

SHADOW BLADE

by

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Abstract

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This thesis consists of the first third of *Shadow Blade*, a YA Fantasy novel and the first volume in a planned trilogy. It follows Keen Anor, a young boy growing up in an idyllic island village. After finding a strange sword deep within the forest, Keen gains the ability to transform into Shadow Blade, a powerful sorcerer. Guided by fragments of Shadow Blade's consciousness, Keen eventually leaves his village to travel throughout the archipelago where he makes his home. During his journey, he teams up with his childhood friend Milla, and a young swordsman named Geld to stop the evil machinations of a mysterious man known only as The Emperor and bring peace back to the islands. Key themes include the sacrifices that must be made to become a hero and that doing the right thing isn't always rewarded.

Prologue

When was the start of all this? Now it seems so long ago, almost a dream. A black cape and a flashing blade... Milla's beautiful smile, Geld's confident laugh, an unrelenting evil, and my lonely tears...

Do you still remember? Our lives before, and our grand adventures? You were all I ever wanted. Your sparkling eyes, your smile... And the only thing I couldn't have. Do you still think of me now and then? I think of you every day. I know you're happy, that this was best; but please tell me that, once or twice, you've thought of me and of what might have been. I loved you enough to let you go. All I ask, is that you promise not to forget.

I may be alone, but I press on... Evil beware, the fighter still remains.

Chapter 1

The sound of the afternoon bell rang out across the village. It was followed by the rustling of wings as a flock of birds rose into the air in a cloud of multicolored feathers and set off in search of a quieter patch of beach.

Milla rose with a practiced motion and brushed the sand off her pale green skirt. “See you later, Keen!” She smiled as the sun glistened off her shoulder length blondish-brown hair. “Don’t have too much fun without me!”

“I’ll try.” The thirteen-year-old boy sitting nearby shrugged, a touch of sarcasm in his voice. “Enjoy magic class.”

“Will do!” Milla smiled again and ran off, leaving Keen to watch as she disappeared past the palm trees.

“You’re lucky, you know?” Kuku turned towards him as she too walked past. “I wish I didn’t have magic. The lessons are so boring, and it’s not like most of us can do much with it anyway. I’d love to trade my magic for extra playtime.”

Keen smiled and nodded but, once she was gone, he sighed and turned his gaze back to the ocean, watching as the waves lapped playfully against the shore. The beach, which had been abuzz with activity only a moment before, had grown quiet as all but the youngest children made their way back to the village. Despite the warmth of the early summer sun and the deep blue of the water, the beach soon lost its appeal.

Keen ran a hand through his dark brown hair. “She says that, but playing by myself isn’t any fun. Besides, Milla and the teacher know all sorts of cool spells.” He rose with a sigh. “Maybe there’s something to do back in the village.”

He followed the route Milla had taken several minutes before and the outskirts of Caluri Village soon came into view. Comprised of mismatched wooden structures stretching almost all the way to the beach, Caluri was, Keen supposed, not much different than any other small island village. Not that he had anything else to compare it to. The inhabitants enjoyed a life of sand and sun, eking out a comfortable, if not especially prosperous, living from a mixture of fishing and farming.

There were a bit over two dozen houses, mostly two-stories tall, with large porches in front and pens in the back for the chickens and others animals. Past them lay a handful of shops, such as the blacksmith and carpenter, which focused on goods that most villagers weren’t able to make for themselves. And, in the center was the schoolhouse where Milla and the others were no doubt learning how to harness their innate magical talents to perform various small but useful spells.

As he walked past, Keen couldn’t resist peeking through the window. Kukururu and the others were seated on the floor, each holding a small candle. As he watched, a few weak flames sputtered to life but most of the wicks remained stubbornly unlit. His best friend, Milla, however, wasn’t with the others. After a moment, Keen spotted her in the front of the room next to the teacher, casually juggling several small fireballs between her hands. Of course, that was no surprise. As something of a magical prodigy, at least within

their small village, she had long since mastered basic spells like lighting candles and strengthening tools and moved on to more advanced lessons.

While Keen had grown up hearing stories of legendary sorcerers who could fly in the air, hurl boulders with a flick of their wrists, and call on the powers of the elements to destroy monsters, no one in the village had anything close to that level of power. And, from what he'd heard from his parents, the world outside was much the same. Such sorcerers were rarer than the most perfect pearl, if they even existed at all. Sometimes stories were just that.

For a moment, his gaze fixed on the flames dancing in front of Milla, trying to look beyond the fire to the magic that lay beneath. At last, he sighed dejectedly. *It's no use. I can't even sense the threads and flows that Milla keeps talking about, much less do anything with them. Am I just unlucky? Or maybe it runs in my family.*

His parents, Tal and Grail Anor, had about as much magical aptitude as any of the villagers but although he truly did think of them as his parents, they weren't related by blood. They were merely the ones who had found him as a baby, crying and alone on the beach, after the great tidal wave thirteen years ago, the lone survivor of a boat lost at sea. Without children of their own, they had taken him in and raised him as their son. But he loved them and they loved him. For Keen, that was enough. Even his lack of magic didn't bother him...much. At least not anymore. But still, sometimes, just a little, he wished that he could join Milla in that classroom, no matter how boring those lessons might be.

Ugh... Forget it. He turned away from the window and continued walking. The streets, such as they were, were nearly empty this time of day, with the older children in

their lessons and the adults tending to their work on the boats or in the fields, leaving Keen with precious little to capture his attention. Normally, he loved quiet days but, without Milla...

“Huh?” He blinked and looked around. “Is someone there?” When no one answered he took a closer look, straining his eyes and ears as he did so. Again, for a brief moment, there was something. Not a sight, or a sound, but a...feeling. There was someone...something...

It's just my imagination, right? He frowned. Whatever this sensation was, he had never experienced anything like it before. *Over there, maybe? Well, it's not like I have anything better to do until Milla gets out of class.* Curiosity building, he ran towards the meadow outside the village.

Keen skidded to a halt at the edge of the Harpy Forest, breathing heavily, and stared off into the tall imposing trees. He'd never actually been this close before. He could remember countless tales, often shared amongst his friends on dark nights, about children being snatched up and eaten alive, each story more gruesome than the last. While harpies, a twisted hybrid of bird and human, were considered relatively weak monsters, they could still be dangerous, especially to the unprepared. Even the adults rarely ventured inside the forest; the berries and herbs which grew amidst the trees simply weren't worth the risk. The last one who had tried, Mr. Monade the blacksmith's apprentice, had come back with a bloody gash all the way down his arm.

I shouldn't, but... The feeling was much stronger, all but propelling him onward. It was in there, whatever it was, just a little further. He glanced around nervously. *Well, I don't see any harpies. I just need to be quiet, right?* He gulped, paused a moment to straighten his pale blue shirt then, at last, stepped slowly, cautiously, inside.

Instantly the light vanished, as if sucked away by a spell. The bright early afternoon was now a dark dreary twilight. Eerie clicks and screeches echoed around him, a constant reminder that any of the towering trees could hide a harpy, or worse. Steeling himself, Keen strode forward. He had always been good at sneaking by unnoticed, but this would be the true test of his skills.

Silent as a shadow, he slipped from tree to tree, bush to bush, never lingering, never hurrying, as his feelings guided him deeper into the forest. A piercing screech caused him to freeze, barely even breathing, as a winged shadow passed overhead. At long last it vanished, leaving Keen to take an uneasy breath. His hands trembled and his heart was pounding so loudly he feared that the harpy would hear it and circle back.

What was I thinking?!? This was a stupid idea! I should- He rose with a jolt. *Wait. That's it!* Before him towered a mound of rocks, reaching almost as high as the trees, with a single gap piercing its thick exterior. The feeling pulsed against the inside of his skull, almost like a shout. He wouldn't stop now. He couldn't.

Squeezing into the opening, Keen followed a tunnel of rough slimy rocks down into the black depths. Soon, even the little light that shone through from the treetops had vanished behind him. *If Milla were here she could just use her magic to light the way.* He

thought ruefully. *It's always more fun when she's around.* With a heavy sigh, he held his hand against the wall and used it as a guide to proceed further down.

The tunnel seemed to go on for an impossible length, burrowing deep beneath the ground. It twisted and turned but the way remained smooth and unbroken, without even a single branch to lead him astray. Keen soon lost all sense of both direction and time. Had it been hours, or merely minutes? There was only the darkness, stone, and the soft echoes of his own footsteps. Down... Down...

Keen blinked. *Is that a light?* He quickened his pace and half ran, half slid, into a small chamber. A pulsing glow filled the room, along with a strange warmth. There, in the center, sat an altar of sorts formed from the same black stones which made up the cave and above it floated the most magnificent sword he had ever seen. Long and thick, its blade pulsed brilliantly with the colors of the rainbow while purple waves of magical energy coursed around it. The hilt was wrought of the finest burnished gold set with dark glowing gemstones and carved with a strange pattern.

“Wow...” Keen stepped forward as if in a trance, raising his hand towards the blade. As his fingers brushed the cool surface the cave and the sword faded away.

Images flashed before Keen's eyes. He saw a young man in a black cape wielding the same glowing blade that he had touched only moments before. The man moved with an impossible grace, seemingly unconcerned about the army of monsters before him. Then he raised his hand and the world exploded in a sea of fire. Now he was on a beach, casually deflecting a crackling lightning bolt thrown by a cloaked figure. Then he was in a forest, on a mountain, inside a shadowy hall, flying high above the ocean... The visions

were brief and disordered, allowing only the faintest glimpses. But in each of them the caped stranger was fighting, always fighting. Magical energy swirled about countless battlefields, coalescing into spells as grand as any from the stories. Throughout it all, the man stood alone. With sword and magic, he triumphed. As Keen watched in awe, two words floated across his mind.

“Shadow Blade.” As Keen spoke the words, the figure turned, revealing a familiar face. “Are you...me?” Keen staggered back in shock as the image faded away. He gasped for breath as his vision slowly began to clear but the man’s face remained burned clearly into his mind. “No... He was different somehow, but close. Another me?”

Struggling to gather his jumbled thoughts, Keen looked around. He was back in the forest, the sword and even the entire cave were gone. Slowly, he forced himself to his feet. He felt different. Acting purely on instinct, he reached behind his back and grasped at something that wasn’t there. It was as if he could feel the fabric between his fingers, hovering on the edge of reality, just waiting to be brought into existence. Keen pulled. A jet-black cape billowed around him, flapping furiously as if in an unfelt breeze as it surrounded his body before settling back into its proper place. Steadily, purposely, Keen straightened. He felt different somehow, but not in a bad way. Though his physical appearance hadn’t changed, he was dressed entirely in black from his shoes to his long-sleeved tunic. As he looked down at the damp forest floor he noticed, half with shock, half with knowing acceptance, that, instead of standing on the ground, he was hovering a short distance above it. Everything was as it should be. With a nod, he raised his hand. A thin sliver of rainbow light shot down into his clenched fist, forming into the shimmering

sword. Keen turned, letting the sword's light spread throughout the trees. "This is it... The Shadow Blade is mine!" He blinked. "No, that's not it. Not quite..." He looked forward, his face calm, cold, and impassive. "I am Shadow Blade."

Feeling oddly calm despite what had just happened, Keen, Shadow Blade, began to glide through the forest.

He had nearly reached the edge of the forest when it happened. With a bloodcurdling screech, three harpies shot from the trees and with deadly precision. The creatures' feathered wings flapped furiously while their razor-sharp claws sliced the air. Long hair streamed behind them as their beautiful human-like faces twisted into cruel smiles.

Even through the part of him that was Keen screamed to run, Shadow Blade stood silently as they descended. With a look of wild delight, the first harpy extended her talons. Suddenly her expression turned from joy to fear as she beat her wings frantically, trying to escape, but it was too late. She let out another scream, even more terrible than the first, as Shadow Blade's pulsing sword sliced cleanly through her body. Without even watching as the pieces of the beast fell to the ground, he whirled to confront the others. Once again, he somehow knew exactly what to do. With a cry, he thrust out his left hand and a glittering white ray shot forth, enveloping the second harpy, leaving only dull gray ash to slowly fall to the forest floor. The last harpy came in from above, its talons nearly scraping his head, but he calmly stepped to the side and brought up his sword, leaving the

happy to scream as it impaled itself on the blade. Shadow Blade turned a calculating gaze on the surrounding trees but there was only silence.

The sun was low in the sky as Shadow Blade left the forest, casting a reddish tinge across the meadow. As he looked off towards the village, Keen's emotions grew stronger. With a grin, he leapt high into the air, turned a backflip, and then shot forward, gliding smoothly over the grass. Shadow Blade, Keen, laughed happily as he fired off a barrage of small spells. *This is incredible! I'm flying and using magic! It's like a dream. No, better!*

A strange feeling filled him as he neared the village. He didn't want to share his new powers yet. Once again, he knew what to do. Reaching back, he flung the dark cape over himself. It billowed furiously and then vanished.

Keen Anor stood on the outskirts of the village in his dark blue shorts and pale shirt. Raising his hand, he tried to cast a spell but nothing happened. Still, he could feel the cape behind him, just waiting for his touch. "I guess I can only use magic when I'm Shadow Blade? Eh, no big deal." His brown eyes sparkled brightly. "This is so cool!"

The village streets were emptying as he began to make his way home, but he still called out cheerfully, if rather automatically, to everyone he passed. His mind was focused on the afternoon's adventure. A secret for him and him alone.

"Keen! Where have you been?" a girl's voice called out, her usually happy tone tinged with irritation. "I've been looking for you for hours!"

“Oh...” He turned to see Milla Kouron standing on her front porch, her hair fluttering in the breeze. “Sorry, I just went on a walk.”

“Uh huh...” Her deep green eyes were narrowed suspiciously and her mouth, usually set in a wide smile, was locked in a more serious position. “You’ve never been able to lie to me, Keen.” She folded her arms across her chest.

“It was just a walk...” He fidgeted nervously. “So how was class?”

“Keen...” Her head drooped sadly. “I thought we were best friends. But best friends don’t lie to each other.” She stifled a sob, though there was a barely hidden twinkle in her eyes.

Although he knew she was just putting on an act, Keen found himself unable to look away from her pleading eyes. *She knows I’ll do anything to keep her from crying.*

“Alright, alright,” he muttered. “But not here.”

Milla jumped down off the porch and followed Keen to a secluded spot behind her house where the two of them often played. Turning to face her, he tried to suppress a grin. “There’s not enough time right now for the full story, but watch this.” He reached back and, with a flick of his wrist and the billowing of a black cape, Shadow Blade emerged.

“Keen?!? Is, is that you?” She staggered back and gaped up at the dark form hovering before her.

“Pretty cool, huh?” He drew his sword and held it up for her to see. “I can hover, I’ve got this sword, and I can even use magic.”

Milla's eyes sparkled. "That's amazing! I'm not going to let you off until I hear every detail! And it's going to take a lot before I forgive you for leaving me behind while you had some great adventure."

With another flick of his cape, Keen returned to normal. "I'll make it up to you." He smiled sincerely. "And I can start first thing tomorrow by telling you the whole story."

"Deal." She smiled back. "See you in the morning!"

"Yeah, goodnight." Keen grinned, unable to look away. He'd do anything to see that smile. "Oh, wait!" he called as she turned to go. "Don't tell anyone about this. I don't want the rest of the village to know yet."

"Ok! It's our secret then." With a last flash of her heart melting smile, Milla disappeared into her house, leaving Keen standing alone in the moonlight.

Maybe she likes the dark mysterious look. This could be- With a start, he noticed how dark it had become. "Yikes! Mom and dad are going to kill me!"

Chapter 2

Keen dashed across a seemingly endless field. His heart was pounding and he thought his lungs would burst, but he couldn't stop. Without slowing, he reached behind him. Suddenly he was Shadow Blade, flying at full speed, sword at the ready. A dark shape loomed in the distance, standing above the body of a young woman. Shadow Blade thrust out his hand and fired a ray of concentrated magic, but the figure vanished, melting into the mist.

Dropping back to the ground, he ran to the fallen woman, dreading what he knew he would find. Her face, the face of the one he loved more than life itself, cold and still...

"Nooo!" Keen sat bolt upright in bed, wide awake, and looked around in confusion. *Only a dream...* He sighed with relief, though his heart was still pounding with terror.

He looked out his window. Judging from the position of the moon, midnight had just passed. He thought about the previous day while waiting for his mind to stop racing. *Shadow Blade...* He wondered if maybe that had been a dream too but decided it was not the time to test. He had gotten off with only a light punishment for getting home late and didn't want to upset his parents with sudden magical lights in the middle of the night. At last, he calmed down and drifted back into sleep.

Keen woke to the crowing of the rooster and hastily scrambled into his clothes. Dashing downstairs, he slid to a stop at the table and gulped down his breakfast before he even saw what it was. His mother raised an eyebrow and smiled as Keen jumped to his feet and headed for the door, mumbling a hurried goodbye. “Why Keen,” her soft voice halted him with one hand on the doorknob, “I’ve never seen you so eager to do extra chores.”

Keen groaned. Of course, how could he have forgotten his punishment? Complaining would probably just get him more work. Taking a look back at his mother, he sighed and stepped out onto the porch and into the light and warmth of another perfect summer day.

Ignoring the worn wooden steps leading down from the porch, he vaulted over the low railing and hurried to the barn where the horse, cow, and chickens were kept. His nose wrinkled slightly as he stepped inside the small barn. The door was open, which meant that someone, probably his father, had already let the animals out to graze. Well, that was one thing less to do. Cleaning all the pens, however, would take at least an hour, probably two.

“There must be an easier way...with magic!” Keen grinned and took another step into the musty darkness. If cleaning the barn provided a way to use his new powers, maybe it wasn’t such a waste of time after all. Following his instincts and memories of the previous day, he reached back and flung his intangible cape forward. Black cloth billowed over him and Shadow Blade emerged. Leaping into the air, he floated over to

the horse's pen. First to get rid of the old hay... A wind whipped into existence sending the rotting straw spinning up in a small vortex. With a sweep of his hand, he sent the whole whirlwind up in flames.

“Keen! What are you doing?!?”

Keen spun at the sound of Milla's voice and shrugged sheepishly. “Just cleaning the barn.”

“Well, you should be more careful!” She put her hands on her hips and frowned up at the boy hovering before her. “What if someone else had come in besides me? And what if...” Her green eyes widened. “Behind you!”

Shadow Blade whirled, his sword instantly in his hand. An angry orange spot met his eyes. Without his attention, his controlled fire had caught the wall. Although the Keen part of him nearly panicked, the Shadow Blade part simply reached out a hand and called forth a spell. Water appeared from nowhere and fell onto the small blaze, quenching it instantly.

“Guess I've got to be more careful.” Keen chewed his lip as he turned back to Milla. Seeing her glare, he hastily changed the subject. “Look, I have to finish this before I can go anywhere so I'll come get you later, ok?”

“Nah, I'll help.” Milla smiled and walked over to the chicken roosts. “It'll go a lot faster.”

“Thanks!” He grinned and turned back to the horse stall.

“What are friends for?” She flicked back her hair as he sent the equivalent of several buckets of water falling down on the empty stall to wash it clean. “Just be careful with your magic, ok?”

“Right!” Keen quickly agreed as he turned his full attention to the task at hand.

Watching him curiously from the corner of her eye, Milla soon began to follow his example. Hay flew through the air, water poured over the floor, fire burned the waste... It was all fast and easy, as long as they kept their minds on what they were doing. Ten minutes later, Keen returned to his normal form. A job that would have normally taken nearly two hours had been finished in minutes.

“Done!” Grinning excitedly, Keen grabbed Milla’s hand and dashed towards the door.

“Where are we going?” She couldn’t help but smile as she ran to keep up.

“To the meadows!” He almost let go of her hand, but it felt too good. “We’re going to figure out everything I can do!”

Gasping for breath, Keen and Milla dropped onto the soft grass and stared up at the clear blue sky.

“So,” Milla’s voice was tinged with amusement despite the constant battle to regain her breath, “you promised to tell me how you got your, uh, magic powers.”

Ok.” Keen rolled over on his stomach. Propping his head on his hands, he stared across at his best friend. “Yesterday, after you went to class, I was walking around, and I felt...something calling me. I couldn’t see or hear anything but I sort of still knew where

to go somehow. So, I followed it and ended up in a cave in the Harpy Forest.” Milla’s eyes widened at the mention of the forest. She looked about ready to start in on one of her famous lectures so Keen hurried on. “At the bottom of the cave there was this glowing sword and when I touched it, I felt like it was part of me somehow; something I’d been missing. And I saw a vision of a caped man who looked kind of like me. He was fighting all sorts of monsters and people, not just with the sword but with magic. It was incredible!” Excitement built in Keen’s voice. “The spells he used... Walls of fire, huge explosions, lightning raining from the sky! It was just like the stories!” He took a deep breath. “I don’t really understand it, but I think I have his power now. The power of Shadow Blade.”

“Shadow Blade?” Milla scratched her head, mussing her sandy hair.

“I know his name, somehow, and these spells. But nothing else. Ugh... I’m really not telling it right, but I don’t even understand it myself.” Keen climbed to his feet.

“Let’s just say that I can transform into someone else and leave it at that.”

“But you’re still you, right?” Milla frowned and stood as well.

“Always.” He grinned

Milla stretched and spun around. “Alright, forget about it. Let’s see how powerful you are!”

Keen grinned and grabbed for his cape. Silky black billowed over him as a pulsing blade sliced through the warm air. Leaping high off the ground, Keen turned a flip and flew in a quick circle before stopping in front of her.

“That hover spell is amazing...” Her voice was now that of the town’s top magic student. “It’s a very difficult spell to cast and maintain but you seem to do it without thinking.”

“Really? It’s strange...” Keen muttered. “Using it is so easy and automatic, but I don’t know how it works or even how I cast it.” His face showed his confusion even though one part of his mind calmly accepted the complexity of the spell. That part of his thoughts, the part that understood how all the magic worked, was barely there, less than a whisper. Trying to catch hold of it was like trying to grasp the wind.

“Fascinating...” Milla walked in a slow circle around him. “So, what else can you do?”

“Uh, I don’t know.” Keen’s face reddened. “There was that stuff I was doing earlier to clean, and I used some white ray spell on a harpy, but I don’t really know what they all are. I never took magic classes, remember?” He began to float backwards, his face thoughtful. “Let’s try this. You cast a spell, then I’ll try to do it,” he let his sword vanish and focused all his attention on Milla.

“Ok,” she shrugged, trying to ignore the strangeness of the situation, “I’ll start with some basics.” She flicked back her hair and let small bolts of magical energy jump between her hands. “Fire ball!”

Breathing heavily, Milla dropped to the ground and ran her fingers through the grass. It had been thirty minutes... Thirty minutes of nonstop magic. Keen had proved himself capable of effortlessly casting every spell she knew. Slightly embarrassed, she

struggled back to her feet. A fine sheen of sweat covered her face and her muscles felt as weak as the reeds growing by the riverside, a side effect of using up so much of her magical power in a short span of time. Meanwhile, Keen wasn't even the tiniest bit winded. If it had been anyone else, she would have been rather jealous of their vastly superior skill. But she couldn't feel that way about her best friend. Although she did occasionally tease him about all the extra fun he must be having while she was in class, she knew how much his lack of magic had upset him, especially when they were younger.

"I'm the only one," he had said to her, shortly after she had first begun her lessons. "The only one who wasn't born in the village and the only one without magic. Maybe I don't really belong here after all." Even as a child, hearing those words had broken her heart. Since then, she'd done everything she could to ensure that he would never feel that way again. Caluri wasn't just her home, it was Keen's as well, and it always would be.

"Anything else?" Shadow Blade's voice brought Milla back to the present.

"Um, that's all the spells I know." She shrugged sheepishly. "I could tell you the names of some others and you could try those..."

"Why not?"

"Ok..." She focused her thoughts on her magic training. There had been many spells mentioned that she had yet to learn. "How about crossing thunder?"

An image floated across his mind, carrying the memory of a spell he had never before seen. Shadow Blade nodded and thrust out his hands. A fierce wind began to

blow, and the sky seemed to darken as sparks of electricity crackled around him.

Suddenly, scores of lightning bolts began raining down. Milla screamed as they crashed around her with a deafening bang. Then, as quickly as it had begun, it was over.

“Wow! That was awesome...” Her voice trembled slightly from a mixture of fear and exhilaration. “Although, it was a bit different than in the book.”

“Really, how?” Keen asked, while trying to keep from grinning at what he had just done. This was all new to him, but that spell had looked very advanced.

“Well, the darkness for one.” She glanced, slightly nervously, at the patches of charred and smoking grass nearby. “And that wind. If you ask me, they seemed to be more for looks than an integral part of the spell. Kinda of like showing off.”

“Maybe?” He shrugged. “When you said the name, the spell just sort of appeared that way in my mind. Anyway, let’s try some more.”

“You sure are enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Who wouldn’t? I can fly, I can cast all sorts of magic, and I got this cool sword!” The rainbow-colored blade reappeared in his hand. “Can’t get much better than that!”

“I guess I can’t argue with you.” Milla laughed, a soft and beautiful sound. “Ok, here’s another spell.”

Chapter 3

“I love you. I always have.” The sky was clear and blue as the sea as Keen leaned forward, looking sincerely into Milla’s eyes.

He had finally done it, finally told her. They had gone out to practice magic, like they had almost every day in the year since he had first gained his powers as Shadow Blade. But today was special; it was the perfect day, a pristine example of the peace and beauty of late spring. That was why he had decided that today was the day to tell her.

Her hair rippled slightly in the wind, but Milla didn’t say a word. She just smiled her special smile and leaned closer. When she smiled like that, even the natural beauty of spring paled in comparison. He lost himself in her soft green eyes as she put her lips close to his ear. He held his breath, waiting for her to speak...

“Keen! Wake up! WAKE UP!” Milla’s voice cut into Keen’s dream.

“Ahh!?!” His eyes snapped open and he tumbled out of bed, banging his head painfully against the floorboards. “Ohhh...” he moaned as he looked up to see Milla staring down at him. Her hand was covering her mouth in a futile attempt to hide a grin.

“Are you ok?” She bit back a laugh.

“Yeah.” He climbed to his feet and glanced out his bedroom window. Outside, dark clouds swirled across the sky, sending rain pouring down so hard that it looked like

a solid wall of water. Flashes of lightning illuminated the dark sky as thunder rolled, sending deafening echoes crashing against his ears. *So much for the perfect day.*

“Don’t tell me you want to practice magic now,” he rubbed his eyes, “not in this weather.”

“Well, there are a couple of spells...” She shook her head, sending countless tiny water droplets flying from her dripping hair. “Just kidding!” She saw his incredulous look. “We’re supposed to help everyone bring their animals into the barns for shelter. And after that, I figured we could hang out in your house for the day or something. Being stuck inside alone gets so boring after a while.”

“Sounds good to me.” Keen grinned as he grabbed his clothes off a nearby shelf. “I gotta change. I’ll meet you downstairs in a minute, ok?”

“Hurry up!” She turned and sprinted down the stairs.

Keen watched her until she was out of sight then hurriedly pulled off his night clothes and began dressing. As he did, his thoughts turned back to his dream. *I’ll never work up enough courage to say that in real life.* He pulled his shirt over his head, muffling a sad sigh. *Someday.* He promised himself. *Someday...* Finished dressing, he hurried downstairs to find Milla waiting for him.

“About time!” She threw open the front door. “Everyone else is already out there.” She stepped outside and immediately vanished into the mass of watery gray.

As Keen ran out after her he was nearly blown off his feet by the terrific force of the wind. It tore at him from all sides, trying to carry him away. Ignoring its ghastly shrieks, he struggled onwards, following Milla’s blurry form.

A large crowd stood in the center of the village, all huddled beneath their coats in an attempt to escape the stinging rain. Further out, others were leading animals back towards the village.

Still following Milla, Keen joined one of the groups and began the arduous task of driving the animals from the fields back towards their owners' barns. While this was far from the first time that Keen had done so, the wind and rain were unusually strong, making it feel almost as if he was walking on the bottom of the ocean rather than a grassy field. The other villagers clearly felt the same way and the usual chatter that accompanied such communal tasks was notably absent. At long last, all the animals were safely in the barns and the sodden villagers began to make their way home when a scream pieced the air.

Keen whirled, coming face to face with an old woman, her face painted with terror. He followed her gaze towards the sea, not knowing what to expect. At first he could see nothing. Squinting and shielding his eyes against the rain, he tried to pierce the veil of water. There... It almost blended in with the rain, but careful inspection revealed it for what it really was. Keen's eyes widened as he watched the massive tidal wave bear down on Caluri Village.

A change came over him. He no longer felt the horror and helplessness that he had a moment before. Now he was calm. He knew what he had to do. A black cape billowed, seemingly unaffected by the wind and rain, as Shadow Blade leapt into the air. People gasped as he sped towards the beach, but he took no notice.

Stopping at the edge of the sand, he watched impassively as the gargantuan wave drew closer at an alarming rate. There was only one sure way to stop it. As the wave neared, gaining height and speed with every second, he let his magic power build.

“Freezing winds!” A fine white mist erupted from Shadow Blade’s hands and sped towards the approaching wave.

The two forces met in a blinding flash. As, for a moment, light, sound, and even the rain itself seemed to vanish. The rain was the first to return, its incessant beat washing away the light to reveal a solid wall of icy blue and green resting on the edge of the beach in a terrifying display of nature’s wrath and beauty. As the villagers struggled to come to grips with the impossible sight, Shadow Blade swept out his hand and the frozen wave exploded, adding a soft shower of ice particles to the now thinning rain.

Suddenly, massive jets of water shot up into the sky. The ocean frothed and bubbled as if on fire, then finally burst forth as a massive form rose from the water. Although the pale white creature was still far out at sea, it loomed higher than the trees and even the bravest villagers couldn’t help but back away in the face of its large bloodshot eyes.

“A kraken...” Milla gasped, shaking from head to foot as the beast raised its tentacles high above the water. “I never thought they were real.”

“Get back with the others.” Shadow Blade’s voice was cold and hard.

“But what are you-”

“Now!” The kraken’s thick beak slammed shut with a deafening clack, punctuating Shadow Blade’s command. Without waiting for Milla’s response, he turned and flew off across the water.

Seeing the black form streaking towards it, the kraken lashed out with its tentacles. Summoning his speed, Shadow Blade dodged, shooting under the thick trunk-like appendages and firing off a quick blast of magical energy. For a few moments, he continued to weave in and out of the writhing mass while launching a steady stream of attacks.

I’m not doing enough damage... His sword, pulsing with every color of the rainbow, appeared in his hand. Darting in, he cut a deep slash across the front of the kraken’s slimy body. With an angry clack of its beak, the fiend redoubled its attack. *Down, left, twist, up...now!* Shadow Blade came to a sudden stop mid-air, turned, and spun violently, sword extended. The two tentacles closing in on him twitched wildly then fell in burst of water and blood.

Shadow Blade smirked and began casting another spell as the kraken screeched in rage, but a rock-hard tentacle slammed into his back, sending him tumbling through the air. Before he could regain control, he was hit again, and again. Keen could feel a rib crack as each successive strike left him more and more disoriented. *No! No! What do I do? What do I-*

“ENOUGH!” Shadow Blade thrust out his hands and unleashed a burst of magic, driving back the tentacles. *It’s strong.* He angrily wiped away the blood that was dripping down his face. *Has to have a weak spot.* He stared back down at the writhing mass of

slimy skin and tentacles below him. *Maybe the eyes... But I'll have to distract it.* With a yell, Shadow Blade shot downwards at dizzying speeds.

On the beach, Milla watched the battle play out in a mixture of terror and awe. Nothing she had seen, heard, or even imagined in her fourteen years of life could have prepared her for the paralyzing fear and dread that filled her at the sight of the kraken. It was all she could do remain on her feet. But Keen hadn't even hesitated. *How can he do it? She has watched, stunned, as he flew towards the monster. How can he be so brave? I can't let him fight it alone! I-I can't...* Despite her best efforts, she couldn't bring herself to take a step or cast a spell. Yet neither could she turn and run. Hidden by the pouring rain, tears streamed down her face. *He's out there fighting for me...for everyone! Why can't I move?!?*

She screamed as he was struck by the tentacles only to gasp in relief as he recovered and renewed his assault. But as he flew down towards the water the kraken lashed out once more, hitting Shadow Blade full in the chest. "Keen!!!" Milla's scream died away as the tentacles passed harmlessly through him. Confused, the monster thrashed wildly, its tentacles striking the water in a series of deafening blows as it flailed angrily at the wavering image. *An illusion? Then where-*

Shadow Blade appeared behind the kraken and thrust out his hands. "Crossing thunder!!!" The sky turned blacker than night as bolt after bolt of glistening lightning lanced through the kraken's body. Electricity poured through it until its skin almost seemed to glow. Its beak was open in one unending, ear piercing screech as Shadow

Blade dropped down and drove his sword into one of the huge red eyes. Magic flared along the blade as both eyes exploded into a bloody pulp. The kraken writhed blindly, its body twitching and writhing as the water around it was dyed a deep sickly red. Its tentacles flapped and twisted aimlessly as Shadow Blade effortlessly flew back out of their range.

“He did it!” Milla gasped, barely able to believe what she’d just witnessed.

The kraken screamed, even louder than before as it drew its tentacles together and aimed them at the village. Milla blanched as she sensed the enormous amount of magical energy gathering at their tips. With a last shriek, the kraken shot a shining white beam, as thick a house, straight at Caluri Village. *No...* Milla fell to her knees as the blinding light drew near. *I can't stop that. I can't even slow it down. The whole village, it's...*

Shadow Blade screamed in defiance as he hurled himself in front of the beam. A magical shield flared to life as he took the force of the kraken’s death blow.

“Keen!!!” Milla could feel his strength, both magical and physical draining away as the shield began to waver. Then, with a last burst of magic, it flared up and shattered as the final remnants of the kraken’s attack dissipated. Hurling backwards, Shadow Blade crashed onto the sand and lay there, unmoving.

“Keen! KEEN!!!” Milla’s screams were bordering on hysteria as she frantically ran to him. “Keen, please! You’ve got to be ok!” The soothing green aura of magic that rose around her felt small and weak compared to what she’d just witnessed but it would be enough. It had to. “Cure! Cure!!!” Her vision wavered as she poured every last drop of energy she could summon into the spell. A searing pain drove through her skull. She

swayed, barely able to remain upright, as her spell faded and died. “Someone help him!” she sobbed as she desperately tried to renew the spell, but her anguished cries were drowned out by the steady rhythm of the rain. “Keen... Wake up! Keen!!!”

Chapter 4

“While simple elemental and healing spells can be cast using nothing more than mental control and your innate magic power, larger and more complex spells require the creation special patterns known as spell forms in order to enhance and focus the necessary energy. Those forms include...” the instructor droned on, oblivious to the fact that at least half of his class was fighting off sleep. Pacing across the front of the room, his eyes never left the rough wooden floor as he stroked his oily white goatee.

Keen yawned and straightened his cape. Before he became Shadow Blade, he had used to wish with all his heart that he could join the other children in their magic lessons. But now that he was actually sitting in the classroom, he would much rather be back outside, even if it meant spending the time alone. But a year ago, after the battle with the kraken, everything had changed.

Keen’s entire body felt sluggish. He was tired, sore, and desperately in need of a drink. For a time, he flitted in and out of consciousness, trying to piece together his jumbled memories. The last thing he could remember was a blazing light and then... *Oh,*

that's right. There was the kraken. It shot a huge beam and- The village! Is everyone ok? I have to wake up! At last, he forced his eyes open.

“Keen!!!” Milla’s tearful face was the first thing he saw. “I was so worried! I didn’t know if you would- How do you feel? Do you need anything? Oh! I have to tell your parents! Mr. and Mrs. Anor, Keen’s awake!” She ran out of the room before Keen even had a chance to respond.

They’re ok. He breathed a sigh of relief as she returned moments later, leading his parents. His mother, Grail, was a soft-spoken woman with smooth features and eyes that normally held a motherly sparkle. Now though, she was crying openly as she raced to embrace her son. By contrast, his father Tal was a tall man, with dark brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He was rarely one to show his emotions but there were hints of tears in his eyes as well.

After countless hugs and reassurances that he felt ok, more or less, Grail bustled out of the room and returned shortly with a pitcher of water and a large plate of food. “Now Milla dear,” she said as she watched Keen devour the meal, “you should go home and get some rest yourself.”

“But I-”

“No buts. You’ve barely left Keen’s side for the past two days and I know how much healing magic you’ve been using. I’m amazed you haven’t collapsed already. Now go and sleep. Keen will still be here when you wake up.”

She was here the entire time... “Thanks. I could feel you healing me then, before I passed out. You probably saved my life. But I’m ok now, alright? We’ll talk after you’ve rested.”

“Ok.” Milla smiled tiredly. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Now son,” Talk spoke once she had left the room, “you and Milla have been hiding something from us. We didn’t want to push her while she was so distraught but, if you’re feeling up to it, you need to tell us everything.”

Keen nodded. “I know I should have told you sooner, and I’m sorry. It began when...”

“I want you to know that we believe you,” Tal spoke once Keen had finished his tale. “But it’s like nothing I’ve ever heard of. If you had told me this before, I may have written it off as a childish fantasy but, after seeing you fight that kraken...” he trailed off. “To be honest, I don’t know how to respond.”

“Regardless, we’ll need to explain things to the rest of the village.” Grail nodded slowly. “That kind of power isn’t normal. They won’t overlook it.”

“That’s fine. I mean, I knew there would be no more hiding my powers after I stopped that wave. But can you just tell them that my magic awakened suddenly due to the crisis or something? I don’t want everyone to know about the sword and the visions. I don’t know why, but I just feel that some things about Shadow Blade and myself should be kept secret.”

“If that’s what you want, then I suppose it shouldn’t be a problem,” Tal mused. “In fact, it might be for the best, considering how strange your circumstances are. But from now on, you need to promise to tell your mother and I about everything that happens. No more secrets.”

“Oh, and you should start attending magic lessons with the other children,” Grail added.

“Really?” Keen’s eyes lit up. “Yeah, I think I’d like that.”

Unfortunately, once his initial excitement had faded, Keen found himself in a rather strange position. As Keen, he couldn’t cast even the most basic of spells while, as Shadow Blade, he was far beyond the level of anyone else in the village, the teacher included. The only one who could even begin to compare was Milla. She had passed up the instructor long ago and was growing stronger every day thanks to her private practice with Keen. Those sessions were what really helped him, not the classes.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t seem to learn spells the normal way, by understanding the theory and memorizing how to properly control the flows of magical energy, like Milla did. As Shadow Blade, he relied more on reflex and a hint of distant memories. Battles, whether the desperate fight against the kraken or his playful sparring with Milla, seemed to make those memories stronger, helping him learn, or perhaps remember, different spells and techniques. Presumably the Shadow Blade in his visions

had gained this superhuman level of strength and skill on his own, through hard work and study, so maybe someday he too would understand everything about how his magic worked, but until then all he could do was carry on as he had been. He leaned back and stared out the window. *Those memories must belong to Shadow Blade, somehow... But it's all fighting and magic. Shouldn't there be something more? Something about who he was, and why he chose me. After all this time, I still don't know anything. But I can feel it, somewhere in the back of mind. He's calling for me. Telling me to do something...*

“And that will be all for now.” The instructor actually looked at the students for the first time that day.

“About time,” Shadow Blade couldn't help but mutter.

“What was that?” The instructor's face turned sour. “Listen young man, when you have magical power you must learn to control it. If you think that you are so much better than me-”

“I am.” Shadow Blade's voice was uncaring. Without looking back, he stepped out of the sweltering schoolhouse and into the warm sunlight. A moment later, his feet began to float above the waving grass. He knew where he was going, to a meadow a short distance outside the village where he and Milla had practiced magic nearly every day for the past two years. Hearing footsteps, he turned to see her chasing after him. Her hair fanned back in the wind as she ran and Keen couldn't help thinking how beautiful she was. It wasn't just now. He thought about her all the time, though he could never bring himself to tell her that.

“Keen, wait!” Her voice was calm and happy, not tinged with irritation. Breathing a sigh of relief, he stopped and dropped down until his black shoes touched the ground.

“You really shouldn’t have been so mean to the teacher.” She caught up and began walking next to him.

“Not mean, just truthful,” Shadow Blade replied. “There’s nothing for me to learn in those classes.”

“What about magic theory?” She flicked her hair out of her eyes and adjusted her light blue shirt. “You still don’t know very much of it.”

“Yeah...” The voice was Keen’s, not Shadow Blade’s. “But I’m never going to learn it by sitting in class. Everything I do comes from the other Shadow Blade’s memories, I can’t learn it from the teacher. Even you haven’t had much luck teaching me that way.”

“Alright.” She shrugged. “So, you want to try white magic again?”

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “Nah, it’s no use.”

“But if you understood the theory and the making-”

“I do. Well, enough anyway, but whenever I try any white spell it all falls apart. I guess it’s just something that Shadow Blade couldn’t do.”

“But with your powers-”

“Forget it. Let’s do something else.”

Milla sighed. Keen’s transformation into Shadow Blade didn’t just grant him amazing powers, it also affected his personality, making him brusquer and more serious. Rather than getting into an argument, it was better to try and cheer him up in order to

bring his normal personality to light. “Ok, no magic then!” She grinned. “We’ve been practicing every day. Let’s have some fun like we used to!” She turned at the touch of a breeze to see a black cape vanish into thin air as Keen straightened up.

“Sounds great!” He returned her grin. “So, what do you want to do?”

“Let’s walk to the waterfalls. It’ll be just like old times!”

He smiled broadly as they headed off. Just the two of them going off together to one of their secret spots... *It can’t get much better than this.* Enjoying the warm sun and the soft breeze, the two friends made their way to the north of the village and into the marshlands.

No one in the village ventured very deep into the marsh. It wasn’t dangerous exactly, despite occasional rumors of monsters lurking about, there was just never any reason to go more than several hundred feet in. Besides, no one liked the murky water or the biting bugs that inhabited the tall reeds and twisted trees. That was why Keen and Milla knew their spot was a secret. It had been years ago when they had first stumbled upon the falls on one of their mock adventures and declared it to be their own private paradise.

As they forced their way through the reeds, Milla cast a simple spell that she had learned long ago to repel the biting mites. “Remember when we used to come home with all those welts?”

He chuckled. “How could I forget? Every night we’d be covered in mud and slime and scratching constantly.”

“I’m surprised we didn’t just give up on exploring this place. Sure was worth it though.” She used a low hanging tree branch to swing across a foul-smelling pool of bubbling green scum.

“We had so much fun back then.” He stepped back onto dry land and pushed his way through a particularly thick clump of reeds. “No matter how bad the marshes were, seeing the falls always made it worthwhile.”

“Yeah...” Milla sighed wistfully as she followed Keen through the reeds and out into the clearing.

Blinking against the sudden sunlight, the two shared a smile as they found themselves staring up at the thundering waterfalls where they had spent so many long summer days. Although wide, the falls were only about fifteen feet high. Dropping from the top of a small cliff, they cascaded down into a sparkling pool of fresh water, most likely the only one in the entire marshland. Trees and reeds were packed thick around the enclave, effectively hiding it from view. There were no insects there, just occasional chirping birds, making it a haven of tranquility.

Without bothering to take off their outer clothes, Keen and Milla ran forward and dove into the cool water. Laughing happily, they splashed each other and took turns jumping off the rocks above, falling down with the waterfall into the pool.

Two hours later, Keen crawled out of the water, peeled of his shirt, and lay back on the small patch of grass surrounding the pool. “That was great!” He grinned over at

Milla, who had stripped down to her swimsuit and was sitting on a nearby rock. “We should do this more often”

“Yeah, we should.” She smiled. “It’s nice to just hang out and relax for a change.

Remember how often we used to just run off by ourselves and talk for hours?”

“Of course I do.” He raised himself to a sitting position and fixed his gaze on her wistful expression. “I really enjoyed those talks.” *I enjoy nearly anything when you’re with me...*

“Me too.” A smile flashed briefly on her face. “Now it feels like we spend most of our time practicing magic.”

“I’m sorry,” Keen scooted over until he was sitting right next to her, “I guess I got too caught up experimenting with my powers.”

“No, I wanted you to teach me new spells.”

“I guess it was both of us. But don’t worry, that’ll change! From now on let’s make it less magic practice and more like before. Deal?”

“Deal.” She grinned and turned to face him. “So,” she put on a conversational tone, “what have you been thinking about lately?”

“Shadow Blade,” he replied a bit too quickly. “Like who he was, and what he wants me to do with these powers. I feel like-”

“Hey, no magic, remember?” She gently chided. “Besides, I can tell there’s something else on your mind.”

“Well, uh...” *You. Every minute of every day.*

Milla's grin widened as she watched Keen begin to blush. "Oh, so that's it! You like some girl, don't you? Is it Kukurū? She told me that she thinks you're cute." She watched him closely for a reaction. "It is a girl in the village, right? Or do you like someone from Wrestina?"

"No..." Keen stammered. "She's, she's from the village..."

"Who then? Come on, I won't tell!"

"Um, uh..." He frantically tried to find a way out of the conversation. "What about you? Is there someone you like?"

"Me?" Now it was Milla's turn to blush. "Not, not really. I mean, I don't love anyone like that, not yet..."

Keen tried to hide his crushing disappointment. He would have done anything to hear her say his name.

"I know what he'll be like though," she continued, a slightly dreamy look in her eyes. "Smart, handsome, kind, but strong. The type of person who'll fight when it's needed. Fun, caring, adventurous..."

"Like, like me?" Keen stammered, barely able to believe that he had said those two words.

"Yeah, I guess so..." She smiled but Keen's heart sank. She had heard the words but failed to understand the meaning. "Ok," her grin returned, "now you have to tell me who you like! Come on!"

"You see..." Keen took a deep breath. This was the time, he just had to say it. One word, one word and then she would know. *But what then? What if she laughs or gets*

mad? Would she stop being my friend? At least now we can spend lots of time together. I, I couldn't bear to lose that... Can I take that risk?

“Hurry up!” she goaded.

“Oh no!” His gaze shifted skyward. “Look at the sun. We never told our parents we were going anywhere, they’ll be expecting us home any minute!”

“Huh?” She reluctantly followed his gaze. “Guess you’re right. We’ll have to run all the way back.”

“Wait a sec, I have an idea!” His face lit up as a memory came into focus. As Milla pulled her shirt and pants on over her swimsuit, Keen reached for his cape.

“Take my hand.” Shadow Blade dropped down until his sleek black shoes touched the ground. “I hope this works...” He jumped into the air and they both vanished.

Milla gasped as the two of them suddenly found themselves a short distance outside the marshlands. “Wow! How did you- You have got to teach me that!”

“Later.” With a flash of black cloth Keen returned to his normal form. “We’ve still got to run or we’ll be late.”

Both Keen and Milla were gasping for breath when they came to a stop in front of Milla’s house. They had made it! Fortunately, the few people that had noticed their race across the village had paid them little heed. It would have been a much different story if their parents had been out looking for them.

“Well, see you tomorrow.” Keen smiled. The sight of the setting sun reflecting off Milla’s hair almost took his breath away, but his expression remained natural. Controlling his outer emotions had become remarkably easy since he had become Shadow Blade. At least most of the time...

“Yeah!” Milla grinned then dashed up the steps to her door. “Oh, and don’t think I forgot what we were talking about before you suddenly started worrying about the time. Someday you’re going to tell me who you like.” With a last smile, she vanished into the house.

“It’s you...” he spoke softly as he stared at the door. “It always has been, and it always will be.” Angrily wiping away a single tear, Keen turned and walked the few remaining yards to his house.

Chapter 5

Keen woke early. Ignoring the sunrise and the chirping birds, he dressed quickly then picked up a sturdy backpack. He sighed as he looked around the room. As he stuffed some clothes into the pack, memories of the times he'd spent there flashed through his mind. Reading late into the night when he hoped his parents wouldn't see... Playing with his toys... Having pillow fights with Milla... It seemed as if every book, every toy, every part of the room held a memory. On the outside, his face was calm, but on the inside, he was fighting back tears. His mind kept replaying the scene from the previous night, when he told his parents that he'd decided to leave the village.

“Son, it's natural for a young man like yourself to want to go off and see the world,” Tal spoke calmly. “Believe me, I understand. But why now? Why so suddenly? You have your magic, but there's so much more you need to learn. Wait another year or two. That will give you time to-”

“I can't...” Though firm, Keen's voice lacked the anger or fervor one would expect in such an argument. “It's not me, it's Shadow Blade. This feeling, it's been growing in the back of my mind for over a year now. I don't want to leave! I don't care

about experiencing the world or anything like that. I love it here. That's why I pushed that feeling aside as much as I could, but it's getting stronger and I can't ignore it any longer. It has to be now."

"But it's just a feeling," Grail pleaded, tears in her eyes, "you can't let something like that control your entire life!"

Keen looked down, trying to keep his own eyes from tearing up, as he struggled to put his thoughts into words. As abrupt as it seemed to his parents, this was a decision he'd been struggling silently with for quite some time. There was no argument they could bring to bear that he hadn't already tried on himself. "That day with the kraken... If it hadn't been for Shadow Blade's powers, you, me, Milla, the village, there wouldn't be anything left. Shadow Blade gave me the strength I needed to save us. And now, there's something he wants me to do. Maybe this, whatever it is, is the reason I was given these powers to begin with. So I can't ignore it. I owe him far too much for that."

"Keen..." Grail's lip trembled.

"Son..." Tal's voice shook as well. "You've grown far more than I realized. I still don't want you to go, but I understand. We'll help you as much as we can."

Leaving ample space in his pack, Keen slowly made his way downstairs. He walked this way every morning, but today it took him longer. More memories... His

parents were waiting for him at the bottom. They ate in silence then walked with him to the entryway.

“Here.” His mother handed him a large bundle. “There’s enough food for at least a few days.” Her eyes were wet as Keen placed it in his pack.

“And take this son.” His father’s voice was gruff as he tried to hold his emotions in check.

“Thanks.” Keen hung the small money pouch from his belt. “I’ll, I’ll miss you...” He hugged them both tightly.

“Please be careful,” his mother sniffed. “You will come back, won’t you?”

“I told you, remember?” He smiled as he opened the door. “This is just something I have to do for a little while. I’ll be back, you can count on it.” No more words were necessary. With a last look at his parents’ faces, Keen waved goodbye and stepped outside.

More memories flooded his mind as he walked across the thick green grass. He thought about the village and all its inhabitants who made up an irreplaceable part of his daily life. Yet, in the end, there was only one other person he had to see. He had been going to tell her yesterday, when they were on the beach, but she had been so happy that he couldn’t bring himself to make her sad. The past year had been the best. Soon after that day at the waterfall, he and Milla had taken their final magic tests and left those boring classes behind. After that, they had spent nearly every day together. In the marsh, in the forests, on the beach... They still practiced magic, but many days had been for fun. For swimming, for exploring, for talking... All that time and still he hadn’t told her. Of

course, that didn't stop Milla from asking if he liked one girl or another and getting annoyed when he remained silent. He wanted to tell her but, but, if she didn't love him too... They had been best friends almost their entire lives. He didn't want to lose that, even if it meant remaining silent.

She was waiting there, on the porch of her house. The sight of her was enough to make him reconsider leaving all over again. The thought of leaving her, of going for days, weeks, months, maybe even years on end, without seeing her smiling face was almost too much to bear. *Still, maybe if I become some famous hero while I'm gone... Maybe then she'll love me. That would make it all worthwhile.*

Steeling himself, Keen continued forward, trying not to be overwhelmed by the memories. *Ok, it's time...* "Morning." He waved.

"Morning," Milla called cheerfully as she hopped off the porch and onto the soft grass. She approached him then stopped and frowned. "What's with the pack?"

"I, I'm sorry I didn't tell you this sooner," he began, finding the words far harder to choose than he had the previous night. "But I have feeling like I did three years ago, the one that led me to the cave, and-"

Milla stood, frozen, as Keen stammered his way through the explanation. Although she understood his words, her mind struggled to comprehend the situation. *Leaving... But he loves Caluri! And we've always been together! There's no way he could leave home, leave me...* She gulped, fighting to keep control of her raging emotions. *There still so much we can do together! I want to spend more days at the*

waterfall. And to go shopping in Wrestina. I want him to teach me more magic. I... I... Memories flooded her mind, images of all the happy times they'd spent together. She'd never had any siblings but she couldn't imagine that the bond between brothers and sisters would be any greater than the one she shared with Keen.

Yet, unbidden, another memory came to life. She saw him, battered and bloody, giving everything he had, risking his very life, to save the village from the kraken. The awe she had felt back then was burned forever into her consciousness. Keen wasn't just her friend, he was a hero. *There must be others out there, all across the archipelago. Others that need help. Others that only he can save. This...this little village isn't the place for him anymore. And, and...I'm no longer the one who can stand by his side...* Sorrow nearly overwhelmed her at that admission but, deep down, she had known for a long time. He was on a different level, far beyond her reach. He had been ever since that day, years ago, when he flew off to face the kraken while she had remained behind. *I can't make him stay, and I can't go with him either. The path he'll walk is for someone far stronger and braver than I am...*

Suddenly, Milla felt as if a flame had sprung to life within her breast, banishing the growing despair. *No, that's not true! I'm already so much stronger than I was back then. It's not enough, not yet, but I can train harder. I can push my magic further, I can learn to fight, and I can strive to give everything for the sake of others, just like Keen. I won't let him be alone! This may be goodbye for now but the next time we meet... Next time, I swear I'll be ready to take that step.*

Resolve burning within her, Milla straightened and looked Keen in the eyes.

“How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know... But I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“I’ll be waiting.” At last, unable to contain her emotions any longer, she threw her arms around him and sobbed into his shoulder. “I, I’ll miss you.” Her voice was soft.

“And I’m sorry. I want to...but I can’t, not yet. Soon though, soon I’ll...” she trailed off, the sorrow at his coming departure drowning out even her new found determination.

A hint of confusion passed over Keen’s face as he tried to make sense of her words but the feeling of her lips brushing his cheek drove them from his mind. They stood there for a long moment, locked in each other’s embrace. Until at last, as if by silent agreement, they broke apart and did their best to smile.

. “Well...goodbye.” He turned to go, knowing that, if he didn’t leave now, he likely never would.

“Goodbye! Think of me every day!” she called, a smile on her tearstained face.

“I will!” Keen did his best to return her smile. Then, with a last look back at Milla, his companion, his best friend, and his only love, he turned away and sprinted down the road, keeping his eyes firmly on the ground as he ran. Away from the village... Away from his parents... Away from Milla... And away from the memories...

No one saw the boy called Keen as he ran... And no one saw as his tears fell onto the dusty road.

Chapter 6

Seemingly oblivious to everything except for the road ahead of him, Keen made good time. He had walked this way many times before, both with his parents and with Milla. But those had been happy times. Then he had talked, laughed, and looked at everything around him as if it were new and exciting. Now, there were just too many memories.

Around midday, he reached a crossroads. The bustling port town of Wrestina was less than one here to the west. It was a fun place, always bright and busy, but he turned south instead. It was easier to go someplace new and unfamiliar, a place where there wouldn't be anything to remind him of home.

A small breeze flew past for an instant, ruffling his slightly unruly hair. *It would be so much easier without these memories.* He thought as he trudged on. Although the way was flat and easy, each step felt strained, as if he were walking through a bog and sinking deeper with every movement. He thought of sunny days in the village, of his parents, of the beach, of the falls, of Milla...

As he walked, Keen at last forced himself to stop reminiscing and study his surroundings. He may not know where he was going, but it helped to know where he was. The road wound slowly inland as he progressed and, after a couple hours, the sight of the endless sea and the sounds of the waves were hidden by tall green trees and the

chirping of birds. It was nice, in a way, although the lack of other travelers made it seem rather lonely. Still, that suited his mood. He didn't feel like talking anyway.

Over the course of the day, Keen rested occasionally but mostly he plodded on slowly but surely. He could have pushed himself a bit harder, but it wasn't like he had a firm destination in mind. The compulsion that drove him forward was as strong as it was maddeningly vague. There things out there he needed to do. Things that only he could do. He knew that with as much certainty as he knew his own name. Yet that feeling, those memories or vestiges of Shadow Blade, had given him nothing to go on. Whatever he was being called to accomplish, he'd have to discover it for himself.

After hours and hours of walking in silence, it grew dark. Not knowing how far it was to the nearest town, he decided to spend the night by the road. It wasn't going to rain, and he wasn't particularly worried about beasts or bandits. If there were any nearby, they would have attacked already. Besides, he could take care of himself.

It took only minutes for Shadow Blade to cut wood and light a small fire. Not wanting to try his hand at cooking, Keen ate a quick meal consisting of odds and ends from his mother's bundle then curled up in his bedroll and listened to the sounds of the night. It was a long time before he fell asleep, but the reason wasn't the chirping of the insects, the hooting of the owls, or even a lack of tiredness. Once again, it was the memories...

After leaving the forest around midmorning, Keen began to encounter more people on the road. Occasional crossroads lay scattered about, with paths leading off to places, the names of which he could barely remember. Geography had never been a very important subject in his village, even that of the archipelago in which they lived. Ignoring the turnoffs, he stuck to the main road, which the signs said led to a place called Chanadia. Although he didn't remember anything about it, judging by the amount of people going there, he guessed it to be a relatively big city.

For the most part, he ignored the other travelers and they ignored him. No one seemed particularly interested in a lone boy walking down the road. The others were of all types. There were families with young children scampering about excitedly, merchants pulling their beat-up carts, young couples walking closely together, and also lone travelers of all ages.

Around midday, Keen did drop alongside a thin middle-aged man with a dark tan and receding hairline. "Have you been this way before?"

"Oh sure, I go to Chanadia quite a lot. Nothing to do where I come from." The man took a quick look at Keen then turned his attention back to the road.

"How much further is it?"

"Two, three hours, no more. Unless there's trouble."

"Trouble?" Keen surveyed the peaceful looking grasslands. Far to the left were the only true mountains on the island. Tall and jagged, their peaks stretched up into the clouds, even so, they were too far away to see without squinting.

“Not here, further down. Before too long the road goes through Florie Forest. It’s not too bad, but you get occasional monsters roaming around in there. I’ve never actually seen one, but keep on your guard.”

“Thanks, I will.” Keen dropped several paces behind and continued forward.

In about forty minutes the road disappeared into a dark forest filled with trees towering a hundred feet, if not more, into the sky. Birds happily flew in and out of the ancient woods, but most of the travelers seemed to hold at least a hint of trepidation. Keen, however, took in the forest at a glance and entered without hesitation. It felt comfortable to him. Dark, powerful, yet mysterious, kind of like Shadow Blade. Besides, there was little chance that any monster lurking about, even in a forest as old as this, would be dangerous enough to worry him. The only things he feared were the ones he couldn’t fight.

There was little talk among the travelers and that was mostly nervous chatter. Then, a series of loud thuds echoed through the trees followed by a scream. Snapping out of his doldrums, Keen ran ahead. Rounding a bend, he skidded to a halt.

The other travelers were a short distance ahead of him, frozen in fear. Before them a monster reared back on its hind legs, twice as tall as the scared travelers fleeing back along the path. *A chimera...* Keen felt a momentary prick of fear at the sight of its three mis-matched heads but Shadow Blade wasn’t the least bit fazed. There was the swish of a jet-black cape then a ray of searing red magic hit the monster squarely in the

chest. However, it hardly seemed to faze it. Startled, the people turned to see who had attacked.

“Get back!” Shadow Blade yelled as he jumped into the air. “Everything will be fine as long as you stay out of my way!” He thrust out his hands and the stones erupted beneath the feet of the chimera, sending it crashing to the ground.

The beast quickly climbed to its feet and roared angrily, four pairs of eyes fixed on the black-clad sorcerer. It lunged forward and its claws, sharp enough and strong enough to tear through iron, slashed at Shadow Blade only to meet empty air as he effortlessly evaded the attacks. Claws, teeth, beak, and horns lashed out again and again only to come up empty. Then its tail, a scaly green serpent, shot forward. Its mouth open, fangs ready...

“Tch, pathetic.” A rainbow-colored sword, pulsing with magical energy, whipped forward and severed the snake’s head leaving only a bloody stump in its place. Shadow Blade fired a blast of wind at the chimera’s chest, knocking it on its back. Magic power flared brightly between his hands for an instant as he sent a swirling multicolored ray at the monster’s stomach. The onlookers ducked and covered their eyes as a powerful explosion rocked the forest.

“All too easy.” Shadow Blade dropped to the ground, his black cape flaring out behind him, as the people watched nervously. After seeing him defeat a chimera without receiving so much as a scratch, none were anxious to approach, even to express their thanks. Instead they just watched, openmouthed as he turned and floated off into the forest.

After several tense minutes, the travelers began to breathe again and slowly started back down the trail. A minute later, Keen slipped out of the forest and joined them. He didn't say anything, he just listened to the bits and pieces of conversation that reached his ears.

“...black stranger... ..beat that chimera... ..acted like it was easy... ..his magic... ..so powerful... ..was flying... ..sorcerer saved us... ..that sword and the cape... ..the black stranger... ..vanished just like a shadow... ..black stranger...”

With a small smile on his face, Keen continued forward. One step at a time, one foot in front of the other. Perhaps this was why he'd needed to leave Caluri, to help others. And this was just the beginning.

Chapter 7

Before long, Keen and the rest of the travelers had put the forest behind them. However, it seemed that all anyone could talk about was the mysterious black caped stranger who had saved them. Keen played along when he had to but mostly remained silent.

They make it seem like I'm something incredible just because I beat that Chimera. His eyes on the ground, he continued along the path almost automatically, leaving his mind free to mull things over. But that battle was easy. I've had a harder time in magic duels against Milla. There have to be others who can destroy monsters like that. Milla could have done it, I think. So there's got to be lots of others, right? Without any frame of reference I don't if I'm that strong or if that chimera was just kind of weak.

He sighed and looked up. The sun was beginning to sink low over the horizon and once again he could see the ocean far off to the west. A few seagulls glided over its tranquil waters as the waves began to turn a bright golden yellow. Fortunately, he could see the outskirts of a city ahead. Chanadia was built over several sloping hills surrounding a small inlet which led out into the ocean. The harbor seemed to be the center of activity with many ships sitting at its docks. It was immediately obvious that, unlike in Caluri Village, nightlife was a big part of Chanadia. Strings of brightly colored lights, magically powered from the look of it, lined the buildings. All around people

milled about the sloping streets, going in and out of taverns, inns, and shops. Keen was quite impressed by how big and lively everything was, Shadow Blade was not.

After a short walk towards the docks, he ducked into the first inn he saw. Despite the commotion, he just wasn't in the mood to explore and mingle. Taking a seat at a deserted corner table, he surveyed the common room. People of all types were crowded around the rough-cut wooden tables talking, dicing, and drinking. Serving girls darted about carrying food and drink to the patrons while a small boy slowly fed the roaring fire. Keen took it all in with a practiced eye. If he were to have come here two or three years back, he probably would have been running around the city in an attempt to see everything. After all, aside from occasional trips to Wrestina, he had never been very far away from home. But Shadow Blade's calm demeanor settled over him, dampening his curiosity and excitement.

"What'll you have?" Keen blinked and looked up to see a thin serving girl standing by his table. His stomach rumbled, reminding him how long it had been since he'd last eaten.

"What have you got?" He put on a friendly smile.

"For drinks there's beer, wine, and waterberry. If you want food, we've got beef stew or roasted fish."

"Waterberry and stew, please." Keen leaned back.

"That'll be two silvers." The girl shook out her short black hair. Keen removed two coins from his small stash and slid them across the table. "I'll be right back with your drink, but the stew'll be a few minutes." The girl turned and started making her way back

through the maze of tables. She returned a moment later with a mug of waterberry juice then disappeared again. Sipping the tart drink, Keen stared down at the table as he let his ears pick up snatches of conversation from nearby.

“Did you hear? ...another shop destroyed... ..had to be the Cabal... ..should do something about them... ..better just to pay em... ..don’t want to get them mad...”

Cabal huh? Wonder what that’s all about... “Hey, wait a sec.” He looked up as the serving girl returned with his stew and half a loaf of bread. “Can you tell me what The Cabal is?”

“You new around here?” She glanced around nervously.

“Yeah, why?”

“Well, you see, they don’t like people talking bad about them...” She moved over next to Keen and lowered her voice. “The Cabal is a gang of sorts. Rumor says they run most of the crime around here. Things happen to people that refuse to pay them protection money or get in their way. Actually, my boss stopped paying them about a month ago. I’m getting kinda worried...”

“Hey, Anglica!” the chubby innkeeper called from behind the counter. “Flirt with the customers on yer own time! Right now I’m paying ya to work!”

“I’m coming!” She blushed. “Got to go.” She looked back at Keen. “Look, just keep away from the Cabal. They’re nothing but trouble.”

“Thanks for the tip.” He tossed her another silver.

“Later!” She shot him a smile and a wink then hurried back to the kitchen.

Interesting... Keen ate his dinner in silence and continued to listen to the nearby conversations, but there was little talk of the Cabal, and most of that was kept to nervous whispers. *Guess this place isn't as peaceful as it seems.*

Keen stayed in the common room long after he had finished his meal. He couldn't say why exactly, it just felt like he should. As the minutes turned to hours, the other patrons began to trickle out, either to their rooms on the floors above or out into the streets. When the last of them had gone, Keen still sat alone and all but forgotten in the corner.

"Hey," Anglica smiled as she refilled his cup, "you won't be able to stay down here much longer. Boss wants to close the place up for the night. Don't you have somewhere to go?"

"Not really," Keen sighed. "Can I get a room here?"

"Sure, we've got a few left." She flicked her hair out of her sparkling blue eyes. "It'll be another four silvers for the night."

He slid her the coins, realizing that there was already a noticeable gap in his pouch. *I guess things are more expensive outside of Caluri. I'll have to be careful until I can find a way to earn more.*

Anglica walked off and returned a moment later with a thick iron key. "Up the stairs, third door on your right. Sorry I can't talk longer, but I need to help clean the kitchen. Have a good night."

"Thanks a lot." He returned her smile.

With a last wink, she disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Keen alone once more. Gulping down the remains of his fourth cup of waterberry, he stood and turned towards the stairs only to stop when a loud bang rattled the common room door.

“Gellon!” a cruel voice called from the outside. “If you don’t open up we’re gonna torch the place!”

Acting on instinct, Keen ducked under the table as the innkeeper, along with a hulking bare-chested man, hurried to unbolt the door. Almost before he was done, the heavy wooden doors swung open and slammed into the wall. Four men slipped in out of the darkened streets. All wore long black coats and matching hats, and all were armed.

“What do you want?” Gellon, the innkeeper, spoke gruffly but there was a slight quiver in his voice. “This is my property! I should call the guards!”

“Da ya really think they’ll care?” One of the black cloaked men stepped forward while the others circled around Gellon and his silent bodyguard.

“You’re not scaring me!” Gellon’s voice sounded more desperate than commanding. “Rongo, throw them out!”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” The men drew their weapons. “Hey Diemitri, come on out and show us what you got!”

A fifth man, tall and scrawny as a scarecrow, emerged from the kitchen. One hand was wrapped tightly around Anglica’s throat while the other held a pistol against her head. Her eyes wide with fear, she had gone limp and didn’t even try to struggle.

“Move and she dies.” The first man turned back to Gellon. “Here’s the deal. The girl comes with us. If we don’t get our payment by noon, she dies. If we don’t get it in a week, this place goes up in flames.”

I’ve got to do something, but what? Keen watched, horrified, from his hiding place. While pistols were slow to reload and lacked accuracy, that hardly mattered at such close range. Try as he might, he couldn’t think of any way to save Anglica before her kidnapper pulled the trigger. *Argh! I’m Shadow Blade! How can I be so powerless?*

“Dark take you…” Gellon muttered through clenched teeth.

“We’ll be sendin someone ta see ya around noon.” The Cabal agents began backing towards the door. “It was nice doing business with you.” With that, they vanished into the darkness.

Without a second thought, Keen reached for the cape that wasn’t there… The table flew back against the wall as magic power flared around him. Jumping to his feet, Shadow Blade dashed towards the door.

“Who the- What are you doing?” Gellon gasped, as he dropped nervously into a large chair.

“I’m going to save the girl,” Shadow Blade replied coolly.

“But that’s suicide!” The chair creaked under the innkeeper’s weight as he struggled back to his feet and ran after the dark caped form. “No one can fight the Cabal! You’ll be killed!” But, by the time he had reached the door, Shadow Blade was gone.

As the five Cabal members hurried along back streets and alleys, no one noticed the man following them. Clothed purely in black, he all but vanished into the starless night, moving behind them as silent as a shadow, his feet never touching the ground.

After what seemed like hours of wandering through the dark, the men finally stopped at what appeared to be a shipping warehouse. The first man knocked on the heavy metal door until a face appeared in the small slit that served as a window. "Gamma darkness neo," the man whispered. The face in the window disappeared and the door slid open slightly. The men hurriedly slipped inside, taking Anglica with them.

Hovering around a corner outside, Shadow Blade considered his options. He could blast a hole in the wall and fight his way in, but that would alert every person in the area and most likely bring about Anglica's death. A quick survey of the building turned up no other entrances he could use, which only left one option.

As he dropped to the ground and walked up to the door, Shadow Blade quickly suppressed the nervous part of him that was Keen. There was nothing to worry about. Stopping before the mass of solid steel, he raised his hand and knocked twice, just like the Cabal agent. "Gamma darkness neo," he growled as the face appeared in the slit. The door slid open and Shadow Blade ducked inside.

"Hey, wait a second," the door guard turned to look at Shadow Blade, "I haven't seen you befo-"

Shadow Blade grabbed the man's shoulder. Magic power flowed from his fingertips and the guard's eyes rolled back into his head. Shadow Blade removed his

hand and let the man crumple to the floor. He was still breathing, but he wouldn't be talking for quite a while either.

Shadow Blade quickly scanned the area. No one else was around... With a flick of his wrist, the body floated over behind a stack of crates. Creeping forward, he could hear voices coming from the far room. Pressing himself against the wall, he peered through the empty doorframe.

Piles of boxes and crates filled the dingy room along with an old table covered with cards and dice. The five men were milling about inside. The scrawny one still held Anglica, who squirmed weakly in his grasp.

"Hey boss," he turned to the man who had done all the talking back at the inn, "what should I do with her?"

"We've got to keep her alive until noon," the man replied as he pulled off his hat. "Tie her to that pole, we may as well have a bit of fun with her."

Anglica's eyes widened as the man dragged her across the room to a grimy pole, which ran from the floor to the ceiling. She began to struggle but he casually backhanded her across the face and stuffed a rag into her bloody mouth. Grabbing a length of fraying rope, he tied her wrists and ankles to the pole, pulling hard enough to elicit a pained gasp.

"Enough!" Shadow Blade stepped into the open. He thrust out his hand and a ray of light hit the boss in the chest, flinging him against the wall.

"Get him!" the wounded man gasped as his companions charged the mysterious stranger.

Shadow Blade waited until they were almost upon him then, with a snap of his fingers, lighting flashed, knocking them back. A moment later, he could hear hurried footsteps in the rooms behind him. *So much for stealth.* Reaching forward, he grasped the ropes binding Anglica to the pole. A minute amount of magic flowed through his fingers and the rope turned to dust. Draping the startled girl over his shoulder, he flung out his hand. A fiery red beam shot forth, knocking a gaping hole in the wall.

He could hear the men behind him as he flew out into the dark night. Turning, he set Anglica down and let magic power flare around him. Multi-colored rays of light struck his assailants as the magic continued to build.

“It’s a demon!” one of the Cabal agents shrieked as he turned and ran.

“Not quite.” Shadow Blade he thrust his hands forward and the building exploded in a flare of light and heat.

Turning calmly, he bent over Anglica and pulled the gag out of her mouth. “Are you alright?”

She coughed several times then looked up into his face. “Yes, I am...” she murmured, as if surprised by her own words. “Thank you.” She looked down nervously as Shadow Blade helped her to her feet. “I’ll find some way to repay you! I don’t have much money but-”

“I don’t want anything.” He put his hand under her chin and lifted her head up until their eyes met. “Come on, I’ll take you back to the inn.”

“You...” Realization dawned in her eyes. “You’re the one who was sitting in the corner?”

Shadow Blade just nodded.

“Please, tell me your name.”

“Keen. But if you really want to repay me, don’t tell anyone about tonight.”

“I swear.” She smiled. “Thank you, Keen.”

After about ten minutes of walking, Shadow Blade and Anglica arrived back at the inn. Gellon jumped up as the pair entered the common room.

“Anglica! How?”

“You shouldn’t have to worry about the Cabal for a while.” Shadow Blade turned to go.

“But, but-” Gellon sputtered. “What did you- Let me get you a drink!”

“No. I’m going.” Shadow Blade’s voice was emotionless.

“Please, at least tell me who you are!”

“Just call me Shadow Blade.”

Chapter 8

Keen awoke to sunlight streaming through the window of his third story room. He had slept later than intended, though he supposed that wasn't too surprising. Although he'd tried hard not to show it, that last spell previous night had taken a lot out of him. Shadow Blade's power was immense, but it wasn't infinite. Like any other spell caster, using too much magical energy in a short period of time left him feeling both physically and mentally exhausted. Fortunately, a good night's sleep was usually more than enough time to recharge.

Arriving downstairs, he slipped into one of the numerous empty tables and quickly took in the scene. Being mid-morning, there were few people still in the common room. The handful that remained sat mostly by themselves and hurriedly gulped down their food in an attempt to make up for lost time.

Surprisingly, the inn showed no signs of last night's visit. Everything was neat and ordered. The hulking guard, Rongo, sat out by the door with a heavy club in hand while the balding innkeeper, Gellon, stood behind the counter casting a lazy eye across the room. Anglica yawned as she leaned back against the wall, her head sagging as wisps of shiny black hair fell over her eyes. However, upon seeing Keen, she hurried over to his table.

“Good morning, sir!” She smiled sweetly. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Breakfast would be great.” He returned her smile. “And please, call me Keen.”

“Oh, alright Keen. I’ll be right back.” She dashed into kitchens and returned carrying a large plate and a mug of juice. “I had the cook keep it warm for you.”

“Thanks.”

“About last night,” she blushed slightly, “I mean, if there’s ever anything I can do for you...”

“Don’t worry about it.” He grinned good-naturedly. “Helping people is sort of my job. I’m just glad you didn’t get hurt.”

“Well, then at least let me say a proper thank you.” Anglica stared shyly at the floor. “I, well, no one except my parents has ever done anything for me without wanting something in return. It, it means a lot...”

“I’m glad I could help. And thanks. I’ve been feeling pretty uncertain since leaving home, but it’s nice to know that I can do some good out here.”

“Oh! I... Well, I guess I’d better let you get back to your breakfast. See you later, Keen.”

“Yeah, later.” Keen looked back down at his food. Deep down inside he still wanted to run back home to Caluri Village, but maybe this journey, or whatever it was, was worthwhile after all.

For lack of anything better to do, Keen decided to spend his time strolling about the city. The part of Chanadia which ran from the city entrance and along half the waterfront seemed to be the main thoroughfare. The clean, well-kept roads were filled with people and lined with inns, restaurants, and shops of all kinds. It was a pleasant place with plenty to see and do but, after a while, Keen found himself leaving the crowd behind to venture into the other sections of town. The main residential district was nice, if a little strange to someone who was used to seeing people live in individual houses instead of multistory apartment buildings. And the port itself, alive with sailors and workers loading and unloading ships, was quite the sight. Still, all this beauty had a dark side as well. Namely the slums, which bordered and often crossed over into the warehouse district.

A hint of a memory from Shadow Blade told him that any large city was bound to have a slum of some sort, but it was Keen's first time seeing such an overwhelming display of poverty and filth. Back in Caluri Village, and even Wrestina to some extent, if someone was falling on hard times, their neighbors would gladly help them get back on their feet. There were no rich people back home, but no poor people either. Some had a little more or a little less than others, but that was about as far as it went.

Another piece of Shadow Blade's memory flickered in the recesses of his mind. A memory of what, he couldn't tell; it slipped through his fingers every time he tried to grasp it. Yet he could sense its meaning. All the magic power in the world wouldn't be enough get rid of the slums, Shadow Blade had learned that lesson the hard way.

Maybe someday, with enough people working together, there could be a change, but that's not my place. Like it or not, I'm a fighter, so I should focus on what I can do in my own way.

At long last, Keen made his way back towards the inn. The sun was sinking over the ocean, turning the lapping waves into glowing hills of gold and orange. It was a beautiful sight, foam crashing onto the sands of the beach while seagulls swooped back and forth across the setting sun.

Such a beautiful world, but so much danger and evil. And that's why I'm here, to keep those things away from others. Looking out over the ocean, his thoughts turned in another direction entirely. Milla and I used to watch the sunset back home. Milla... You don't know how much I care about you. You haunt my thoughts and my dreams... Why can't you understand? Why couldn't I tell you? It's only been three days and I already miss you. I missed you from the moment I left the village... A single tear slid down his cheek. "Milla..."

Even though the sun was down, the streets of Chanadia continued to teem with life. All along the lanes, shopkeepers were lighting lamps and calling prospective customers into their stores while light, warmth, and laughter trickled out of every inn and tavern.

Tearing his eyes away from the sea, and his thoughts away from Milla, Keen strolled across the road and into his inn. The common room was just as it had been the night before. People filled the tables talking, drinking, and dicing while Anglica and several other girls hurried about bringing food and refilling drinks.

He slipped into a deserted corner table and took in the scene. Anglica arrived a moment later. “Hi.” He smiled slightly. “What have you got tonight?”

“The same as last night.” She smiled and blushed. “What would you like?”

“The same as before then.” He slid the appropriate coins across the table.

“Alright, be back in a flash.” Anglica ran off and disappeared into the kitchens.

The other serving girls exchanged sly grins as they watched her go. All could tell that she liked the young man sitting alone in the corner and all were eager to press her on the matter after the evening crowd had gone.

“Thanks.” Keen looked up as she returned.

Instead of simply placing it on the table, she began meticulously arranging the plate, cup, and silverware, bending down until her short hair brushed against his face. “Be careful,” she whispered. “The Cabal put a price on the head of ‘the black caped man.’”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

“Just, just don’t let anything happen to you.”

Keen froze as he felt her cool lips brush his cheek. When he looked up a moment later, she was already hurrying away.

“I should have known last night was only the start...” he murmured. “Ok then, I won’t leave here until the Cabal is destroyed.”

Keen woke in the middle of the night just as he had planned. Dressing quickly, he walked over to the window and stared out into the dark night. Reaching for his cape, he transformed into Shadow Blade then leapt into the air and vanished, reappearing in the alleyway outside.

“Well,” he began to walk deeper into the city, “if the Cabal wants me, here I am.”

Dark clouds covered the sky, hiding the light of the moon and stars. Dressed completely in black, Shadow Blade truly became a shadow, all but vanishing in the darkness. The sound of his footsteps, however, echoed loudly amidst the buildings. But that was exactly what he wanted. Hiding was easy, but tonight he wanted to be found.

The minutes dragged by as Shadow Blade continued to walk. *Soon... Soon...*

The crack of a pistol echoed through the night. A magical barrier flashed, and the bullet crumbled to dust before it could reach its intended target. Deep inside, Keen breathed a sigh of relief. While his instincts had led him to believe that it would work, he'd never tried to block a non-magical attack, much less one that he couldn't even see coming. Still, there was no time to congratulate himself. Already, he could hear the footsteps of his attacker fading away into the distance.

Leaping into the air, Shadow Blade vanished and reappeared in front of a man in a dark coat. The startled assassin backpedaled frantically only to find himself floating off the ground, bound tightly by invisible threads. “You work for the Cabal?” Shadow

Blade's voice was cold and hard. The man, paralyzed with terror, could only nod. "Take me to their base."

"N-never..."

"You will take me there," Shadow Blade's hand closed around his throat, "or I'll kill you now and find someone who will."

"N-no... I'll, I'll take you!" Shadow Blade released both his hand and his spell and the man dropped limply to the ground.

"Lead the way then, and don't even think about running."

"There..." The Cabal agent trembled as he pointed to mansion in one of the city's nicest districts.

Shadow Blade surveyed the place, a simple spell allowing him to see clearly in the dark. It was a large and tastefully ornate stone building, but no different than the dozen other structures that lined the street. "You'll go to the door and enter." He looked down at the quivering man before him. "I'll be right behind you."

"Please, no." The man shrank back. "They'll kill me for bringing a stranger to the base!"

"And how many have you killed for much more trivial reasons?" Shadow Blade's voice was cold. "If you follow my instructions, you might live. If you refuse, I won't have any more use for you."

Shaking with every step, the man led the way behind the building to a small back door. Raising a gloved hand, he knocked several times in rapid succession, forming a strange pattern. Silently, the door slid open. The assassin stepped inside and looked around.

“You back already?” the door guard asked. “Did you get that blacked-caped guy who destroyed the warehouse base?”

“What?” The man spun around only to see that he and the guard were alone in the room. “Well, um-”

“No, he didn’t,” Shadow Blade dropped the invisibility spell he had been holding, “and you won’t either.” There was a brief flash and the guard fell limply to the ground.

“Did, did you-” the assassin stammered.

“No, he’s alive, for now. Now, take me to the person in charge.”

“But, I’m not allowed to-”

“Do it.” Shadow Blade raised his hand threateningly and the man scurried off down the hall.

The building was surprisingly well furnished, likely courtesy of its previous inhabitants. Lush carpets covered the floors while tapestries and paintings hung on gilded walls. Even the furniture was tastefully ornate. Still, signs of the current occupants abounded. Crates and weapons lay about in helter-skelter arrangements and many of the expensive furnishings were marred or otherwise damaged.

“There. Right there! Around that corner and through the door.”

Shadow Blade studied the man who had brought him this far. “Since you helped me, I’ll let you go but, if I ever see or hear of you doing anything wrong, I’ll hunt you down.”

“Thank you, sir!” the man was sweating profusely as he began backing away.

“I suggest running away from here as fast as you can.”

Shadow Blade paused for a moment, watching as the man disappeared down the corridor. *Should I have really let him go? Well, it’s not like he’s a threat. Besides, he’s not the reason I’m there.*

Shadow Blade rounded a corner and came face to face with a pair of guards. Both men raised their pistols but, with the flash of a multi-colored blade, they fell before they could fire. Floating over them, he raised his left hand and the door exploded inward, sending splinters flying.

“What the- How did you get in here?!?” A heavily scarred man jumped to his feet.

“You’re the leader of the Cabal?”

“Ah, I see...” the man sneered as he smoothed out a crease in his expensive coat.

“You’re the one my men are after. I’m surprised that you made it this far.”

“I’ll give you one chance.” Shadow Blade spoke calmly. “Disband and I’ll let you live.”

“I think you already know my answer.” The man yanked a pistol out from beneath his desk and fired.

“Fool. So be it.” Shadow Blade snapped his fingers and a red ray pierced the man’s chest

“It’s not over...” the man gasped as he fell back against the wall. “You can destroy us, but he, will still, triumph...” With a last labored breath, his eyes rolled back in his head and he dropped to the floor.

Shadow Blade stood there for a moment then slowly touched a finger to his left shoulder. “I’m bleeding...” He blinked as he stared at the blood dripping from his finger. “I was careless. Still, it’s time to end this.”

Magic power flared around him until it was too bright to look upon. “Hell Flame Explosion!!!” he screamed as the force surrounding him erupted into an incredible blast, drowning out all else in burning orange light.

The flames bursting through the windows of the stricken mansion cast an orange glow on Shadow Blade’s cape as he appeared back on the street. He floated for a moment then swayed and dropped to his knees on the paving stones. Gritting his teeth against the aching pain in his shoulder, he staggered to his feet, jumped into the air, and vanished.

Tongues of flames danced in the night, casting an orange glow across the night sky.

“Could that be...” Anglica gasped as she, Gellon, and the inn’s patrons rushed out into the cold night. She turned suddenly to see Keen behind her. He was breathing heavily and clutching his left shoulder, but he managed a weak smile. “Did, did you-”

“Yeah. I don’t think you’ll have to worry about the Cabal anymore.”

“But how?”

“I did it,” Keen replied calmly. “That’s all that matters.” He turned to go.

“Wait!” Anglica finally managed to recover from her shock. “What happened to your arm?”

“It’s not too bad, I’ve had worse.”

“Come on,” she hustled him inside, “I’ll get some salve and cloth.”

“Don’t bother. I’m fine.”

“No!” She grabbed his good arm. “As a friend, this is the least I can do.”

Friends... Keen thought as he let Anglica tend to his wound. My first new friend...

Chapter 9

Keen spent much of the next two days resting under Anglica's watchful eye. The massive amount of magic he'd used to destroy The Cabal's base had left him physically and mentally drained and, even though it had only grazed him, the bullet wound in his shoulder had only made things worse. Still, it gave him time to think. Destroying the Cabal had felt right somehow, like it was something he was supposed to do. As had defeating the chimera, to a lesser extent. *Maybe that's what Shadow Blade wants.* He mused. *Doesn't explain why he chose me, but traveling around, fighting evil, and helping those in need isn't really a bad way to live. And, if I keep it up long enough, maybe then it'll be time to return home. No, it will be. I will go home to Caluri and I will see Milla and my parents again. But I can't help anyone if I just keep thinking about how much I miss them. So, for now, I need to focus on the present. The world doesn't need Keen, it needs Shadow Blade. So, until the day I can go, that's who I'll be.*

Saying goodbye to a part of his personality, even just for a time, was sad, and even a little scary. But, once the decision was made, he felt as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Now, with a new resolve and a firm goal, he was ready to move on and face whatever this new life might bring.

By the morning of the third day, Keen was feeling much better and, with his goal set, at least for the time being, he found himself in the common room bright and early.

Anglica hurriedly finished serving the other customers, then moved over by Keen's table. "Whatcha gonna do today?" she asked cheerfully as she dropped into the chair across from his.

"I'll be taking a ship to another island," he replied. "Now that the Cabal is gone, I think it's time for me to move on as well."

"Oh... I was hoping that you'd stay for a while."

"It's a long story, but traveling is kind of my life now. At least for a while."

"Will you come back and see me again sometime?"

"Of course. I always come back to visit my friends." He smiled as he stood and hefted his pack.

"I'll be waiting." She smiled sadly. "Goodbye, Keen."

"Goodbye, and thanks." With a last wave, he turned and left the inn behind.

The ship's captain was waiting at the dock. He was a tall man, burly and grizzled, with a white cap on his head and a healthy growth of stubble on his face. "Better hurry and get aboard," he growled as the young man approached, "we're almost ready to pull anchor."

“Ok.” Keen sprinted across the rough wood of the dock and up the creaking gangplank. Once aboard, he barely had time to stow away his gear before the ship began sailing out to sea.

For a while he just stood on the deck and watched as Chanadia slowly vanished in the distance. Despite his newfound resolve, saying that he was ready to move on was far easier than doing so. Sighing heavily, he watched as a group of dolphins swam by, jumping playfully in and out of the water. The gentle rocking of the ship didn't bother him, and he never lost a step. While his seafaring experience was limited to sitting in the small rowboats and fishing skiffs used by the villagers in Caluri, near perfect balance was another thing he had gained since becoming Shadow Blade. It was nice, having access to so many skills and talents he never had to acquire on his own, but a bit unsettling as well. Lost in thought, Keen continued to stare out across the waves.

It was mid-afternoon when land was first sighted in the distance. At the cries of the lookout, Keen stirred and opened his eyes, only then realizing that he had slept for several hours. Shaking his head, he squinted off into the distance and was just able to make out a thin strip of green and brown. Before long he was able to make out the rough outlines of the buildings surrounding the docks. Hurrying below to reclaim his gear, he returned as seagulls began swooping low over the ship. Moving to the very front, he

began studying the approaching port town of Calypso. It appeared to be roughly two-thirds the size of Chanadia, and had a decidedly less festive atmosphere.

It was only a matter of minutes before Keen's ship had joined those anchored at the docks and become a center of activity. Slipping unnoticed out of the noise and confusion of the port, he probed deeper into the town. The streets were busy but unpaved, leaving dirt and mud to cling to the shoes of those walking between the two- and three-story brick buildings.

Hmm... Now what? Keen thought as he strolled randomly through the city. *Could there be something like the Cabal here as well? If not, I guess I can always hunt monsters or go on to another town.*

After an hour of wandering around randomly, Keen found himself in front of a large tavern. Slipping inside the dimly lit room, he decided try and learn more about the area. Frowning at how few coins remained in his purse, he ordered a drink from a harried serving girl and moved to join one of the many dice games taking place. For a few minutes, he simply stood and watched the other men throw out coins and roll the grubby, six-sided dice. One, a relatively well dressed and clean-shaven fellow, was clearly coming out ahead, with more and more of the coins making their way to his side of the table. Keen frowned and studied the man more closely. *Just like I thought. He's good...* Keen's hand lashed out, snatching up the dice, while his other hand closed around the man's arm.

“What do you think you’re doing!” The gambler tried to jump up, but Keen’s grip held him firmly in place.

“Showing the others your trick.” Keen dropped the dice on the table on the table. Two stopped on six and two on five. Not the best role, but close enough. “Go ahead,” he gestured to the other men, “no matter how many times you roll them they’ll always come up the same.”

“But how-”

“He’s been switching the normal dice with his every few rolls and then swapping them back before you noticed.” Keen pried open the hand of the white-faced swindler, revealing another set of dice.

“You, you-” A dagger appeared in his hand. Hardly moving, Keen slammed his fist into the man’s stomach. The knife fell to the floor as the gambler staggered back, gasping for air. With a wild fear in his eyes, he turned and sprinted for the door. Reacting almost without thought, Keen grabbed a chair and hurled it after the fleeing man. The heavy wood hit him squarely in the back, knocking him to the floor. Before he could recover, a muscular man grabbed him and hauled him outside.

“Thanks a lot kid,” the men in the dice game moved to reclaim their money from the swindler’s pile, “you’ve got sharp eyes.”

“What are they going to do with him?”

“That scum? Who knows? But from what I hear, the guard isn’t easy on his sort.”

“Want to join the game?” One of the men smiled a gap-toothed grin. “We’ve got an empty seat and, if it hadn’t been for you, we wouldn’t have anything left to bet with anyway.”

“Thanks.” Keen slid into the chair and dropped his remaining coins on the table. “So,” he said as the game began, “if the local guards have enough time to deal with people cheating at dice, this must be a pretty peaceful place.”

“You’d be right about that.” A middle aged man with a receding hairline tossed the dice, getting a rather average roll. He frowned then continued. “Used to be really bad, but The Emperor really cleaned things up.”

“The Emperor?” Keen frowned. “Sorry, I just came from another island and all the towns and cities there just have their own local governments. I guess it’s different here?”

“We used to be like that too.” Another man replied as they continued to pass around the dice. “But then crime started to get real bad and the local guards couldn’t keep up. But once we agreed to join The Empire, The Emperor’s guards moved in and cleaned things up in no time. Been nice and quiet ever since.”

“Really... I’ve never heard of The Empire before.” Keen picked up the dice and watched them spin to a stop.

“Guess you haven’t been up north either.” The first man took up the dice once more. “The Empire has only been around for a decade or so, but I hear most all the islands up there are already loyal to The Emperor.”

“Guess I’d better start learning then.” Keen smiled good-naturedly. “What can you tell me about him?”

“Well, you see, I don’t know his name. Everyone just calls him The Emperor. Not quite sure how he got his start but I heard speak him once, when he first visited this town. Talked really grand and promised an end to organized crime. Kept his word too, far as I can tell.”

“Sounds good. But what does he want in return?”

“Well, we pay taxes and we had to give him some land to build a barracks guard station. Couldn’t really expect him to keep the criminals in check if he didn’t have a place to keep his troops.”

“Can’t say I’m too fond of the taxes,” another man picked up the conversation, “but it was worth it to make the streets safe again.

“Wasn’t there something else he wanted? Some old artifact the elders had in the archives?”

“Oh yeah, always wondered why he wanted that thing.”

“You know rich people,” the blonde man laughed, “probably thought it would look good in his mansion.”

Keen laughed with the rest then looked down at the table. His mug was empty, and a modest stack of coins stood at his end of the table. “Thanks for the fun.” He stood and gathered up his winnings.

“Thanks for catching that crook.” “See you later.” The other men called their goodbyes as Keen stepped back out into the street.

That worked out pretty well. He felt the new weight of his money pouch as he began looking for an inn. Though, unless Shadow Blade's powers include enhanced luck, I probably can't count on it happening every time. Still, I got so much more than just the sword and magic that day. My hearing, my eyesight, my balance, they've all improved. Maybe I did get a little bit of luck in there too.

After about a quarter of an hour he succeeded in finding an inn. The battered sign above the thick wooden doors showed a painting almost too faded to make out and a name, The Wandering Woman. Keen stepped inside into what seemed to be a very ordinary common room and walked to the bar. He paid the innkeeper, a plump older woman, for a room and meal then took a seat at an empty table. Leaning back, he let his thoughts roam as he watched a thin slip of a girl singing from atop a corner table. *Things seem pretty peaceful in this town. This Emperor sounds a little strange, but the people seem to like him. Not much reason to stay if there's no trouble. I'll leave tomorrow, keep traveling, and see what I find. I'm sure that there are people somewhere that need my help.*

Chapter 10

The torchlight flickered eerily, casting multitudes of shadows throughout the vast network of tunnels that lay spread out beneath the city of Aquaria. This ancient system of caves, once home to an alliance of dark wizards, had gone unused for centuries. But now signs of life could again be seen. Dust had been swept aside and fresh torches lined the rough stone walls. Crates, barrels, and other items lay scattered throughout, also showing that the caverns were inhabited once more.

A group of heavily armed men strode confidently down the stone halls. The one in front, a tall man with two long scars across his face, was talking to his companions. “Stay sharp men, we’ve got some extra business to take care of tonight. Seems some of the merchants have decided not to pay up. We’re gonna use them as an example to show the whole city why they shouldn’t defy the Cave Dragons.”

The men were too intent on their task to notice what was taking place behind them. Innumerable shadows filled the passage, but one seemed to separate itself from the others. They didn’t see as a black caped figure appeared, seemingly out of thin air, behind them. But they did hear his voice...

“I’m afraid your plans will have to be put on hold, permanently.”

Wasting no time with question, the men whirled and charged at the stranger, but the effortlessly evaded every attack.

“Is that the best you can do?” He raised his hands and multicolored rays of pure magic shot forth. Before they could even turn to run, the villains crumpled and dropped to the cold, hard ground. Turning away from their bodies, Shadow Blade continued down the tunnel.

It had been nearly eight months since he had left Chanadia and his home island behind. Growing up in Caluri Village life, while not always easy, had been simple and peaceful. Prior to leaving, he had always assumed that the rest of the islands were much the same. His encounter with the Cabal dashed those beliefs and, since then, he had encountered many gangs that were just as bad, if not worse. He had traveled the length and breadth of Pelina Isle, which he had sailed to from Chanadia, and it seemed that almost every town and city which hadn't put itself under the protection of The Emperor had become overrun with criminals of all types, from large organized gangs to haphazard groups of raiders and brigands. At least Keen found the numerous small islands that made up the northern end of the archipelago to be peaceful, aside from the occasional monster, but only because The Emperor had long since solidified his control there. Even when Keen cloaked himself in the persona of Shadow Blade, which provided a far less optimistic outlook, the sheer amount of criminal activity felt strangely unnatural. To the point where he couldn't help but wonder if there was an underlying cause driving at least some of it.

Following his time on the northern islands, Keen had returned to Pelina and made his way to Aquaria, said to be the largest city in the entire archipelago, only to find that it too was all but overrun with crime. Compared to the numerous criminal groups he'd

destroyed so far on his journey, the local gang, known as the Cave Dragons, had proven very difficult to track down. It had taken a full two weeks of investigation before he uncovered the large network of underground tunnels, presumably the remnants of some long-forgotten ruins, where they made their base. The complex network of passages explained everything from their ability to disappear seconds after entering a room or turning a corner to their seemingly omnipotent knowledge of the goings-on in the city.

Turning his thoughts to more pressing matters, Shadow Blade once more appeared to vanish into the shadows cloaking the thick stone walls. It may have taken some time, but today the Cave Dragons' reign of terror would finally end. *And then...* Shadow Blade drifted around the next corner. *Then I'm going home. To Caluri... To Milla... Right after I destroy the scum filling these caves. They're probably not the last gang on these islands but all the work I've done must have made a big difference. At least enough to earn a rest, at least for a little while.*

Sensing another group of men ahead, he prepared a fatal spell. The cluster of armed Cave Dragons didn't even have time to scream as the magic seared through them. Early in his travels, he had often tried to merely incapacitate his opponents, and only resorted to outright murder when necessary. But he quickly discovered that it was often far simpler to finish off his opponents as quickly as possible. Besides, as Shadow Blade he had never had any real aversion to taking a life. At times it was a necessity, nothing more. As Keen... As Keen, he did his best not to think about it. This wasn't the time to worry about morals or regrets. Not when so many innocent people were suffering.

Frowning, Shadow Blade continued forward. Progressing through the cavern was taking far too long as, instead of avoiding contact with enemies, he was actively seeking them out. His usual method upon gaining access to a gang's base or headquarters was to use his powers to burn or otherwise destroy it. However, some places didn't lend themselves to that plan, particularly where innocents might be hurt, and these ancient caves were on a different level entirely. Infused long ago by powerful dark spells, Shadow Blade doubted even he could do any real damage to them. And, in the unlikely event that he did, the backlash would most likely kill him and cause the entire city to collapse.

So he proceeded methodically, searching out every room and passage, until at last there was only one place left to go. Silent and invisible he glided into the last section of the tunnels. More guards patrolled the area, but they too were silently dispatched. As the last of the men and women of the gang dropped to the ground, Shadow Blade flung open the door to the command room.

Inside, a thin wiry man poured over a map of the city. Three others leaned against the walls studying their blades. "What?!?" the leader gasped as Shadow Blade dropped his invisibility spell. "Guards!"

The three were already charging towards the dark intruder. Shadow Blade simply watched as they lunged forward. With a bright flash, a glowing sword appeared in his hand. Only streaks of rainbow-colored light showed where the blade had been as all three fell, a look of shock on their faces.

“Looks like you’re the only one left.” The sword vanished as Shadow Blade approached the trembling leader.

“You, you won’t get away with this!” The man’s face was pale as the whitest rose. “He’ll hunt you down! You can’t escape his power!”

“Who?” Shadow Blade’s hand closed around the man’s coat, pulling him off the ground. This wasn’t the first time he’d heard such threats, and he was growing tired of their vague nature.

“I’ll, never, tell... Swore never-” His protests were cut off as waves of crackling red energy poured from Shadow Blade’s hand. The man’s screams echoed through cavern, his body felt as if liquid fire had been poured inside every muscle and every vein. At last, the spell ended, leaving him gasping for breath.

“I’ll only ask you one more time,” Shadow Blade’s voice was colder than the bottommost depths of the ocean, “who is behind all this?”

“It’s, it’s, The Emperor...” the man gasped feebly.

Though Shadow Blade’s mental control dampened his emotions, Keen couldn’t help but widen his eyes slightly as everything began to fall into place. At first, he had been looking into possible social or economic issues behind the islands’ crime wave but the pieces had never quite fit. There were too many differences and inconsistencies from place to place. And, while the idea of a larger criminal mastermind pulling the strings had crossed his mind, it too hadn’t made sense. Too many of the towns and villages he’d visited simply didn’t have the wealth and resources to justify the level of criminal activity taking place within them. Why would a smart criminal send an armed group to terrorize

one tiny village or other when there was no real profit to be made? *Unless wealth was never the goal to begin with. The Emperor wants to expand his power and influence but, as haphazard as it is, the patchwork of local governments mostly works. I can't imagine most of them would want to give up their power, especially with the new taxes The Emperor calls for. But this way, he just backs them into a corner until they don't have a choice but to ask for his help. It's got to be much cheaper and safer than a war. And just think of his public image. Instead of a cruel conqueror, he's the hero who saved the islands. I hate to admit it, but that's a pretty brilliant plan.*

A moment after the shocking admission, Shadow Blade finished organizing his thoughts and nodded casually. "Then I have my next target. He'll pay for every innocent life he's destroyed."

"Your words are noble," the man on the ground seemed to regain some semblance of courage, "but your actions aren't. How many people have you killed on your crusades?" He struggled to his knees. "You deceive, manipulate, and kill to achieve your goals, just like him. At least under The Emperor, the islands will be unified and at peace, so what right do you have to judge?"

"Silence!" A glowing sword stopped less than an inch from the man's throat.

"Go ahead..." he wheezed. "Kill me. But remember, the peace you seek for the islands is just as blood-soaked as his."

Shadow Blade stepped back slightly, his normally unshakable persona cracking as Keen's thoughts pushed their way to the forefront of his mind. *No! It's not like that! I'm the one protecting the islands! I'm doing the right thing! I'm not a murderer! I'm... He*

looked down, down at the bodies lying on the floor, down at the blood staining his hands... Then, silently he dropped to the ground and turned away.

A searing pain shattered Keen's troubled thoughts. Seeing, the hilt of a throwing knife extending from his arm, he reacted automatically, reducing the cave dragon's boss to nothing more than a pile of ash. But before he could do anything more, Keen once more regained control and snatched at his cape. There was a flash of back and then Keen, in mind and body, dropped to his knees. Pulling the dagger free, he angrily hurled it against the wall. Tears began to slide down his face as he felt blood trickle down his arm.

"Was he right?" Keen couldn't take his eyes off the bodies. "What have I done? What have I become?" He swayed and fell, his vision darkening. "Milla..." he gasped as blackness closed in.

Keen blinked as consciousness slowly returned. Dead bodies stared at him reproachfully as he looked around the room. Struggling to his knees, he gasped as pain tore through his left arm. He gulped as he studied the wound. The cut was small, but bleeding heavily. He grabbed a fallen handkerchief off the floor and attempted to tie it around the wound but his hands trembled too much to make the required motion and, after a moment, he gave up. His vision wavered as he forced himself to his feet, forced himself to put one foot in front of the other. *Out... Must get out...* His thoughts were muddled and unclear. *Hurts so much... Tired, have to rest... No! Have to, find, help...*

After what felt like hours to the weakened sorcerer, he finally managed to stagger out of the honeycomb of caverns and into the evening twilight. Despite the late hour, there were still a fair amount of people roaming Aquaria's streets. But, after glancing briefly at the wounded youth, they simply hurried on their way. No doubt he had been attacked by the Cave Dragons, and no one wanted to risk bringing the gang's wrath on themselves by stopping to help.

Through some miracle, Keen managed to find his way back to his inn. He could feel his strength slipping away as he stumbled inside and all but collapsed against the counter. Reaching into his money pouch, he dropped a handful of coins in front of the startled innkeeper.

"Doctor. Get, a, doctor..." The last thing he remembered was the innkeeper's worried expression as he once again fell into darkness.

"Milla!" Keen grinned as he ran towards her.

"Keen..." She was just like he remembered. Her eyes, her hair, her smile...

"I missed you." He took her hand.

"Don't touch me!" She pulled it away. Startled, Keen watched as her expression changed to one of fear. "Stay away from me you murderer!" Trembling, she turned and ran.

"Milla, wait!" Keen dashed after her retreating form.

“Stop.” Shadow Blade appeared before him, leaving Keen to watch helplessly as Milla vanished into the darkness. “If she won’t accept you as you are, there’s no reason to follow her.”

“As I am?” Keen stepped back cautiously. “Or as you are? I’m not going to let you control me anymore. I can use your power and still remain myself!”

“And if you can’t?”

“Then, then I’ll give it up. I never asked for these powers!”

“Tch, this whole discussion is meaningless.” Shadow Blade folded his arms. “You cannot change who you are simply by not using your powers. We are two sides of the same coin. I am simply a manifestation of your feelings, just as you are. We are the same.”

“You’re crazy!”

“No Keen, you are.”

Keen awoke with a start, jerked to a sitting position, then fell back down as needles of pain shot through his arm.

“Easy there.” A man, old and wrinkled, placed a hand on Keen’s chest. “You’ll hurt yourself if you do that. Just lay back and rest.”

Keen blinked as memories returned. “Are you a doctor?”

“Yes.” The man nodded, his stringy white hair peeking out from beneath a dull gray hat. “Now, you are not to leave this bed for at least two days. You lost a lot of blood

and need time to rest. The innkeeper will have your meals brought up to you. After that, you may get up and walk, but try not to use that arm for at least another week or two.”

“Thanks.” Keen motioned to his money pouch, which was lying nearby along with his outer clothes. “Just take what I owe you.”

The old man smiled as he removed several coins from the pouch. “You must really trust me.”

“I don’t have much of a choice, do I?” Keen smiled faintly.

“I guess you don’t at that.” The doctor chuckled and walked towards the door. “I’ll be going. Just follow my instructions and that arm will be good as new within a month. Goodbye now.”

“Bye,” Keen muttered as he lay back. The nightmare was still etched in his mind. He had to think about a lot of things but mainly what he was going to do now. Who would have thought that one day would change so much? But first, he needed to rest.

Lying back, Keen stared up at the ceiling. His body had remained almost motionless since he had woke late in the morning, but his mind was racing. The nightmare still haunted him, but he couldn’t bring himself to say that it was either right or wrong. Hours passed, morning changed to afternoon and afternoon to evening, and still his thoughts continued. *Why am I fighting? Who is my enemy? Do I even have a right to battle?*

At last, pictures began to flash through his mind. He could see his parents, Milla, and the other residents of Caluri Village. He could see Anglica and the innkeeper, Gellon. And the many other people he'd encountered over the course of his journey. *Maybe The Emperor's plan would be bring peace to the islands in the end, but how many people will be hurt or killed along the way? How many of my friends will live to see that "peace?" No, I don't care about his reasons. Noble or not, they're not worth the cost. He has to be stopped and I...I have the power to do it. That's why he's my enemy. I don't care what others think. He, and anyone who tries to take the life of freedom of the people I care about is my enemy. If I have to kill to protect the innocent, so be it. That's a burden I'm willing to bear. It doesn't matter if I'm Keen, Shadow Blade, or some mixture of the two. I will stop The Emperor and I will protect these islands!*

A heavy burden seemed to lift from him as he made the silent declaration. There was still much he didn't know. About himself. About Shadow Blade. And about the nature the threat he faced. But he knew what he had to do and, for now, that was enough. *Sorry Milla, it looks like I won't be returning home for a while after all. But I love you and I swear, we'll see each other again. So please, wait just a little bit longer...*

Chapter 11

Under the cover of darkness, Shadow Blade floated behind a pile of crates. Dropping to the ground, he cautiously inched forward until he could see out into the alleyway. After several minutes, his waiting was rewarded as two men walked past. Approaching a seemingly normal section of stone wall, one of them stepped forward and knocked six times, alternating between fast and slow, hard and soft. The portion of the wall slid in and the men hurried inside.

Frowning, Shadow Blade watched as the wall slid back into place. It had been little more than two months since the destruction of the Cave Dragons in Aquaria and another gang using their name had already sprung up. However, these new Dragons stayed clear of the caves, clearly aware that their safety had been compromised.

Since his recovery, Keen had been traveling nonstop, mostly among the northern islands, but he had yet to encounter The Emperor, who seemed to rarely stay in one place for any longer than needed. What's more, the more he learned about his foe, the more Keen realized that simply killing The Emperor wouldn't be enough. His heroic image and popularity amongst his subjects were too strong. Any attempted assassination would only strengthen that and, even if successful, The Emperor would die a martyr and someone else would quickly rise to continue to work. The only way to truly stop The Emperor was to bring the truth to light and completely and utterly destroy the image that he had

worked so hard to create. Due to its rapid growth, The Empire wasn't yet very deeply entrenched throughout most of its territory. If the people turned on The Emperor, it would crumble. But, while Keen knew what needed to be done, he had no idea how to accomplish it. So, as he had ever since the day when he first found the sword, he followed his instincts, trusting that things would become clear in time.

He had returned to Aquaria a week back to find the city once more in chaos. The new Cave Dragons were playing it more carefully than most. They used a multitude of buildings for their hideouts, never staying in one for very long. If they had a central headquarters, he had yet to find its location. On top of that, during his first attempt to destroy one of their temporary bases, had met an unexpected surprise in the form of an enemy mage. Although the man's skills couldn't compare to Shadow Blade's immense power, his appearance had allowed the gang members, himself included, to escape relatively unharmed. While Keen had gained plenty of experience fighting monsters and thugs over the course of his travels, his sole knowledge of magical combat came from his duels with Milla, which had little in common with a life or death battle. With that failure weighing heavily on his mind, he was determined to take a more cautious approach.

He paused as another figure entered the alley. The newcomer appeared to be a young man around his own age. His hair was brown with a faint reddish tinge and his eyes a dark blue. His clothes were that of either a traveler or a fighter, and the two large broadswords which hung from his back clearly marked him as the latter. Unlike the two previous men, who walked confidently up to the secret door, the swordsman darted cautiously about the alley as if he didn't want to be found.

Curious, Shadow Blade floated silently out from behind the pile of rotting crates while the man's back was turned. "What are you doing here?"

Instead of starting, the man whirled, drawing his swords as he did, and lunged at the floating mage. Reacting quickly, Shadow Blade jumped over his assailant and forced a paralyzation spell around him, freezing him in place. For a long moment the man's face tensed with concentration, then the spell shattered. A startled Shadow Blade dove to the side just in time to avoid two razor sharp blades.

How did he do that? I don't think he even drew any magical power... As the fighter charged once more, Shadow Blade put all his strength into another paralyzation spell, hurling it around the man and sending as much magic into it as he could. He could feel an invisible force struggle to cancel the spell but this time it failed. His face more angry than scared, the swordsman stopped struggling and waited.

Deciding it was unwise to weaken his spell, Shadow Blade physically dragged the man into another alley. "As I was saying, who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I should ask you the same question," the swordsman spat out the words, his eyes glowing defiantly.

"One way or another, you're going to answer my questions," Shadow Blade replied coldly. "All you get is a choice. The easy way or the hard way. Let's just say that if you answer now, it will make things easier for both of us."

"Fine, go ahead, ask your questions. If you're lucky, I might even answer a couple."

“You’ll answer them all, one way or the other. Now, who are you and who are you working for?”

“Easy enough. My name’s Geld Arroway and I’m working for myself.”

“A mercenary?”

“No. I actually care about things besides money.”

“Are you working for the Cave Dragons?”

“You should know the answer to that! I’m here to take them out, even if they have mages like you!”

“You seem to have things backwards. I’m here to destroy the Cave Dragons and I found you outside the entrance to their hideout. Give me one reason why I should believe you.”

Geld scowled. “Fine. The Emperor destroyed my hometown so I get revenge by taking down his gangs.”

“You know the truth The Emperor?” Shadow Blade nodded thoughtfully as his tone softened. “I didn’t think there was anyone else...” Keen felt a sudden sense of comradery welling up. Perhaps he wasn’t alone in his battle after all.

“Your turn.” Geld still looked angry and suspicious. “Why should I trust you?”

“You may have heard that many of the gangs in nearby towns and cities have been dismantled over the last few months. Their bases destroyed, their members captured or killed, all by a black-caped sorcerer.”

“Shadow Blade...” Geld replied slowly. “That doesn’t prove you’re him. Though it’s not like I can prove my story either.”

“How did you cancel my first spell?” Shadow Blade continued without comment.

“That?” Geld smirked. “Just a basic paralysis protection charm. You can buy them at any magic store. Although I never heard of a mage strong enough to overpower one.”

Protection charms? For the first time, Keen realized that, even with his powers, he still knew relatively little about magic itself. “One last question. If you want revenge, why go after the gangs? Why not attack The Emperor himself?”

Geld winced. “I actually did try that about two years ago, right after my village was destroyed. I was lucky to survive.”

“Is he that well-guarded?”

“No, but he’s a powerful mage in his own right. He left me for dead.” Geld’s anger grew with every word. “That’s why I’m going after these stupid goons. I can’t defeat him...”

“That’s probably for the best.” Shadow Blade released his spell, allowing Geld to drop to the ground. “He’s too popular. The people would just hunt you down.”

“As long as he’s gone, I don’t care what happens to me. It’s not like I have anywhere to return to. But at least if I take down some of these gangs, I can hurt his plans and keep others from ending up like me.”

“Then maybe we should do this together.” A glowing sword appeared in Shadow Blade’s hand. “But be warned, one wrong move and I will kill you.”

“Same to you.” Geld twirled his swords then slid them back into their sheaths. “What’s the plan?”

“They have at least one mage. We’ll go in the front. I’ll take care of any mages. Your job will be to keep the others at bay and help out where you can.”

“I’m game.” Surprisingly, a small grin was on Geld’s face. “Let’s do it.”

“Stay back and follow my lead.” Shadow Blade glided across the alley to the spot where the men had entered earlier. Raising his hand, he performed the same sequence of knocks they had and waited as the door slide open.

An armed guard stood inside. “Hey, you’re not-”

That was as far as he got before Shadow Blade’s sword pierced his heart, but it was enough. As Shadow Blade and Geld stepped inside, heavily armed men began pouring into the room. Behind them stood two others, devoid of weapons and armor, but glowing with magical light.

“Geld, now!”

Geld leapt inside, his twin swords gleaming a brilliant white, and threw himself at the guards. Blades flashed and the sounds of metal striking metal filled the room. The odds were again him, but that was the way he liked it. Laughing confidently, he wove his way in and out among the mostly inexperienced men, blades moving too fast to follow. Jump, duck, slash, fall back... Ignoring the blood dripping down his arms and chest he laughed again and continued. The excitement, the danger, the gamble, this was what he lived for.

Meanwhile, Shadow Blade cut through the three men blocking his way and found himself face-to-face with the enemy mages. Magic power flared around them both as they calmly regarded their opponent. They acted as one, almost as if they could communicate

without words. A hail of red rays arched toward Shadow Blade from in front while bolts of lightning rained down from above. Jumping back, he threw up his arms, creating a barrier to block their attacks.

“Yahh!!!” Crackling waves of energy flew from Shadow Blade’s hand.

Halting his attack, one of the men put up a barrier of his own, canceling Shadow Blade’s spell. At the same time, his companion switched attacks and sent walls of fire speeding across the room. Dropping to the ground, Shadow Blade jumped aside and shot off another spell. Once more, it simply hit the other’s shield and dissipated. Fires continued to flare throughout the room, setting boxes, cloth, and even other Cave Dragons aflame, but the mages ignored it, their focus entirely on Shadow Blade.

Dark take it! Shadow Blade dove to the side to avoid another wave of flame. *I can’t just keep defending, but preparing a spell strong enough to break that barrier would leave me wide open. There’s got to be another way...* Ceasing his attack, he strengthened his defenses, stopped, and studied the two men. There had to be a weakness to their fighting style. *Two acting together... Strong offense... Powerful anti-magic barrier... Of course.* Shadow Blade smiled.

“It’s over.” He jumped forward and flew straight at the pair, putting the rest of his power into his barrier. Seeing him coming, they simultaneously strengthened their own magical defenses redoubled their attack. “Fools.” A shimmering sword appeared in his hand. Their eyes widening, the enemy mages had no time to react as the rainbow-colored blade sliced through the air. As their bodies fell, he turned to survey the rest of the room.

Bodies covered the floor and fires smoldered in at least a dozen places. The walls were stained red and black, and the acrid smell of fire and blood filled the air. Geld stood on the far side, leaning heavily on his swords. Blood soaked his clothes, much of it his own.

“Are you ok?”

The young swordsman straightened up, not without wincing, and gave Shadow Blade a wry smile. “I’ve been better, but I’ll live. We should check the rest of the building.” Shadow Blade nodded and walked towards the nearest door. Gritting his teeth, Geld staggered after him. “I saw you take out those mages. Nice sword work.”

“They were fools, both of them,” Shadow Blade replied without looking back. His gaze was now moving over every wall and corner, searching for another threat. “They never thought that someone with my magical power would use a traditional weapon. It’s the possibilities you don’t expect that kill you.”

“That’s true.” Geld forced open a door and quickly scanned the small storage area inside. “You sound like you’ve been fighting a long time.”

“One year, four years, my whole life... It’s a long story.”

“Looks like no one else is here.” Geld pointed down the last corridor, now a smoldering ruin.

Shadow Blade nodded and began drawing on his magic power. “Stand next to me.” He raised a barrier around the two of them. “Now, don’t move.”

Outside, the still tranquility of the night was broken by a tremendous explosion. Few in the city failed to hear the sound or see the flames. Many rushed towards the scene to find the reason for the blast but, by the time they arrived, no one was there.

“So,” Geld spoke as they walked down the deserted streets away from the burning base, “what are you going to do now?”

“I’ll stay in this city a bit longer to clean up any remaining Cave Dragons.” Shadow Blade floated alongside him. “You?”

Geld shrugged. “I don’t really have anywhere to go. The fighter’s guild and town where I grew up are gone, so taking down The Emperor’s men is pretty much my life now. Hey, you want to team up for a while? We could work pretty well together. You can’t watch your back all the time.”

“Alright.” Shadow Blade dropped to the ground. “But if you tell anyone my secrets, you’ll be the next one I hunt down.”

“Don’t worry about me turning on you. We’re in the same boat here.”

Shadow Blade nodded as he reached behind his back. “You can consider this my first secret.”

Geld gaped as Shadow Blade’s caped form vanished, replaced by someone new. He still looked similar to the dark sorcerer but not as cold, not as hard. In a way, he looked more human.

“Nice to meet you, Geld.” The youth smiled and held out his hand. “I’m Keen.”

Chapter 12

“So, I have some questions.” Geld leaned back, enjoying the heat of the fire burning in the common room’s hearth, and stared across the table at his new companion. Keen looked to be about his age and height. The dull blue shirt and dark green pants were different from the standard dress in cities like Aquaria, but fairly typical for the small seaside villages. His off-black hair was thick but of ordinary length and his brown eyes were cold, seeming to have lost whatever sparkle they may have once had. Instead, they held pain, death, longing, and sorrow. Even as Keen talked, his eyes continued scanning the room, as if he expected an enemy to appear at any moment. Geld knew those eyes. They were the eyes of a fighter, much like his own. Still, despite his current life as a vigilante of sorts, Geld’s eyes still held a sparkle, that glimmer of life, fun, and excitement. Keen had lost that long ago. But even so, Keen’s eyes at least held a trace of warmth and friendship, unlike Shadow Blade’s. His eyes held nothing but death.

“What do you want to know?” A part of Keen was still uneasy around Geld, and shocked that he had actually shown his secret identity to this swordsman who he knew almost nothing about. But then, there was another part of him, nothing more than a persistent feeling, that told him that this was someone he could trust.

“About you and Shadow Blade.” He lowered his voice so that only Keen could hear. “You’re not just one person in two sets of clothes, are you? Your whole personality... I mean, you’re both so, different.”

“Yeah...” Keen sighed. “It’s a long story and even I don’t entirely understand it. But, if you want to know, it started when-”

“Everybody outside!” A large man threw open the common room door. “We’re about to read an important decree from his mightiness, The Emperor!”

Both curious and anxious, the inn’s patrons and employees hurried out into the bright morning light and joined the throng of people hurrying towards the central square. Many of them appeared to still be half asleep and had to be herded along by their neighbors. In the midst of this crowd, Keen and Geld struggled to keep their footing as they were bumped, prodded, and forced along the road.

“What could this be about?” Geld frowned nervously. “I didn’t think The Emperor had any guards here.”

“I don’t know,” Keen’s voice sounded more like that of Shadow Blade than his own, “but I doubt it’s good.”

Although not in the exact center of the town, or the only square in the vast city, the central square was by far the largest. With one side opening to the immense and magnificent building housing the Aquaria Spell Institute, the largest and best school of magic on the islands, the square was often filled with students, vendors, and casual passersby as well. This morning however, it held a crowd of an entirely different sort. In the center stood a giant statue of a man, Gogen Strago, the founder of the institute and, if

history was to be believed, one of the greatest mages to ever make the islands his home. Despite his long beard and wrinkled skin, you could still clearly see the joy and excitement on his face as he stared proudly at the Institute. But the crowd's attention was focused at the statue's base, where a man stood, wearing the uniform of The Emperor's guard. As the square began to fill, he cleared his throat, held up a piece of paper, and began to read. "Citizens of Aquaria," a simple magical charm allowed his voice to carry across the entire square, "his great mightiness The Emperor thanks you for adding yourselves to his magnificent empire. In return for your obedience and support, The Emperor promises to free this city from crime. A permanent barracks will be built here to house a detachment of his guard and we will personally see to it that no law breaker goes unpunished."

"What?!?" Keen gasped. "They're giving in?"

"Damn it!" Geld growled as his hands strayed to the hilts of his swords. "All that work protecting this city for nothing!"

"Quiet!" Keen hissed. "You want someone to hear you?"

"Furthermore," the guard continued, "the Spell Institute will be put under the direct guidance of The Emperor. His vast wisdom and experience will help propel it to new heights and train mages to protect the glorious empire. In accordance with The Emperor's law, all businesses must pay one tenth of their total income to The Emperor as a tax to help maintain the guard and keep your city safe. Thank you, and welcome to The Empire!"

Almost at once, a quiet murmur started among the crowd that quickly grew into a low roar. Since the leaders of the city had been the ones who'd made the decision to submit to The Emperor, many of the common people hadn't even known that the matter was being considered. Some appeared quite pleased, while others were entire the opposite.

"Well, it looks like we're done here." Keen frowned thoughtfully. "The Cave Dragons have outlived their usefulness. And, at this point, attacking The Emperor's guard directly would probably be a bad idea."

"Why?" Geld's knuckles turned white as his grip tightened on his sword hilts. "With your power, we can't lose. Let's show those guards what we really think of them and their leader."

"No." Keen glanced around to make sure no one was listening. "Even I have my limits, and if we attack them the whole city, no, the whole empire, will be after us. The Emperor comes in and all the gangs vanish, making him the hero. We can fight the gangs and get away with it because The Emperor can't let himself be associated with them, but that only delays the inevitable. And if we attack the guards, then all The Emperor's underlings will be up in arms, along with his newly loyal subjects."

"Attention!" The crowd went silent as the guard began speaking once more. "As citizens of The Empire, you must abide by its laws. We assure you that all these laws are only for your own wellbeing and a complete list will be made available to you shortly. However, at this moment, I would like to share with you a new and very important decree directly from The Emperor himself. 'My dear subjects, despite my many journeys and

constant work towards the betterment of these islands that we call our home, there are still many areas which remain unsafe. After much thought and research, I have determined that many of the crimes that have been plaguing our paradise are perpetrated by wandering fighters and mercenaries. Therefore, I am now passing a law banning any professional fighters not working for The Empire from all the lands under its control. This law includes swordsman, weapon masters of any kind, mercenaries, and mages skilled in black magic and other types of offensive spells. Any such people must swear allegiance to The Empire and enter into its service immediately or face imprisonment. Any found to be harboring such fugitives will be severely punished. I pray that this desperate but necessary measure will help bring peace and safety to these islands.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Geld’s eyes were wide.

“This is, unexpected...” Keen gulped. “He’s smarter than I thought.”

“Well,” Geld chewed his lip, “maybe it’s not so bad after all. I mean, there are only gangs to fight in towns outside of The Empire.”

“It’s not that simple.” Keen began forcing his way towards the edge of the crowd. “For one thing, this is going to turn The Empire’s guards into a massive army. And that’s the least of our problems.”

“How can that be the least?”

“Forget about the gangs for a minute.” Breaking free from the crowd, Keen quickened his pace. “As much as I hate to say it, fighting them is ultimately a losing battle. The way things are going now, everyone will join The Empire sooner or later. The only way to completely bring it down is to turn the people against The Emperor.”

“And how do you propose we do that?”

“I don’t know,” Keen was muttering now, more to himself than Geld. “But it’s going to be a lot harder if we can’t move freely about the islands. Ugh... Right now, we just need to get out of here.”

“You’re right...” Geld sighed heavily as they returned to their inn. “I’m just not used to thinking things out very far in advance. I’m more of an impulse guy.”

“You’d be surprised how impulsive I can be,” Keen replied, too quietly for anyone but himself to hear. Out loud he said, “Go get your things. I’ll meet you out front.”

Over the course of his travels Keen had become used to making quick departures and reached the outside of the inn long before Geld. Leaning back against the cool stone of the building, he stared up at the sky and let his thoughts stray back to a simpler time. *Milla... Do you remember when I first became Shadow Blade? How excited we both were? I was so eager to test out my new powers and you were always right there to help me. I never thought it would end up like this. We were only having fun. How could we have known the tremendous responsibilities these powers gave me? Everything was so simple back then. Our talks, our games, our magic practice... It all seemed so black and white. Now, sometimes, I can't even tell what's right and what's wrong. It's wrong the way The Emperor is taking over the islands, but in doing so he's brought peace to many areas. So what does that make him? Does the good he's done outweigh the bad? Am I*

even doing the right thing? Why did it have to be me? Milla, I know that we could figure this out if only we were together. I hope you're safe and happy...

"I'm ready." Keen blinked and turned to see Geld standing nearby. The swordsman grinned and hefted his pack. "Let's get moving. The sooner we're out of this city the better."

"Right." Keen fell into step next to Geld as the two of them hurriedly made their way down the cobbled streets and past the massive wood and stone buildings that made up the grandest city in the entire archipelago. At last the stone was replaced by soft grass and the buildings by trees as they left Aquaria behind.

"So," Geld stretched and looked around, "where are we going now?"

"Why are you asking me?" Keen ran a hand through his hair and stared longingly towards the ocean.

"Because you're the leader. You're Shadow Blade."

Sometime I wish I weren't. Keen sighed. "Ok, we'll head south. Most of the villages down there are still independent. I destroyed their gangs a while back but, considering how things went in Aquaria, The Emperor probably sent in more. We'll do what we can there while I try to figure out a better plan."

"As long as it involves taking out The Emperor's goons, it sounds good to me." Geld grinned brightly. "Come on, cheer up! With the two of us, we're sure to come up with some way to stop The Emperor. But first, how about finishing that story you were about to tell me earlier?"

“Ah, it’s nothing important.” Keen gave his cheerful companion a long look.

“How did you find out about The Emperor anyway?”

“Well,” Geld shrugged off the change of subject, “it happened like this...”

Chapter 13

“Why are we even doing this?” Shadow Blade made no attempt to hide his annoyance as he glided through the rain-soaked forest. “Almost every day, another village bows to The Emperor no matter what we do to the gangs. We should be focusing on the master plan.”

“We spend enough time doing that as is.” Geld had to fight his way through the overgrown bushes and vines that filled the small gaps between the trees. “Besides, at least by destroying the gangs we’re keeping them from hurting more innocent people.”

“I suppose.” Shadow Blade’s voice was cold as the rainwater dripping from the leaves high above.

Geld sighed. He could certainly understand where his friend was coming from. After two months of fighting gangs and working on their constantly changing master plan, they were both tired and discouraged. Sometimes it all seemed hopeless.

“You remember that rumor we heard in the last village?” Despite the falling water, Shadow Blade’s clothes were completely dry. “They said that one of The Emperor’s conditions when he took over was that they give him an old scroll from their library.”

“Yeah, so?” Geld shook his head as he jumped over a large rotting log.

“There’s something about that. It’s not the only thing he’s asked for. Books, stones, jewelry...”

“So the guy’s a collector. What’s it matter?”

“Maybe...” The voice, tinged with worry, was Keen’s. “But I have a bad feeling about it. A really bad feeling. There’s something about the items he wants...”

“Forget it. You’re worrying for nothing. Besides, I think we just found our target.” Geld pushed aside some bushes and pointed to a dark hole boring into a moss-covered cliff face. A man clad in rusty armor stood at the entrance looking more asleep than awake.

“About time.” Shadow Blade raised a hand and fired a thin ray of red light at the guard. It cut through his armor like paper and the man fell without a sound.

“Nice.” Geld scrambled through the underbrush and studied the body of the dead guard. “Barely a mark on him...”

“He was weak and unprepared.” Shadow Blade floated over to the cave entrance. “It seems that The Emperor doesn’t want to waste his best men on small villages and towns like these.”

“Makes sense.” Geld looked around to be sure no one was watching them. “Ready?”

Shadow Blade turned towards the jagged hole in the cliff face and peered down into the inky blackness. Little could be seen of the inside, but the cave appeared to be nothing more than a glorified hole in the wall. Good enough for unorganized brigands

maybe, but hardly a sufficient base for the more sophisticated gangs he had come across. He nodded to Geld and the two of them slipped inside.

There were no lamps or torches on the damp moss covered walls, so the only light was that of a small glowing sphere which floated in the air next to Shadow Blade's shoulder. The floor was rough and muddy but there were footmarks, proving that others did routinely walk up and down the passage. For now though, the only sounds were the squish, squish of Geld's feet in the mud and the steady dripping of innumerable tiny water droplets from the roof of the cave.

After several minutes of following the lone passage, a new sound could be heard in the distance. Creeping closer, the pair found themselves standing before a door which looked as if it had been made by piecing together odd pieces of scrap wood. Light leaked out through the many cracks in its uneven surface, as did the sounds of drunken laughter.

Geld glanced at Shadow Blade then drew his twin swords and kicked open the door. At the sound, some of the more sober drunks jumped to their feet and tried to attack, but all they succeeded in doing was tripping over the waste strewn floor and falling painfully to the ground.

"Tch," Shadow Blade let his own sword vanish as he watched the brigands wallow in their own filth, too drunk to even see the strange warriors in their midst, "this is pathetic. A child could capture them without even putting up a fight." His voice dripped with a potent mixture of disgust and disdain.

"These guys are too plastered to even try to stop us." Geld sighed. "How about we just turn them over to the village?"

“If you want.” Shadow Blade dropped to the floor. “I’ll restrain them. Go check the rest of the cave and see if there are any others. Horses too, if you don’t want to drag them all the way back.”

Geld nodded and disappeared down another dark tunnel.

Sighing, Shadow Blade looked around the room. Three makeshift tables were scattered about, each covered with small beer kegs and battered playing cards. Piles of empty mugs lay on the floor, interspersed with the booty from their raids against the local hamlets. All around, men lay in bizarre positions, either snoring loudly or looking unseeingly around the room. Everything was covered in filth, be it dirt, dust, or vomit.

Disgusting... Shadow Blade used his powers to pick up a large coil of rope and slice it into pieces of a more appropriate length. Still using nothing but magic, he began binding the men one by one. He finished just before Geld returned.

“There aren’t any others.” The young swordsman flicked his rather unruly hair out of his eyes. “I did find the horses though. Guess we’ll have to carry them to the stable.” He frowned and grabbed the first of the brigands then began dragging him up the tunnel. “Coming?”

Shadow Blade made a strange twisting motion with his hand and two of the men lifted off the ground and floated in the air before him. “Lead the way.”

About half an hour later found the two warriors leading a trail of nine horses, each with an unconscious man tied across its back, down a twisting forest trail small enough to

be all but invisible. Leaving the woods in mid-afternoon, they stopped and looked off towards the small village which lay not more than a lere away.

“We’ll leave them here,” Shadow Blade stopped and began tying the horses to the nearby trees, “someone is bound to find them sooner or later.” Stepping back, he focused on one particularly large tree. The bark on the trunk glowed a burning red then shriveled away, leaving two words engraved for all to see, ‘Shadow Blade.’ “There, just so The Emperor knows that I haven’t given up.” Shadow Blade dropped to the ground and flung his cape forward. A moment later the billowing black cloth vanished, and Keen straightened up.

“Well, that’s over with.” Geld began walking. “What now?”

“I don’t know...” Keen sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Maybe it’s time for us to leave.”

“Leave?”

“Yeah. There’s only a handful of towns left on this entire island that haven’t sworn to The Emperor. We should head back to my home island. If we play it right, we may be able to keep The Emperor from gaining a foothold there. Maybe we can turn the people against him before he even arrives, and keep any gang activity from springing up while we’re at it. If it works, we’ll have a sort of stronghold against The Empire and we can work from there. And if not, we won’t be any worse off than we are now.”

“I guess we do need a new strategy, and The Emperor is bound to send people to hunt us down, if he hasn’t already. He may even put a bounty on our heads, and that’s one complication we really don’t need.”

“Hey, you’re starting to get the hang of it.” Keen smiled slightly.

“Then hang of what?”

“Thinking ahead. You’re actually thinking about what might happen in the future instead of just charging blindly into it.”

“Thanks, I think...” Geld dropped back slightly as they reached the main road and headed south towards the port town of Calypso. “So, is there any place in particular you want to start once we get to your island?”

“Well...” Keen looked down at the soft ground beneath his feet. “It won’t really help us stop The Emperor, but I would like to go back to my home in Caluri Village, at least for a day or two. It’s been about a year since I left and it’d be good to see how everyone is doing. Especially Milla and my parents.”

“Who is Milla anyway?”

“I mentioned her before?”

“Only in passing. You never really said much,” Geld replied as a light breeze began to blow up from the coast, bringing the smell of saltwater to the air.

“Anyway,” Keen tried to change the subject, “I’d like to go back there first. Although you can do what you want. We can always meet up later.”

“Nah.” Geld stretched and let the wind have its way with his red-tinged hair. “I don’t know what I’d do on my own. You’re the planner. Besides, I’m your friend, so I don’t mind keeping you company.”

“Thanks.” Keen smiled. *Friends... I suppose we are, even if it is a rather strange friendship. Anglica, Geld, Milla... My friends...* “Come on. I’ll race you to Calypso!”

“You’re on!” Geld was running even as he accepted the challenge. “But no Shadow Blade!”

“Hey, get back here!” Keen sprinted after him. *Milla... I’m finally going home!*

Chapter 14

The sun was sinking beneath the sea, turning the calm waters glowing shades of red and yellow, as Keen and Geld stepped off the boat and onto the worn paving stones of Chanadia's port. A few seagulls and other birds soared above, heading to their homes to rest.

As Keen led the way down the brightly lit streets, he was surprised to see that nothing in the city seemed to have changed. Crowds of people talking and laughing still filled the lanes, shops, and taverns, while the same shopkeepers still stood outside trying to bring in as many people as they could. It was as if he had left only yesterday instead of a year ago. Still, that didn't comfort him. He felt strange, as if something was different. Then he realized, it wasn't the city that had changed. It was him.

"Where are we going?" Unlike Keen, Geld was turning from side to side, studying the city with a curious and somewhat excited air.

"To an inn where a friend of mine works. Or at least she did last time I was here."

"A friend?" Geld asked casually.

"Anglica. She's one of the few who knows that I'm Shadow Blade. She should be able to fill us in on what's been happening since I left."

Geld said nothing but nodded and quickened his steps to match Keen's. Several minutes later they arrived at the inn. Entering the warm common room, the pair wove

their way amongst the drinking and dicing patrons until they reached an empty table. Taking a seat, Keen leaned back and surveyed the scene while he searched for a thin serving girl with short black hair. Spotting her at last, he stood and waved. Anglica turned and frowned briefly, then smiled and hurried over.

“Keen!” She threw her arms around him. “It’s great to see you again! I’ve been worried about you.”

“It’s good to see you too.” He blushed as she let him go. “Can you talk for a while?”

“Hmm...” She glanced towards the bar where the innkeeper, Gellon, was pouring drinks. “I get a break at the end of the hour, we can talk then.” She smiled happily, her eyes sparkling. “Meanwhile, can I take your order?”

“Stew and waterberry if you have it,” Keen replied as he slid back into his chair.

“Stew sounds good.” Anglica blinked as she noticed Geld for the first time. “And a beer.”

“Be right back.” She nodded and headed off towards the kitchen.

“She’s cute.” Geld leaned back and looked around the common room. Keen merely shrugged. “Come on, you’re too serious. You’ve got to learn to lighten up a bit.”

“I’m Shadow Blade,” Keen replied calmly, as if that explained everything.

“Here’s your drinks.” Anglica dropped two mugs on the table. “Two silvers each for food and drinks.” She waited while Keen and Geld handed her the appropriate coins. “Thanks!” She smiled and winked at Keen, who had added an extra silver. “Food will be here soon.” She moved over to the next table.

“Looks like a nice city,” Geld commented. “Small compared to Aquaria, but nice.”

“I guess.” Keen stared into the dark liquid in his mug. “Cities themselves don’t hold much interest for me. Just what I need to do in them.”

Unable to resist any longer, Geld rolled his eyes. “Were you always this...I don’t know. Serious? Dedicated? Somber? Something like that.”

“No,” his companion smiled sadly, “I’ve changed a lot since I became Shadow Blade. With great power comes even greater responsibility. You should remember that.”

Keen and Geld had just finished their meal when Anglica appeared and whisked the empty bowls away. She returned a moment later with a mug of spiced wine and sat down across from Keen.

“So,” she studied him with a smile that was more than just friendly, “where have you been? Saving more people?”

“Where to start...” Keen leaned back in his chair. “You remember what it was like when the Cabal was in power here. Well, it turns out that they’re only a small part of something much bigger...”

Anglica’s eyes widened as Keen and Geld told her about The Emperor, the gangs, and their various adventures. “Wow...” She picked up her mug only to discover that it was empty. “I’ve heard about The Emperor, but I never thought...”

“It’s really a brilliant plan.” Geld took a sip of his second beer. “It would take a lot of resources to start, but now that it’s in full swing it’s nearly impossible to stop.”

“But couldn’t you just tell everyone what you know?”

“Wouldn’t work.” Keen was absently toying with a dented copper coin. “Sure, there’s a handful of us that know the truth, but most people love him. They’d just think we’re trying to stir up trouble and send the guard after us.”

Anglica shook her head. “It’s so hard to believe. I mean, when I heard him speak, he seemed like a really nice guy.”

“Heard him speak!?!?” Keen nearly choked. “He was here?!?”

“Yeah, about a week ago. Gave a speech in the main square and tried to convince the mayor to join The Empire.”

“You didn’t, did you?” Geld glanced around nervously.

“No. And now I’m glad.” She cast a quick look at the battered clock standing in the corner. “We really focused on building up the city guard after that fire last year.” Her eyes strayed meaningfully to Keen. “From what I’ve heard, a couple other gangs tried to form but the guard was able to stop them. So there wasn’t really any reason for us to join The Empire.”

“Dark take it!” Keen glared murderously at the table. “I miscalculated. I was sure that he hadn’t personally come to this island yet.”

“Hey, don’t beat yourself up.” Geld was looking much more serious than normal. “You may be powerful, but you’re not omnipresent. There’s no way you could have known. He hasn’t been here long, we can still make it work.”

“You’re right.” Keen stood. “Since he just got here, he’s probably still focusing on the villages on the southern part of the island. We’ll leave tomorrow and head for

Caluri. From there, we'll visit the other towns and villages to the north. If we move quickly, we might be able to keep him from getting much of a foothold."

"That's better."

"Anglica, can we get a room for the night?"

"Sure." She smiled at Keen, but her unease was evident. "I'll get you a key."

Rising early the next morning, Keen shook Geld awake. Anglica, concern reflected on her face, was waiting downstairs to take their orders, and then to see them off once they'd finished their meal. As they walked away, Keen looked back, getting a last look at her black hair and smiling face before the crowd hid both her and the inn from sight.

Leaving the city, the two warriors set a fast pace to the north. As Keen walked, he found himself studying the scenery. It too hadn't changed over the past year. The ocean, the meadows, the forest... All solid, peaceful, and unchanging. Despite the gravity of their situation, he couldn't help but feel excited. After all, who really cared about The Emperor? He didn't, not as long as he had Milla. *Milla*... Memories flashed through his mind, memories he had done his best to suppress over the last year. Milla and him as children, playing games, swimming in the ocean, discovering the waterfall, racing hand in hand across the meadow... Suddenly they were older, practicing magic and spending long hours lying out in the sun talking about everything and nothing at the same time...

Biting his lip, Keen tried hard not to cry. But even so, two small tears slowly made their way down his cheek.

“You okay?” Geld’s tone was one of worry and concern.

“Yeah,” Keen quickly ran a hand over his face and put on the unreadable expression that had become his norm over the past year, “I was just thinking about something,” he let his voice trail off, hoping Geld wouldn’t press him for details.

Fortunately, his friend sensed his mood and simply nodded. Suddenly, he blinked and cast an appraising glance at the other travelers making their way along the road. “Hey Keen,” he stretched, causing the twin swords hanging from his back to bump together in their nondescript brown sheaths, “why don’t we talk to some of the other people and see what we can find out about The Emperor? At worst, we go a bit slower and at best we find out something useful.”

“That’s a good idea.” Keen forced a grin while he mentally gauged the remaining distance to his home and Milla. “You really are learning.”

“You’re a good teacher.” Geld returned the grin then slowed his pace, dropping back next to an older couple leading a weary looking mule.

Keen sighed heavily then hurried to catch up with a young blonde-haired man carrying a bulky pack. Milla would have to wait a while longer.

The sun had long since sank below the horizon and the last bit of light was fading away from the clear sky when Geld and Keen reunited. Now that the last of the travelers had split off for their own destinations, they stopped to set up camp.

“What did you find out?” Keen asked, skipping the pleasantries.

“Not much.” Geld pulled a piece of dry meat out of his pack and tore off the end with his teeth. “Most of them didn’t know much about him yet. A couple people from some small places we passed awhile back said that their villages had sworn to him. How about you?”

“Well, after my little adventure in Chanadia last year, it looks like The Emperor waited awhile before making another attempt, so the gang activity on this island hasn’t really begun in earnest. Not to say that there isn’t any, but it’s nothing like where we just came from.”

“That’s good. Without many gangs we have a better chance of keeping the people on our side.”

“True, but I wouldn’t be surprised if The Emperor’s doing it on purpose.”

“What?” Geld shook his head, unable to understand Keen’s logic. “Why?”

“Simple enough. Financing all those gangs must cost a fortune, or several fortunes for that matter. Then there’s the added costs of maintaining his guard and replacing all the gangs we destroyed. No matter how much he’s getting in taxes, all our activity must have really cost him. He’s probably hoping to get the people on this island behind him with just a handful of gangs and some scare tactics.”

“Could be.” Geld dumped the contents of his belt pouch onto his bedroll and quickly counted the coins. “Hmm... Do you think we could win this by bankrupting him?”

“I’ve thought about it, but it would take too long. And that’s assuming we can deplete his gold faster than he can earn it. It would be more effective to cut off his sources of income but, aside from taxes, we don’t know what they are, and even then, it would probably be impractical.”

“You don’t miss a thing, do you?”

“That’s my job. Come on, let’s get some sleep. We’ve still got a long walk tomorrow.”

It was the middle of the afternoon when the simple wooden houses of Caluri Village first came into view. For the first time in over a year, a wide grin formed on Keen’s face. Unable to hold himself back any longer, he laughed and ran forward, the gentle breeze catching his hair in its playful grip. In the distance, he could hear the waves lapping off the beach as seagulls soared overhead. At long last, he was finally home.

Chapter 15

Keen skidded to a halt as he entered the village proper. It was all as he remembered. The houses, the trees, the beach, the flowers, the colorful birds... Yes, he had changed considerably over the last year but now, looking at the home he had longed for, he once again became the carefree young man who had left what seemed like a lifetime ago. Shadow Blade vanished back into the void where he resided, and the boy called Keen was revived.

“I’m home!” he shouted almost in disbelief as he spun around. “I’m really home!”

Geld was shocked by the change. As he watched his friend and companion dash about, eager to take in each familiar sight, he realized that this must be the real Keen, the Keen who was free and unburdened by the powers and worries that came with being Shadow Blade. Here there were no gangs and no Emperor, there was just Keen.

Grinning from ear to ear, Keen waved for Geld to follow. Walking up the steps to his house just as he had done many times before, he opened the door and stepped inside. “Mom, dad! I’m home!” There was no answer.

He shrugged and walked outside to where Geld was waiting. “Looks like my parents aren’t home. Do me a favor would you? Knock on the door of that house over there and ask where the Anors are. Ask about Milla too.”

“Sure,” Geld looked puzzled, “but why?”

“Well,” Keen shrugged, “I know it sounds kinda weird, but I want Milla and my parents to be the first to know that I’m back. Ok? If Milla’s home, just tell her to come outside.”

Still not entirely understanding, Geld walked up and rapped on the rough wooden door. It opened almost immediately, revealing a middle-aged woman. Despite the years, her golden-haired beauty hadn’t diminished in the least. “Yes?” she asked politely, eyeing the unfamiliar swordsman.

“Hi,” inclined his head respectfully, “is a Miss Milla here?”

“No, she’s out right now.” Milla’s mother seemed rather unsure as to why a stranger was asking about her daughter, but she still answered politely. “She went off somewhere this morning. I never know where that girl goes...”

“And would you know where I can find Mr. and Mrs. Anor?”

“They went out for the day, although they should be back before evening.”

“Thanks a lot.” Geld smiled and backed away, leaving the very confused woman to her thoughts.

Returning to the Anor’s house, he filled Keen in. “So,” Keen frowned briefly, “mom and dad won’t be back for a while. But where could Milla...” A smile lit his face. “Of course, there’s only one place she’d be.” He turned then stopped. “I’m going to go look for Milla. Would you mind waiting around here for a while?”

“Hey, no problem.” Geld grinned good-naturedly. “I’ll walk around for bit, maybe hang out on the beach. Just come get me when you’re back.”

“Thanks!” Keen ran off towards the edge of the village. “Later!”

“See ya!” Geld headed towards the soft white sands and lapping waves, marveling at the change that had come over his friend.

Making his way along the familiar path through the marsh, Keen quickly remembered why he had never gone there without Milla and her amazingly useful bug repellent spell. For a moment, he entertained the thought of changing to Shadow Blade and trying to replicate the magic, but quickly discarded the idea. This was his first day home, his, Keen Anor’s. Shadow Blade could wait, for now he just wanted to be himself.

Breaking through the last of the thick, twisted undergrowth he found himself in the waterfall clearing. It was just as beautiful as he remembered. A crystal-clear pool, sparkling in the bright sunlight, set in the middle of a giant marsh, and surrounded by large gray rocks. The waterfall roared as it fell, shining like millions of tiny diamonds. But all of that paled in comparison to a beauty of another type. Milla, her back to him, sat on the edge of the pool, dangling her legs in the cool water, and whistling a haunting tune.

Grinning mischievously, he slipped forward on feet that were now much more suited to stealth and gave her a push. Before she even had a chance to register surprise, Milla found herself plunging into the icy water. She quickly broke through the surface, ready to lash out at whoever had defiled the peace of her private sanctuary, only for the anger to vanish from her mind. There before her, a familiar smile on his face, sat the

person she'd feared she would never again see. At first, she thought he couldn't be real, just a daydream brought on by her memories, but then he reached down. As she grasped his outstretched hand, Milla realized that this was no dream. After one long and lonely year, her best friend had returned.

"Keen!" Scrambling out of the pool, she embraced the smiling young man. "I thought you'd never come back..." she sobbed into his shoulder. "It's been so long..." Keen found himself sobbing as well as they held each other tightly, two best friends, who knew each other like brother and sister, finally reunited.

As they broke apart, Keen found himself staring at the deep sparkling green eyes and gorgeous smile that had haunted his thoughts and dreams. Her face was just as he remembered it only ten, no, one hundred times more beautiful, and her hair, even soaking wet, was shining like spun gold. Breathing in deeply, he inhaled the scent that was her. It was a magical moment that he never wanted to end. "I've missed you so much."

"So have I." She kissed him lightly on the cheek, a rapturous bliss that was as fleeting as it was wonderful.

"You have to tell me everything!" She grinned suddenly, all sadness passed. "Everywhere you went, all your adventures, any girls you came across..." Her voice lowered teasingly.

"You're not getting off that easily." Keen smiled in return. "You've got to fill me in on all the local news."

"News, around here?" she quipped and they both laughed. "Have you seen your parents yet?"

“They’re not home. I’d like to stay here for a while, but we should probably go back and wait for them.”

“Don’t worry,” Milla put her arm around his shoulders, “we’ll have plenty of other days to come here, right?”

“I hope so.”

“Do you want to teleport back?”

“Nah,” Keen started towards the edge of the clearing, “let’s walk. You can start telling me what happened over the last year.”

“And you?” Magical light flashed briefly around Milla as she cast her self-made bug repelling charm.

“I’ll tell you when my parents get home, so I don’t have to repeat myself too many times.” Keen hopped over the first pond of foul-smelling goo.

“Ok, fair enough.” Milla grinned. “Well, let’s see... The Cyphers had their baby and...”

It was around twenty minutes later when Keen, now very knowledgeable about the local happenings, and Milla emerged from the marsh and began the relatively short walk to the village.

“You’re a mess.” Keen reached over and flicked a piece of slime off his companion’s face.

“So are you.” She giggled, looking at the black gunk that clung to his skin and clothes. “Let’s do something about it.” She raised one hand and frowned briefly then Keen suddenly found himself under enough water to fill a small pond.

“Hey!” he sputtered indignantly as the spell ended.

“That’s for pushing me into the pool.” Milla, also soaking wet, used another spell to dry their clothes.

“So,” Keen began as they continued walking, “you’ve told me a lot about the village, but what have you been doing?”

“Me?” she tossed her head back, sending tiny droplets of water flying through the air. “Nothing much. I went to the waterfall a lot. Looked after the younger kids too. Practiced magic, traveled to Wrestina a few times for some martial arts training-”

“Martial arts, really?” Keen looked impressed. “Sounds like you’ve kept busy.”

“Yeah.” She nodded and ran a hand through her hair, straightening the tangles caused by her earlier wet-and-dry treatment. “But it’s just not the same by myself.” Her voice was low and quivering. “Without you it...it just wasn’t the same...”

“I know.” His voice was like hers. “I know...”

“Uh, so...” She looked up as they entered Caluri. “Should we go to your house and wait for your parents?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Keen’s sharp eyes skimmed the village. Only several other people, mostly kids, were in the immediate vicinity, and it looked like they hadn’t yet noticed the pair. “Oh, I gotta get Geld. Wait at my place!” He dashed off towards the beach.

Milla shrugged and did as he said. Entering the deserted house, she sat in one of the comfortable wicker chairs surrounding the kitchen table and waited. Keen returned a few minutes later, accompanied by a rather handsome young man with deep blue eyes and rusty brown hair. He was smiling amiably, but his eyes were alert and the two broadswords hanging on his back looked like a natural extension of his body.

“Milla, this is Geld.” Keen indicated the swordsman.

“Hi.” They both nodded politely as Keen and Geld took their seats.

“So, you two are friends?” Milla asked.

“Yeah,” Keen nodded, “Geld and I ran into each other in Aquaria a while back and we’ve been traveling together ever since.”

“Wow, you must have really hit it off.”

“Uh, yeah...” Keen muttered as he and Geld both began laughing.

Watching them, Milla smiled both inside and out. *I’m glad he found a friend. This Geld looks like a nice guy. I’ll have to thank him for helping Keen. I mean, staying here all alone was bad enough, but traveling far away from home without anyone you know...* She shuddered.

“Hello?” a female voice called apprehensively from the door. “Is someone there?”

“Mom!” Keen jumped up and ran into the arms of his startled mother.

“Keen?” his father gasped as he hurried inside as well.

For a long minute they just hugged and cried. Even Keen’s father, usually very reserved with his emotions, couldn’t help but shed a few tears of joy. Keen may not have been their biological son, but they treated him as if he were.

At last, everyone settled down and took seats around the table. “Ok,” Keen smiled, happy and content, things he hadn’t felt in a long time, “I promised to tell all of you what I’ve been doing. It’s a long story so I’d prefer if you saved any questions for the end. Oh, Geld, I guess you can interrupt and correct me if I get something wrong.” He took a deep breath. “After I left, I decided to head south and went through this old forest. There were lots of other people on the road and they were kinda nervous about the forest when suddenly…”

“So Geld and I began traveling to the various towns and villages in the area…” Everyone listened spellbound as Keen recounted his tale. Even Geld was interested, as there were many parts that he hadn’t previously heard. Suddenly, to everyone’s surprise, there was a knock on the door.

“I wonder who that could be.” Keen’s father stood and moved to answer it. A moment later, he returned with several villagers following. Keen knew them by name and appearance, but they weren’t among the adults he had been particularly friendly with.

“Sorry to interrupt,” one man said in a tone that hinted at the opposite. “We heard that you were back, Keen. Could you step outside with us for a moment?”

“Um, I guess…” Keen frowned, puzzled. The others rose with him.

“Oh, there’s no need for all of you to come,” a middle-aged woman spoke.

Exchanging curious glances, Keen's parents returned to their seats. It was an odd request but, knowing the other villagers, they couldn't imagine that anything in particular was amiss. Geld and Milla, on the other hand, remained standing but made no move to follow as the villagers led Keen out into the cool night air. Only then did he realize just how long he had been talking. The sun had been set for at least a half hour, if not more, and darkness was rapidly descending over the village. Far overhead, the stars shone just as brightly and beautifully as always.

Walking against the breeze, Keen soon arrived in the center of the village where it seemed that half the population of Caluri was gathered. A moment later he found himself alone in the center, surrounded by a sea of familiar faces. He looked around both curiously and nervously as an older man, his former magic teacher, stepped to the front.

"Keen Anor," he intoned, his voice as dry as it had been during those long hours in class, "although you are a native of this village, we cannot permit you to stay here any longer."

"What?" Keen blinked, positive that he must have misheard.

"We have heard rumors of your exploits since leaving the village. With your magic, you are a powerful warrior and a threat to the peace and tranquility of both this village and the entire empire."

Empire! Keen's eyes widened.

"Rogue mages such as yourself have been banished from all corners of The Empire. It would only bring trouble if it were discovered that the infamous Shadow Blade

came from our village so, unless you mean to swear loyalty to The Emperor, you must leave immediately.”

Keen just stood there, numb with shock. The Emperor? They couldn't be saying what he thought they were... They couldn't!

“What is your decision?”

“You, you really did it...” Keen looked as if someone had just run him through with his own sword. “How could you join The Empire?!?”

“He saved us!” one of the villagers cried.

“Saved?” Keen struggled to collect his thoughts. “From what? A few brigands he probably hired himself? All he cares about is power! The only reason he banned warriors is so no one can oppose him!”

The people stood silent for a moment. “Liar!” Keen wasn't sure whose voice first called out, but others quickly joined until he could barely make out the individual words. “Protection-” “-peace!” “No place-” “Traitor!” “No fighters!” “Dangerous-” “-a threat!” “-rebel sorcerer!”

Keen sank to his knees as the insults and accusations crashed into him like a flood. These were his neighbors, his acquaintances, even his friends. While he wasn't especially close to many of them, they had known him his entire life. It didn't make any sense... “Why?” he gasped. “I always did my best to help-” The jeers grew louder.

His eyes scanned the faces in the crowd. There was Mr. Grenolds, who Keen used to help with his garden. And Mrs. Elm, who always gave him candy as a child. Even Kukurū, a childhood friend who had often played with him and Milla. The faces blurred

until he could no longer make out the speakers. Only the worlds continued, tearing into him with a cruel fury. “No!” Keen clutched his head, trembling violently as tears streamed down his face.

As the cries mounted, he let out a last tormented scream. “Alright!” he cried out in his anger and his pain. “I’m leaving! I’m leaving!!!” He reached behind his back and a cape blacker than the rapidly darkening night billowed over his anguished form. “But the fighter still remains!” A pulsing sword cut through the darkness as Shadow Blade emerged. Taking one last look at the screaming mob, he jumped into the air and vanished.

Milla waited for Keen’s return, silently wondering what the group had wanted with him. She couldn’t imagine that anything was wrong but still, something felt off about it. Suddenly, the sound of angry voices rose in the distance. *Keen?* Without stopping to think, she dashed out into the darkening night. Keen’s friend, Geld was beside her, eyes narrowed as he ran. Confused, Mr. and Mrs. Anor remained frozen for a few moments before they too followed. Milla glanced briefly back at them but there was no time to wait. She ran faster, pushing herself as hard as she could.

As she neared the village center, she could see a large crowd gathered around something or someone. A growing sense of dread filled her as the dull roar coalesced into a cavalcade of angry words. *No... They couldn’t. They wouldn’t!* Milla began to push her way through the mob. She had never seen them like this. Not even

when- Geld grunted angrily and shoved his way ahead, knocking the startled villagers aside.

Then, suddenly, Keen's voice echoed forth, drowning out all else. "I'm leaving! I'm leaving!!! But the fighter still remains!" Milla and Geld broke through to the center just in time to see him vanish into the night.

"Keen!" Milla yelled wildly as she looked around. "Keen!!!" Her eyes flashed with unbridled fury as she turned upon the crowd. "How could you?!?" Her voice was enough to stop even their cries. "After all he's done for you!!! After all he's done for this village!!! You-" she thrust her finger towards a portly woman, "who re-dug all your garden beds after they were washed away in a storm? And you-" she turned to face a young couple, "who used magic to help build your new house? And you! And you! And you! Ever since you found out about his powers, all you did was ask him for favors! And did he ever say no? DID HE?!?"

Angry red magic flared dangerously around her, giving form to the rage which filled every fiber of her being. It was all she could do to keep herself from attacking them right then and there. "And do you remember the tidal wave?" Her voice trembled. "The kraken?" She clenched her fists so tightly that blood began to trickle down her fingers. "Without Keen... Without him, most of you wouldn't even be here today! And this is how you repay him?!? Maybe The Emperor saved you and maybe he didn't, but that doesn't invalidate everything Keen has done!!! He loved this village more than any of us! He did more for it than any of us could ever hope to do! And you! You!!! Because of one, stupid little law..." She paused, chest heaving, as she gasped for breath.

I failed... Deep inside, her anger began to drown in a deep sorrow. I promised myself that, when he returned, I'd stand by him. I'd help him. But I was too late again! I couldn't protect the village. I couldn't stop this. I couldn't even reach him in time...

Tears began to trickle down her face. *I trained so hard and still... No! It's not over yet! I won't let it end like this!*

As the magic around her faded, Milla looked once again at the villagers, stunned into silence by her outburst. Some remained defiant, but others at least had the decency to look ashamed. "You disgust me." Her voice was bitter. "All of you. Keen deserves better. And if there's no longer a place here for him, than there's not one for me either."

She turned to see her own parents together with Keen's, shock and anger evident as they regarded the group they had once been glad to call neighbors. "Don't worry, I'm going to find him." Her voice, ragged from screaming, was filled with a quiet determination. "I don't know where we'll go or what we'll do, but I promise, he won't be alone."

Milla turned to Geld and he nodded. The dumbfounded crowd parted to let the two of them pass as they walked off into the night. Only the sound of the chirping insects and lapping waves broke the silence.

Chapter 16

Shadow Blade appeared in the midst of a forest. The trees were thin but their leaves thick, letting almost no light reach the ground. He wasn't sure exactly where he was nor did he care. Even now that he was alone, the screams of the villagers were all he could hear, their faces all he could see. Angry, accusing...

"After all that..." He rose, hands trembling as sorrow was replaced by anger. "After all I did for them!" He lashed out with his sword, severing one of the slender trees with a single blow. "I'll show them all!" More trees fell to his blade as the magic around him grew until it was a blinding inferno. "I'll destroy The Emperor!!!" A fiery explosion lit the inky black night as he screamed.

At last, his magic drained, Shadow Blade dropped to the ground. Reaching back, he weakly grasped his cape and flung it over his body. Keen fell to his knees in the midst of a blackened crater as ash rained down from the sky. "Why?" Try as he might, his anguished mind couldn't grasp what had happened. "I just wanted to go home..."

Keen awoke to the feeling of the warm ground pressing against his face. It was morning, not much past the normal waking hour. The previous night's events

immediately flooded into his mind, drowning out all other thoughts. He trembled as he fought to gain control of his body. At last he raised his head and looked at the destruction he had wrought upon the forest. Everything within fifty feet of him had been destroyed, leaving only dust and ashes.

“The village, everyone, why? The Emperor.” His eyes flashed. “It’s his fault! He deceived them!” Keen grasped his cape and let it flow over him. As Shadow Blade emerged, a simple spell removed the soot from his skin and hair. Drawing his sword, he let the magic flare around him. Feeding his anger, giving him power... Power to do anything.

“Emperor...” Shadow Blade’s voice was cold fury unchecked by any barrier. “Prepare yourself. I’ll make sure you don’t live to ruin any other lives.” He jumped into the air and sped through the forest, weaving deftly through the trees until he emerged into an open meadow. Recognizing his location, he continued on without slowing, a black blur heading northwest. Wrestina was close. Perhaps there he could learn where The Emperor was going next. Why waste time with a plan? A single death and this entire nightmare would end. *Faster...* He urged himself on. *Faster...* Soon, very soon, it would all be over.

Stopping at the outskirts of Wrestina, Keen regained enough presence of mind to return to his normal form. Unlike the rest of his appearance though, his eyes didn’t change. They shone with anger, loneliness, and sorrow. Yet, at the same time, they burned with a fierce determination.

Emerging from hiding, he began to follow the main road. Although big only when compared to Caluri Village, Wrestina was the largest shipping port north of Chanadia. As such, there was usually a large crowd milling about the entrance. Today, however, Keen saw less than ten people wondering the streets. Even the colorful shops and stalls were deserted. Worried, he started running across the smooth gray paving stones. He could hear sounds coming from the town center. Rounding a corner, he skidded to a stop and found himself on the edge of a massive crowd that seemed to contain most of the population of the town. Everyone was swarming around the statue of Glenn Viper, the famous warrior of long ago, which sat in the exact center of the plaza.

Standing on the pedestal was a man, tall and strong, but not yet middle-aged. A long brown cloak hung from his shoulders, trailing behind him like a cape. Deep piercing eyes looked out over the crowd as he spoke, but they were unlike any Keen had ever seen. Instead of being simply brown, or green, or blue, they were a swirling vortex, changing colors every instant. But even so, they always remained dark, unreadable. Another man stood behind the first, a long staff in his hand, but he remained still and silent.

Keen paused for a moment to listen. “Crime will be all but nonexistent,” his voice was clear and strong, “all I ask is a small tax and a place to station the guards who will protect this beautiful town.”

Keen’s eyes widened as he matched the visual image to the vague figure in his mind. *So that’s The Emperor...* The thought was nearly drowned out by the hatred and anger that suddenly welled up in his mind. Rage clouded his senses as he reached for a

cape that wasn't there. *I'll end this right here.* Deep inside, some part of him cried out, telling him that it would be a mistake, telling him to wait for the right time, but Keen ignored it. The cries of the villagers still echoed in his mind as he transformed.

Shadow Blade let his magic flare around him as he stepped forward. The crowd, whose eyes had been fixated on The Emperor, turned towards the brilliant display. "Emperor," Shadow Blade's voice was brimming with anger, "I won't allow you to deceive the people any longer! It's over!"

"Ah..." The Emperor turned and studied the caped figure as the townspeople hastily backed away. "You must be the one they call Shadow Blade, I've been wondering when we would meet. I must thank you for defeating so many villains on the other islands. However, even warriors with seemingly honorable intentions like yourself cannot be allowed to do as they please if the wellbeing of the people is to be considered. Come, join me, help make these islands safe."

"Lies!" Shadow Blade jumped into the air and floated above the ground. "You sent those gangs to attack the cities and villages. I'm here to end this game of yours. I may be playing my hand early, but it doesn't matter. Defend yourself!" Shadow Blade shot forward as a pulsing sword appeared in his grasp. The Emperor raised his hand almost lazily, putting a magical barrier between himself and his opponent. Shadow Blade struck the barrier but, instead of being knocked away, he remained in place, pushing back against the translucent green wall.

"Not bad. Not bad at all..." The Emperor's eyes turned brighter as his mouth twisted into a small smile.

“My lord,” the man with the staff spoke calmly and quietly, unfazed by the magical struggle taking place within arm’s reach, “it is him. The clothes, the sword, the essence of his magic... He is truly the same. This changes much. If we-”

“Yes, I understand.” The Emperor nodded, his voice too low for any other than his companion to hear. “Well then, this place is of little importance so let’s see what the famous Shadow Blade can do.” He jumped back, letting the barrier vanish, and a shining blade appeared in his hands.

Shadow Blade lunged, only to be knocked back by a volley of fireballs. *So, he’s not just some two-spell street mage. Fine, I’ll show him a taste of my true power.* There was a flash and eight Shadow Blades surrounded The Emperor and closed in to attack. At the last instant The Emperor whirled and lashed out with his sword. The real Shadow Blade winced as he was knocked back by the strike.

“Do you see?” The Emperor called out to the townspeople. “Even the warriors lauded as heroes can be dangerous without a firm hand to control them. This is why my laws are necessary to bring peace. But fear not, I will protect you!”

“Die!” Magical power flared around Shadow Blade as a storm of multi-colored rays rained down destruction on his surroundings. The crowd screamed and ran, although most retreated only as far as the streets and alleys before turning back to watch a battle the likes of which was rarely seen outside of myth and legend. The spell continued, blasting large holes in the paving stones and throwing up a cloud of dust and smoke.

“Such amusing tricks,” a voice whispered in Shadow Blade’s ear. “But you must realize that flashy wide-ranged spells like that leave you wide open.”

Shadow Blade whirled but it was too late. He was sent flying across the square and crashed painfully into the base of the statue. Pain lanced through his body and his vision wavered but his eyes still burned with rage. Forcing himself to stand, he cast a magic sealant followed by a paralyzation spell. Both struck The Emperor and dissolved, overwhelmed by his sheer power.

“Surely you can do better than that.” The Emperor casually pushed back his reddish-brown hair, now slightly unkempt from the battle, as Shadow Blade felt the same spells encasing him, cutting of his magic, sealing his movement...

No! I won't be stopped like this! Magic flared brightly as The Emperor's spells shattered. “Crossing Thunder!” Shadow Blade's voice echoed as lightning streaked from the sky, but not a single bolt reached its target.

“Enough of this.” The Emperor lunged, and Shadow Blade flew forward to meet him. They met in a blinding explosion of light and magic, forcing the townspeople to avert their eyes. When the light faded, Shadow Blade lay on the ground amidst a pile of shattered stone.

“So this is truly the extent of your power?” The Emperor looked almost surprised. “I was expecting more from the one that-”

“No!” Shadow Blade struggled to muster the strength for another attack. His clothes were torn and bloody and pain wracked his entire body but, as long as he killed The Emperor, nothing else mattered. “I did not come here to lose!”

The Emperor calmly snapped his fingers. There was a flash of light and Shadow Blade was smashed mercilessly into the ground.

This isn't right. Keen could only watch, unable to move, as The Emperor approached him. *I'm Shadow Blade! I can't lose like this!* He struggled to roll away, but his muscles refused to obey. *It, it's over...*

“Heal!” Milla thrust out her arms and a soft blue glow enveloped Shadow Blade. Having arrived only a moment before, after hours of fruitlessly searching the nearby forests and plains, she didn't know what was going on, but it didn't matter. Keen was hurt, and his enemies were her enemies.

“Emperor!!!” Charging past her, Geld leapt, bringing his twin blades down on the back of Shadow Blade's opponent. The man sensed the attack and moved to dodge, but he was a moment too late and the blades cut a deep gash across his arm. Anger flashing in his eyes, The Emperor raised his other hand and hurled a fireball into the young swordsman's chest, knocking him back.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Shadow Blade dove in front of his friends, blocking another spell before it could reach Geld. “Thanks.”

“It's nothing.” Milla smiled despite the situation. “I'm just so glad we made it in time.”

“So, it appears some playmates have come to join you.” The Emperor's calm demeanor was beginning to fall away. “Perhaps it's time to-”

“My lord!” The man with the staff ran forward and whispered something into The Emperor's ear.

Shadow Blade watched them cautiously as he rose. Geld joined him, swords ready. Milla stood between them, feeling the weight of her steel-plated gloves as she dropped into a fighting stance. Still, her face betrayed uncertainty. *It's ok... I can fight. This is what I trained for. But this feeling, it's nothing like a sparring match. Healing is one thing, but can I really hurt someone? Can I-*

"I suppose that's enough for today." The Emperor's voice interrupted her thoughts. "This isn't the time or the place. Citizens of Wrestina!" His voice rose. "If these are the type of people you want to live freely in your midst, that is your decision! But, when you seek peace and safety, I will welcome you to The Empire with open arms! Until then, farewell! Glazion, let's go." The other man nodded and raised his staff then, in a burst of magic, the two of them vanished.

Milla nearly stumbled as the tension drained from her body, but managed to maintain control. Geld, meanwhile, casually sheathed his blades with a practiced motion and turned to Shadow Blade. "You ok? Got to say, it sure is nice to have someone around who can use healing magic. But seriously, I never expected to find you fighting The Emperor, I mean-"

"Shut up," Shadow Blade growled as he pushed past his friends and headed towards the edge of the square.

"Keen?" Milla paused, shocked as his cold response. "What's wrong?"

"Not now," he spoke without turning. "Just...leave me alone for a while." He turned a corner and disappeared.

"What was that about?" Geld scratched his head, puzzled.

Is he still upset about the village? Milla frowned. *What am I thinking? Of course he is. But there's more than that. I don't really know what happened here but it shook him somehow, in a different way than what happened in Caluri. It's only been one year but he's changed so much. I feel like I can't even understand him anymore. But I have to try! I'm here for him, no matter what.* "Come on." She glanced towards Geld. "I don't care what he said. We should find him."

Chapter 17

After nearly an hour of searching, Milla and Geld finally spotted Keen sitting on a low stone wall on the outskirts of town, staring morosely out over the ocean.

“Hey,” Geld’s tone was tinged with annoyance, “why did you run off?”

Keen turned briefly, then looked back towards the calm water.

“Keen,” Milla’s voice was gentle as she sat beside him, “what’s wrong?”

“I lost...” His voice was barely audible. “Even as Shadow Blade...”

“So what?” Geld’s shrugged. “You underestimated him. It happens. You survived, so you know what to expect next time.”

“What next time?” A tinge of anger crept into Keen’s voice. “Shadow Blade’s power is on par with legendary heroes. When I’m him, I can kill monsters or even destroy a small army all by myself. And I was giving that fight everything I had but The Emperor... Can you imagine the type of power he must have? There’s no defeating someone like that! It’s impossible.”

“So you just want to give up now and let him take over?” Geld growled. “I thought you were stronger than that.”

“No, but I...” Keen trailed off, unable to find the words.

Milla put her arm around his shoulder. “I understand.” She spoke slowly, organizing her thoughts. “When I saw you fight the kraken, I was amazed. Before then, I

always thought that, with just a little bit more practice, I'd be able to catch up you. To Shadow Blade. That's been my goal ever since our first day practicing magic together. But no matter how I tried, the gap between us never seemed to grow any smaller. I trained really hard while you were gone. I'm far stronger than anyone in Caluri, Wrestina, or any of the surrounding villages. But even now, I can't match up to what you did that day. Maybe I never will. It's..." She sniffed and took a moment to bring her emotions under control. "Growing up, we always hear that no matter how strong or skilled we are, there's always someone better, and it was Shadow Blade who made that lesson real for me. It's hard, really hard. And you're my best friend. To feel that way about an enemy...it's terrifying. But, at the same time, I didn't do all that training just because I wanted to be strong. There was more to it than that. That day with the kraken I..." Despite her best efforts, tears began to pool in the corners of her eyes. "I hated myself. You fought so hard, you nearly died, and I couldn't do anything to help. I felt the same way when you left the village. You don't realize how much I wanted to go with you, but I knew that I'd only hold you back. Yes, I wanted to be strong and brave! But only so I could stand and fight beside you! I didn't want you to have to do everything alone like on that day. And now, here I am. Back then, if I had given up, if I had decided that you were too strong and there was nothing I could do, I'd still be that little girl crying desperately on the beach. But I used that experience to push myself and grow and you can do the same. Maybe you can surpass The Emperor but even if you can't, you'll find a way to win. Because you're not alone anymore."

“She’s right.” Geld waited until Milla had finished speaking. “I’ve lost plenty of times and I never let it stop me. That’s just part of learning. But this girl, wow!” He whistled appreciatively. “You should have seen her last night in the village after you disappeared. She’s strong, and I don’t just mean magically. I haven’t met many with the courage to do what she did. She cares about you and I guess I do too. So don’t worry, we can do this.”

Milla could feel herself blushing slightly as his words. “So Keen, are you ok?”

“Yeah...” He squeezed her shoulders then stood, a small smile on his face.

“Thanks. Now let’s find some place we can relax. We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Milla tried to tune out the shouts and laughter filling the bustling common room so she could better focus on the matter at hand. Though the biggest distraction came from her own thoughts. Despite everything she had said since reuniting with Keen, the events had still shaken her. *I thought I was ready to leave home to travel with Keen, still it’s a bit scary. But I can’t back down now. He needs me. And I certainly can’t return to Caluri after what they did. But this... Defeating gangs? Fighting against The Emperor himself? It’s all so much bigger than I expected. How can they do it? How have they been able to go on day after day, risking their lives against such ridiculous odds? No! It doesn’t matter. I made a promise to myself and to Keen and I’ll do whatever it takes. The how*

doesn't matter. Just take it one step at a time. And right now, that means learning as much as I can about the situation.

“So, does this mean it’s back to the old plan?” Geld spoke in a low voice to be sure that none of the inn’s other patrons could hear.

“What old plan?” Milla frowned. While she knew that Keen and Geld weren’t deliberately leaving her out of the loop, their frequent references to knowledge and events of which she was unfamiliar was frustrating, to say the least.

“Well...” Keen frowned and ran a hand through his hair. “Geld and I were working on a plan to stop The Emperor, but it never completely came together. The basic idea was to find a way to turn the people against him. Without their support, The Empire would crumble and we could deal with the remnants after that. But every time we thought we’d found some piece of evidence, or a law we could exploit, the entire thing would fall apart.”

“And now we have another problem,” Geld interjected then dropped silent as a plump serving girl arrived to take their orders. After she had left, he resumed from where he had left off. “Now that we know how powerful he is, discrediting him might not be enough. Not if he can just destroy any opposition.”

“Well for now, instead of worrying about that, can you fill me in?” Milla interrupted. “I still don’t even know why we’re fighting The Emperor in the first place.”

“Sorry.” Despite the seriousness of the situation, Keen found himself unable to look away from his friend’s face, even for a brief instant. He had wanted to see her for so long and now they were finally together again, even if it hadn’t turned out the way he’d

planned. “I guess I never did get to finish my story last night. We can get into the details later, but the gist of it is that I discovered that The Emperor was secretly controlling all the recent criminal activity across the islands. Unfortunately, he’s very careful so Geld and I haven’t been able to find a single piece of hard evidence. Sure, a couple of top gang leaders have pinned him as their backer, and it all fits pretty nicely, but we have no real proof. Nothing that will convince the average person, anyway.”

“Wait, wait...” Milla shook her head. “Why would he do that? He’s famous for reducing crime. That’s why so many people are joining The Empire to begin with.”

“Exactly. But the problem was that, before he came around, the islands were just too peaceful. A handful of brigands, some small-time thieves and swindlers... Nothing that the individual towns and cities couldn’t handle on their own. But suddenly, more and more criminals began appearing. And, even worse, they began to work together and form gangs. Crime has risen to an unprecedented level, people are scared, and no one is sure what to do. Fortunately, The Emperor comes and offers to protect them in return for a modest tax, a place to house his guards, and maybe a few other small conditions. The unsuspecting masses jump onboard, The Emperor dissolves the gangs, and pretty soon he’s got his very own empire.”

Milla’s eyes widened. “Wow... But I see what you mean. I trust you, but if some random person had told me that, I would have thought he was crazy.”

Keen ran a hand through his hair, as he often did, and tried to remain focused. Although he tried hard not to show it, Milla could see the exhaustion in his eyes. He was tired, both physically and mentally, far more than she had ever seen. She could remember

back when he first became Shadow Blade. The fun, the excitement... He was different now. Colder, harder... She first had noticed the personality change Shadow Blade brought upon her best friend long ago, but it had been so small, barely noticeable, nearly insignificant. When he transformed back then, he had mostly stayed Keen, even though his body was Shadow Blade's. There were a few times when the darker personality had taken over, such as when the kraken had attacked, but they had been few and far between. The bright cheerful Keen had all but drowned out the cold battle-worn Shadow Blade. Now it was just the opposite.

“But why Caluri?” He signed heavily. “When? How?”

“Actually, it was barely two weeks ago,” she replied. “A group of brigands, some swordsmen and a mage, attacked the village. It was a small group but you know Caluri, it's so peaceful. Nothing like that ever happened before and they panicked. I was here in Wrestina at the time and, now that I think back, they may have waited for me to leave. If I had been there, I could have fought...” She looked down sadly. “Anyway, when I returned, the village was a mess. In the end, a few people were injured and some things were stolen. Nothing too serious, not really, but everyone was afraid that they'd return and it would be worse. I said we should fight back but the others were scared. And then, when The Emperor showed up a couple of days later offering protection... Well, you can tell how that went. And that law against warriors and offensive magic users, to a lot of the villagers, that seemed like the perfect answer. They could just keep dangerous people out and leave everything to The Empire. I didn't completely agree but, if you hadn't

returned when you did, I probably would have joined The Emperor's guard to help protect the village. Now I'm really glad that I didn't."

"Did The Emperor have any special requests?" Geld took a long swallow from his mug. "Some useless trinket or an old book?"

"No, nothing like that." Milla frowned as she thought back to the official proclamation. "He did want to build a lookout tower of some sort next to where the future guard station will be, though I don't know why. All you could really see from there is the ocean."

"Still think it's just an eccentricity?" Keen gave Geld a significant look.

"What is?" Milla sighed inwardly as she once again felt left out of the conversation.

"The Emperor built towers by a few other guard stations too," Geld supplied the answer before Keen had a chance to speak. "We've seen two of them and heard rumors about a couple more. But none of them are in good positions and there's no platform or anything at the top where a guard could stand, just some round thing. All form, no function. A symbol of The Empire or something."

"They could be a symbol," Keen cut in, his tone that of one who had already argued the same subject many times before, "if he placed them at every guard station. But he's only built them at a handful of locations."

"Yeah, it's weird." Geld leaned back and yawned loudly. "But so what? If The Emperor wants to build a few stupid looking towers, let him. It's not like knocking them down is going to defeat him."

“I know,” Keen rolled his eyes in exasperation, “but I have a strange feeling. First there’s those old trinkets and manuscripts he keeps asking for, and now the towers. They’re connected somehow. Shadow Blade knows, I can tell. If I just had all of his memories...”

“Look, don’t stress over it.” Geld flicked a lock of rust colored hair out of his eyes. “How many towns and villages are there to the north of here?”

“Um...” Keen trailed off. “Milla?” He turned to her sheepishly.

“I told you to pay more attention when we studied local maps. And just about everything else...” she added under her breath.

“Hey!” Since becoming Shadow Blade, Keen’s hearing didn’t miss much.

“Although this may be the second largest island in the archipelago,” she ignored his indignant glare, “it’s not very densely settled. There’s only three villages and one large town to the north.”

“Ok, easy enough.” Geld stood. “We should travel to all of them and try to keep The Emperor from taking over if he hasn’t already. Considering that he’s already appeared here, most of the south is probably a lost cause. Now I don’t know about you guys,” he yawned again, “but I was up all night and need some sleep so I’m going to get a room.”

“That sounds good.” Milla tried and failed to stifle a yawn of her own. “Keen?”

“I’m in.” His hand ran across the worn pouch on his belt as he stood. “Hey Geld, how much money do you have left?”

“Not much.” The young swordsman scowled. “Haven’t found a good dice game since we left Aquaria and my luck’s nothing like yours. Why?”

“I’m running low too.” Keen sighed and began juggling the nearly empty pouch from hand to hand.

Milla suddenly found both of the boys looking at her. “Hey, I wasn’t expecting to suddenly drop everything and leave home,” she protested. “Not that my allowance money would go very far anyway.”

“One room it is then.” Keen groaned and headed for the bar.

“Is sharing a room ok with you?” Milla felt Geld’s eyes on her. “I don’t really know how close the two of you are and we only just met...” He blushed slightly as he spoke.

“It’s fine,” Milla replied casually, shrugging off his concerns.

“Look, I know you’re from a small village, but you need to learn to be more cautious and less naive. There’s a lot of dangerous things and people around.”

She rolled her eyes at the lecture and gave him a cool look. “I trust Keen. And,” a hint of a grin flitted across her face, “I trust that he could wipe the floor with you if you tried anything. And that’s only after I get through with you.”

Geld laughed. “Ok, point taken.”

Keen returned a moment later, holding a single rusty key, and led the three of them down a hall at the far end of the room. There were many things to plan and much work to be done, but that could wait until morning. Despite all that had happened, Milla

couldn't help but feel somewhat positive. Keen was back and this time she was ready.

Whatever happened, they would face it together and, win or lose, that would be enough.

Biography

Josiah Lebowitz received his Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia degree in 2007 and his Master of Science in Technology degree in 2009 from the University of Advancing Technology. He then developed and taught game design and writing programs at Florida Gateway College in 2011 and University of Hawaii – West Oahu in 2014. In 2016 he began a position as an Assistant Professor of Game Writing at George Mason University. He is the author of *Interactive Storytelling for Video Games* (2011), *The Verities Silex Trilogy* (2012), and *So You've Been Reborn in a Fantasy World* (2021).