing to the throne. “Did you lose this?” He asks.

Ladir grins at his Uncle. “I didn't lose it. I knew exactly where it was. The problem is, when I returned, there was some idiot sitting on it!” Veran, Serena and Cardan snicker. Varis looks around to see many of his own guards doing the same. This infuriates him!

“ENOUGH!” Varis yells. He lifts his left hand and an energy ball flies out striking Ladir in the chest. The force of it lifts Ladir from the arms of his captors and launches him backward. He slams into the wall and falls to the ground, unconscious. Another bolt strikes Veran doing the same to him. “Take them to a holding cell!” Varis yells. “I’ll have my fun slicing them into rat bite pieces, shortly!” He exclaims. The limp bodies are lifted and carried away as Serena watches. A tear rolls down her face and strikes her manacles. In the back of her head, she hears a voice. “All will be as it should. Take heart in this. The time of prophecy is at hand.” She looks up and sees a mist slipping around the corner following the guards out of the room. Beside Varis, a shape forms.

It is the guard, formed in the water of the scrying bowl. “My Lord. Lagos’ Lair and the Oracle’s den are empty. Naught but bare stone walls. Every trace of them is gone.” Varis sits and thinks for a moment. “Return to the castle. I have other plans for your troops. You will gather here and attack Sandraia before nightfall. Burn that castle to the ground!” The form bows and melts down into the water. The surface of the pool flattens and smooths over. Varis waves his hand over it and speaks quietly. He looks confused. The water does nothing. He tries again. Nothing. As he opens his mouth to speak, the water explodes from the bowl into his face and the bowl falls to the floor with a clatter.

He spins around angrily to see Serena standing below, still chained.

Her eyes are glowing a faint green. He steps forward and backhands her face, knocking her to the floor. He calls to guards. "Take her to her room and make her comfortable!" He says. Two guards step up and grasp her by the manacles and chains. Leading her away, one of the guards whispers to her. "We are Artemis Elites. You will soon be freed." She walks quietly with them out the door as Varis fumes.

Ladir opens his eyes and grasps his chest. It is difficult to breath. His ring begins to glow and he feels a rush of fresh air enter his lungs. His chest is glowing beneath his ring of healing. He sits up and the glow fades. He takes a deep breath and relaxes. Neraby on the floor are Cardan and Veran.

Ladir stretches his hand out towards them and a gold mist emanates from the ring. It splits into two tentacles of fog and each engulfs a friend. Shortly, both men gasp for air and roll onto their backs. Both take deep breaths and sit up. They look at Ladir as the glowing mist retreats into the ring and fades away. Veran and Cardan look at each other abeam. They know Ladir is ready to become King! The woodsman sits up and begins looking around the cell. Cardan laughs and suddenly composes himself. The elites in the cell, Veran and Ladir all look at Cardan, confused. He stands up and walks to one of the walls. "I have been here before." He laughs. He searches a drawing of hieroglyphs on the wall. He raises his hand and it glows blue. A number of glyphs begin to glow.

Four stones melt away in the floor next to Veran. He peers in to see steps below. Cardan calls to them. "Hurry, we haven't much time." The elites and crew pile into the secret passage and the floor reforms above them. A wall passage with a torch on it opens in a hallway. Ladir, Veran and Cardan exit cautiously. Ladir speaks to the leader of the elites. "Secure the castle from inside. Let no fresh troops in. Afterwards, meet me in the throne room." The Captain bows and the wall closes. Veran peers around a corner to see the two guards at the door. Cardan recognizes them as Artemis elites. Across the hall, stand two Ruff guards. Veran draws two small daggers from his back sheath and let them fly down the hallway. They strike the Ruffs in the side of their heads.

The two men fall face down onto the floor. The elites look down the hallway and wave sarcastically to Veran. “Glad you have good aim!” One of them says. The other turns to unlock the door and calls inside to Serena. “The Prince is here with your Father.” She exits and rushes to Veran. She leaps up hugging him strongly. He holds her for a moment. She says, “I thought I had lost you, too!” She looks at him with tears flowing down her face. He smiles back. “No, my dear. I have unfinished business.” Cardan looks down another hallway and Ladir steps forward. “We must find my Uncle.” Cardan motions that the hall is clear and the guards take up rear watch positions. Ladir steps down the hall and passes the king’s chambers. He tries the door but it is locked.

As he steps away from the door, a stone wall slams down behind him, closing the hallway. On the other side, Serena rushes to the wall and beats it with her fists. “Ladir!” She shouts. Next to him, Prince Ladir hears the bolt open on the chamber door. His Uncle steps out into the hallway. “Hello, boy!” Varis booms. Shield and sword form for Ladir as he steps forward. Varis smirks and a flaming scimitar forms in Varis’ hand. Ladir lunges faster than Varis expected and slices a small gash in his Uncle’s side. Veran looks down and sees the wound starting to bleed. He frowns and lashes out at Ladir. Varis sweeps towards Ladir’s head. He misses and draws a small dagger from behind his back. He throws it at Ladir. It slices Ladir’s arms slightly and sticks into the wall.

Prince Ladir grunts from the wound in his arm. It stings, burns, but he has to continue fighting. Varis mocks him. “What’s the matter boy? A little pain stopping you from failing, again? Your Father screamed like a wetnurse when I peeled the skin from his flesh. He was weak! You are his spawn! A miserable excuse for a son! You were nothing more than night wasted in a drunken consort’s bedchamber! I was to be King until your filthy whore of a Mother spit you out!” Varis jeered at Ladir. “NO!” I am the son of a Queen! My mother fled this kingdom with me in her belly! Birthed me herself in Sandraia! My Mother was the Queen of Artemis! I am the rightful heir!” Ladir lunges again, slower than before, but fast enough to catch his Uncle unaware. Ladir’s anger feeds him.

Varis parries the blow, but not before Ladir's sword slices deeply into his Uncle's hand. The flaming sword disappears as Varis loses his concentration. He covers the fresh wound on his hand and kicks a panel at the base of the wall. A door opens and Varis jumps through. Ladir leaps forward trying to stop the door as it closes. It slams shut and a click is heard on the other side. It is locked.

Behind Ladir, vines creep under the wall barricading the hallway. They thicken and begin to lift the heavy stone deadfall. As it lifts, Veran sees his friends. Cardan, Serena and Veran have joined hands and all three have green glowing eyes. The vines rise and slam the door upward into place. The three rush through and the stone slams down behind them.

Serena hugs Ladir. “Sorry it took so long. Somehow he was preventing us from entering.” Ladir points to the passage. “He escaped, but I think he is headed to the throne room.”

They start running down the hall toward the throne room and Ladir slows. His vision becomes blurry. The crew stops and turns as he falls to the floor behind them. Serena rushes to him and lifts his head. The arm wound is seeping yellow bubbling ooze. Cardan steps up and see this. “Shadowbat poison! No!” he yells. He grasps Ladir’s hand with the healing ring and places the palm onto the wound. The ring glows faintly and fades. “That’s the one thing the ring cannot heal! Damn you Varis!” He says. Veran reaches into a hip pouch and draws some moss and ayrebane.

He crushes them together in his hands and presses them onto the wound. He looks at Serena and frowns. She peers into her Father's eyes and for the first time in her life she truly fears. She see his gaze, void of hope. He slowly shakes his head left to right and closes his eyes.

Cardan lifts Veran's arm. If we can find the Oracle before he,..." Cardan stops himself. "We must find her, now!" He restarts. Veran stands and looks down at Serena. "Stay with him." He says.

Tears pouring down her cheek, she stammers. "I will, father. I will."

Cardan and Veran rush down the hall towards the throne room. They split at the end of the hallway going different directions. Serena looks down at Ladir, cradled in her arms.

Prince Ladir's face is beginning to turn a sickly odd yellow color. His eyes are beginning to sink into his face. Serena begins to cry. "It can't end like this." She sobs. Ladir smiles up at her. "All will be as it should. He whispers." Serena kisses him on the forehead. "I love you. She whispers back. "I know I am forbidden to be with you except as a guardian. I am not noble, nor fit to be your Queen." Prince Ladir coughs. "Had I become King, I would have changed that. That law could not stop us. I would be honored to have you as my Queen. Perhaps you could teach me how to ride a horse." He smiles and coughs again. Serena giggles, choking back her sorrow. His eyes flicker closed. He opens them and whispers, "I love you." His eyes close as blood begins to flow from his nose.

Serena sobs uncontrollably and stammers, “Until death do us part, my sweet Prince.” She holds him close as his breaths become weaker. Finally, his body falls limp in her arms. Serena grips his body tighter and screams out, “NOOOO!!!” It is a yell of torment that can be heard throughout the castle.

In the throne room, Varis is reading a scroll and looks up. He sneers to himself knowing it will not be long now. The intruders will be destroyed and his reign will be secured. The door slams open and Veran steps in. he draws his sword and rushes toward the King. Varis tosses the scroll into the air. It shifts and grows to the size of a blanket. It falls and envelopes Veran, binding him tightly. He slams to the floor and slides for a few feet.

Varis brags. “Pitiful fool! You are the village idiot compared to me! What have you accomplished in your miserable little life, other than guarding the boy who would be King?” Varis tilts his head and leers at Veran. Veran struggles to free himself. Varis lifts a brazier and pours the oil onto the floor. It slowly seeps toward Veran. Varis lifts a lit torch and holds it high. “Your Prince is dead! Your daughter will be as well and everything you know and love will burn, including you!” As Varis is about to drop the torch a spear plucks it from his hand and pins the torch to the wall. The spear disappears and the torch clatters to the floor safely away from Veran.

In the doorway stands Cardan. He lifts his hand as the spear reforms in it.

He throws it again at Veran on the floor and it slices all the way through the bindings. Veran rolls to the side and stands up. He snarls and twin axes glow forth from his hands. Veran rushes the King swinging wildly. He catches pillars and pedestals. The axes shatter the marble and stone into shrapnel. The pieces fly into Varis' face almost blinding him as he steps backward. A spear flies by Veran's head and pierces the King's shoulder. Cardan leaps up over Veran's head. As he comes down his feet extend, striking Lord Varis in the face as Cardan lands. He draws the spear from the King's body and Veran leans over Varis. His axes cross at Varis' throat. "Yield and live!" Veran yells. Varis snickers, "Honorable idiots!"

Varis fires energy bolts from his hands tossing the two men off him. They slam to the floor on their backs and roll down the throne's steps. Veran stands up and freezes. A slight thumping sound is heard and he falls forward. In his back are six arrows. The guard has returned just in time to save his evil master. Cardan stands over the woodsman and takes a defensive position against the new foes. Behind them a man gurgles and falls. They turn to face the onslaught of elites and Artemisian guards, clearing a path to the throne room. Serena soars over the heads of the guards like a hawk. She reaches the floor and rolls twice coming to her feet like a wheel unrolling.

She stands and faces Varis with a glowing dagger in each hand and hatred burning in her heart. “You killed him.” She glares at Varis. Lord Varis stands proudly. “That was the idea from the beginning. I regret that it took so damned long!” He bellows. Serena begins throwing daggers at Varis. As she releases one, another forms in her hand to replace it. They stream toward the King. He begins batting them aside, but can’t keep up with the onslaught. Some begin to embed themselves into his body and other stick into the wall behind him. He fires an energy bolt and she dodges it. He leers, “Your boy king is dead! What have you left to fight for dog?!” She stops throwing daggers. Serena thinks for a moment. “Revenge!” He calls out.

She throws one dagger, so fast Varis barely sees it coming. It strikes him in the leg and he falls to his knees. He fires another energy bolt striking her in the chest. She slams back against the wall and rolls to her hands and knees. She sputters and coughs, unable to catch her breath. Her vest saved her from certain death.

The dagger disappears from Lord Varis' leg and he stands up. He strolls down to pass Cardan. He fires another bolt driving Cardan to the ground. Varis walks over to Serena who leans back against the wall. She knows this will be the end. Varis raises his hand and it begins to glow a deep red hue.

“I killed your Queen, your Prince, and now, you!” He holds his hand over her face and snarls.

From the doorway, a voice calls to him. “You are weak! A filthy excuse for a sorcerer, and no threat to anything, but the clover in the forest!” It says.

Serena and Varis look to the doorway to see Prince Ladir, looking a little worse for wear, but alive, nonetheless. His sword forms in his hand and he raises it and points it at his Uncle. “Let’s finish this!” Ladir says. Varis smiles, and says, “Yes, Let’s!” Suddenly he vanishes. A few feet from where he stood, an energy bolt erupts and flies toward Ladir. His shield forms and he raises it quickly, deflecting the blow. From nearby, another bolt erupts. Ladir dodges it and also raises his sword. As the sword passes over the shield, Ladir looks through the blade.

Through it he sees a silhouette of his uncle. Ladir rolls forward and rises to his feet spearing the sword into an uppercut.

The sword stops in midair and the Uncle reappears, impaled upon the blade. He steps back as Ladir withdraws the blade from Varis' stomach. Lord Varis staggers backwards. He stumbles and falls into the grand fireplace. The flames consume him and he screams out in pain. He thrashes around a moment then settles into the ash. The flames change colors many times, then fade back to a simple fire.

Ladir walks over to kneel next to Veran and Serena helps hold Ladir from collapsing. He is very tired.

She looks at him and beams,  
“I thought you were dead.” Ladir  
replies and looks at Cardan seated  
nearby. “My Father was a tough  
candlemaker.”

Veran groans and reaches back to  
remove his vest. As he does, the  
arrows remain in it. He tosses the  
porcupine looking fur to the floor.

Veran looks at Serena. He starts to  
pluck arrows from the back of his vest.  
“What? You don’t expect me to fight  
Owlbears in just a shirt, do you?” He  
laughs. The others laugh as well as  
the elite guards rush in. One kneels to  
Ladir, next to the fireplace. Veran  
stands up. He calls out proudly, “I am  
Veran, Brother to Cardan! As Men-at-  
Arms for the Lands of Sandraia and  
Artemis, appointed by the Kings Olan  
and Daraius!”

He continues, "I declare Prince Ladir to be the one, true King of Artemis! Son of the elder of Artemis! All Hail the King!" Veran and crew turn and kneel to Prince Ladir. He stands and bows back to them. As he does a panel slides closed in the back of the fireplace. All shout in unison. "Hail! Hail to the King!" Ladir looks around the room at his warriors and is proud.

A few days later, it is the day of King Ladir's coronation. He must declare his advisors and choose his elite guardians. King Olan bows to Ladir in the hallway. "Your majesty. May I have a moment of your time? There is a matter of the alliance between our kingdoms I wish to discuss with you." King Olan asks. "Of course." Replies Ladir. The Prince walks with Olan into the War Room and closes the doors.

Ladir presents a seat to Olan. “I have chosen to ask Cardan and Veran to stay as our Men-At-Arms. As brothers and both willing to serve both of our kingdoms, it helps to keep the peace.” Olan nods his head. “Excellent choice, and explanation. Have you chosen your Elite Guardians?” Ladir sits and folds his hands. “I am actually having difficulty in that.” He drops his gaze.

Ladir looks up with a heavy heart and speaks. “I wanted to choose Veran’s daughter Serena, but,…” Olan leans back. “But?” he ponders. Ladir stands up and begins to pace. “She is familiar with the courts, and has served well as a Guardian so far. I just have concerns that she has feelings for me.” Olan smiles. “Ah. You have a good heart to be concerned with the feelings of another.”

“With regard to your station and the alliance between the kingdoms, I have a solution. My first Queen bore me a daughter who has been serving me in a different kingdom. After her death, I remarried. This Queen and I never had children. She is the reason Serena is knowledgeable of the courts. My wife took her under her wing as a surrogate child.”

King Olan stands next to Ladir and places a hand on the Prince’s shoulder. “To secure our alliance, however, we must regard your station and the laws of the land. I hereby offer my first daughter to you as your Queen. She is of true royal blood and will serve you well. By marrying another of actual royal bloodline, your children will also have full legal right to the thrones of both kingdoms.”

“I know it must be a difficult decision for you, but it is the proper decision.” Ladir knows this is the right choice for his kingdom. He questions in his mind how Serena will react when she finds out. He turns to Olan and agrees. “I must make the best choices for my kingdom, regardless of my own feelings or those of others. I accept your offer.”

Olan shakes his hand, “It is a difficult decision to put your kingdom before yourself, but you will be a good king. Your father would have been proud.” King Olan turns and walks out of the room. Ladir plops down in his chair. He drops his face into his hands. “What have I done? I am sorry Serena. I hope you will forgive me.” Prince Ladir begins to sniffle as tears well up in his eyes.

In the hallway, Veran hears a sobbing cry. He rounds the corner to see Serena crawled into an alcove window. She is sobbing uncontrollably. “I guess you heard.” He slows his pace as he approaches. Knowing he could not have you as his Queen, he asked me if you would serve as his Guardian. I told him I would ask.”

Serena looks up with heartbroken eyes. “How?” She sobs. “How could I ever be his Guardian? To see him every day. To be with him every day, but never allowed to touch him. Now, to see him take another woman as his Queen, and to always see them together.”

“Loving him as I do, but knowing I can never love him as I should, or receive that love in return.

I cannot live that way. I have chosen to return to Tamaric and rebuild our home there.” She says. “I was happy there before he came to this land. Perhaps I can find happiness there again. I can help them rebuild the village. I can find purpose.” She says as she wipes the tears from her eyes. Veran nods his head. “So, you do love him.” Veran asks. Serena kisses him on the cheek and stands up.

Serena picks up her saddlebag and squeezes her Father’s hand. “That is why I must leave. Please explain it to him.” Veran pulls her close and hugs her tightly. There are a lot of explanations to be made it seems. The view fades back as Veran holds his daughter’s face and kisses her on the forehead. He smiles, knowing she has made the best choice for her King.

He is very proud of how he has raised her, regardless of her station or lack of royal lineage.

In the coronation room, Ladir sits upon the throne. The herald at the door announces guests as they enter. He was much happier being a simple candlemaker. Cardan stands beside him on the right, named as his Guardian. Veran stands next to Olan.

Veran holds a lush pillow and upon it is Ladir's crown. The pomp and circumstance begins to irritate Ladir. He looks to the door upon every announcement, in hopes that Serena will show.

He looks down at Veran who frowns and shakes his head side to side. Veran bows his head.

“Attending from the House of Loraz, The Three Sisters; Arnaz, Demetria, and Lagos!” The herald calls out. All turn to see the Scrywitch, the Oracle, and the Draconite walking together. They approach the royal dais and all three kneel side by side. Lagos is kneeling in the center and speaks. “Aeons ago, The house of Loraz, a very magical household would host a vision known as the prophecy. Many complications would arise to restore peace from the turmoil.” She says.

One of the arrangements that had to be made was to send a watcher to each of three kingdoms.

As House Loraz had only one daughter, the choice was made to split her spirit into three parts. Hence, us. Thanks to your warriors and yourself, Majesty, we may now return home.”

All three raise their hands and grasp their pendants.

The pendants glow and the Scryer and Oracle become mist forms. They flow into the chest of the Draconite who shifts to become a gorgeous young woman. She stands and bows to Ladir. "My name is Lamaya." She says. She walks over to Veran and lifts the crown from the pillow. She steps up behind Ladir and places the crown on his head.

She looks outward to address the guests. "By our Father, your Father, and your subjects of the House of Artemis, I hereby authorize you as King Ladir, Ruler of Artemis!"

Lamaya steps around to kneel before him. "May your rule be long and just.

All hail the King!” The crowd repeats, “Hail to the King!” Lamaya stands and addresses King Ladir. “In honor of his majesty, King Olan, and respect for the sacrifices the warriors have made in their service to the kingdoms and peace, I bear gifts.” She steps down to the bottom of the dais. Lamaya raises her hands to the doors at the rear of the hall. The doors open and a troll wearing armor enters. It is the one seen earlier in the war tent of the Orc Commander. He approaches the dais and kneels before Lamaya.

Lamaya holds in each hand a crystal; in her left, the Ice Crystal, in her right the artifact crystal stolen by Ladir’s Uncle. She places them together. The crystals fuse into one, long, multicolored crystal in the shape of a handle. She hands this to the troll.

He takes the crystal and holds it up. A shimmering crystal blade extends from it making an ornate sword. Lamaya addresses the crowd. “Lerok of the Land of Neder! You have shown yourself to be kind and just. By acting with the sryer to defeat the Ruffs of your land and Lord Varis, your heart has been proven to be that of a King. Take the Crystal Sword of Shelion and return to your home. You will be heralded as the rightful King of the Northlands. Rule Well!” The troll closes the blade and bows to Ladir.

He places it into his sash and stands. He addresses Ladir. “Majesty. I have never believed in the war between our peoples. Your Uncle stole the artifact crystal from us and used it against his own King. I hereby declare this war over!

I pledge our allegiance to peace.”  
With that, Lerok bows to King Ladir and steps aside to join the throng of supporters.

Lamaya looks to the doorway again. The doors open and an older Queen enters the room. She approaches the dais, bows to Ladir and faces Olan. King Olan’s eyes fill with tears.

Lamaya calls out. “Taken from her kingdom many years ago, Queen Mara of Sandraia was hidden for her safety as was Prince Ladir. Now, in peace, she returns to her husband.” The Queen hugs and kisses Olan. She looks at Veran and questions him. “Where is your daughter, Serena?” Veran holds back a tear. King Olan interrupts. “There are complications with Serena. I will explain shortly.”

Queen Mara takes her place at his side. Her tending maid pulls the train of Mara's dress out of the way and stands next to Veran. The maid looks at Veran with a coy gaze. He lifts his eyes to see her pull down her cowl. She turns to ask him a question. "What has our daughter done now?" Veran chokes as he realizes this woman is his wife, whom he thought killed many years ago. He drops the pillow to the ground and embraces her, lifting her feet off the floor and spinning her around.

He sets her down and asks, "How? I thought you died in the fire!" Lamaya explained that the scryer sister hid the Queen in a distant land for safety. Prior to that, during an attack on your village, the Oracle sister saved her.

The sister sent her ahead of what was to come. She was sworn to secrecy once she saw the events to unfold. She knew her interference would destroy everything.

“I am so sorry I couldn’t return! Can you ever forgive me?” Lana asks. Veran kisses her intensely and replies, “That was never a question to be asked, my Love!”

Veran looks at Ladir, then speaks to Lana. “Serena cannot be here at this moment.” He smiles. “We need to talk.” He says to his wife.

Lamaya waves back to the door. The doors open again and A woman clad in royal robes enters elegantly with a white dire wolf walking on each side of her. King Olan grips his Queen’s hands and steps away from her onto the main floor.

He speaks to the crowd of guests in a loud and proud voice. “In accordance with the laws of the Kingdoms of Arperia, I present my eldest and only daughter to offer as bride to King Ladir. May she serve you proudly as your Queen.

King Olan steps up behind his daughter and removes her veil to reveal Serena beneath. Ladir is speechless.

He steps down from the dais as Olan announces her. “I present to you, my daughter, Serena Varka, Princess of the House of Sandraia.”

Ladir is puzzled and elated, all at the same time. Lamaya explains, “Before she was old enough to know what was happening, Serena was given to Veran to raise in secrecy.

She was never to know her station, and to learn how to be a strong Queen with an unmatched intelligence and training.”

Ladir takes Serena’s hands and she begins to cry with happiness. Serena looks Ladir in the eyes. “Father, er... Veran, told me the truth this afternoon. I never had any idea!” Ladir continues for Lamaya. “So when I came along, you and I were both hidden away so my Uncle would not know about us.”

King Ladir turns to Olan. “I would be honored to accept the hand of your daughter as my Queen if she will have me.”

Ladir looks to Serena and she yells as loud as possible, “YES! I would be honored to be your Queen!” She kisses him as they were never permitted to before.

They know they will be happy. As they finish their kiss, she steps by his side. Lamaya watches Ladir intently. Now, comes the moment of truth. Will the prophecy be as it has been seen?

Suddenly, Ladir's hand moves like lightning. It jumps in front of Serena's face catching a fiery energy arrow close enough that it singes her eyebrows. He spins completely around and in one motion, forms the bow in his left hand, knocks the bolt in his own bow and fires the bolt towards the balcony.

It finds its mark in a hooded figure that falls from the balcony.

The body slams to the floor of the throne room shattering the tiles. The hood falls back to reveal his Uncle, burned, beaten and now, dead from his own energy bolt to the throat.

The bolt fades away as does Varis' body. The clothes slump to the floor in the body's absence. Lamaya bows to Ladir. "All will be as it should." She says with a smile. She bows to Serena. "Your Majesty." Lamaya says. Then, Lamaya fades to become mist and floats out the window.

All eyes look to Ladir as his bow retreats into his hand. He smiles at Serena. "What? Even a candlemaker knows how to shoot a bow!" He winks at Cardan and kisses Serena, again. He whispers in her ear.

"Until death do us part, my Sweet Princess." He says.

THE END

### Author's note:

Involved in Community Theater and 30+ Medieval & Renaissance Fairs during my life, the medieval age and history are my passion. At ten years old, I was taught to make chainmail armor by a Knight Templar. My dream was to become a Knight myself. I studied Martial Arts for many years.

At age 40, a childhood dream was realized when I was Knighted: Sir Kenneth Adams, a Knight Templar in Gainesville, Florida.

Now, I have written this, my second book to be published within two months of each other. To be a published author realized, my next goal is the third book within the next month. Join me on this journey.

- K.D. Adams