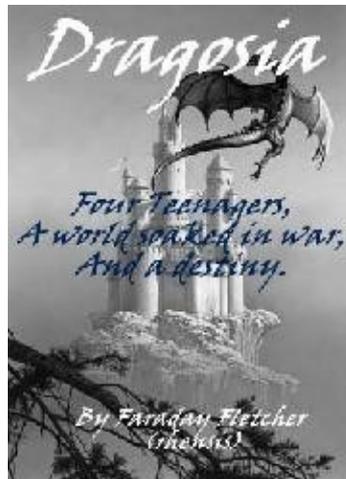


Dragosia-Book 1

By : Rhensis

A war is closing in on the world, and only a select few can stop it. Life is changing in every moment, and unexplainable things are happening all over. But can four teenagers change the destiny of a world soaked in bloodshed, magic and war?



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Chapter 1: The Dragon Awakens

A/N: This novel has been discontinued, in case you didn't see that in the summary

Rhen was stunned by the letter she held before her. The words swirled around on the paper as she stared and lost focus, then blinking to restore it. Her legal guardian, Brother Aam, was on the other side of the dining room table, surrounded by the orphans who also lived under the care of the church. As the oldest, Rhen was allowed to sit next to a roaring fire at dinner time; one of the many perks of this status within the orphanage. "What is this letter about then, Rhen?"

"Ummmm" Rhen was only just returning to reality after focusing on the letter for so long. She saw all the other children staring intently at her. "King Cameterie Kocure..." Astonished gapes and gasps arose from all the young elves at the table at the mentioning of the name of the King of their beloved city-Malwrym. Rhen waited for them to calm down before continuing. "He wants me to meet him in Malwrym as soon as possible. No specification why." The last statement was guided by the tone of her voice and the direction her eyes looked in toward Brother Aam.

"Malwrym???" The Brother looked very uneasy at the mention of his ward travelling so far. "Well, if that is what our monarch wants...I should not want to defy him..." Rhen immediately assumed that this meant she was allowed to go. She smiled inside and was suddenly filled up with a burst of emotions. Life in the orphanage had been dull without the hope of going to the academy by September.

"But, of course, the only form of transport we will be able to provide for you at such short notice is your own horse, Midnight," Rhen was secretly very pleased when Brother Aam told her this. The stunning black horse that she often rode was one of her best friends when she was at home. "You will, of course, have to leave tomorrow at the summons of such a powerful figure. I suggest you pack as soon as you have eaten your soup." Surprised by the lack of protest given from Brother Aam, Rhen guessed that he had already been informed of the nature of this invitation. After the open permission for her to go on what may prove to be a long and perilous journey, she was excited and ate faster than normal. Once she had finished, she thanked Brother Aam and ran up the stairs.

The rooms in which the fifteen children who lived in this sector of the church were along the corridor in the attic, with seven on one side, eight on the other. The rooms were identical apart from the size. The younger and older children got the large rooms, and the unfortunate children in between had the smallest ones. Inside the rooms was a desk with a chair, a bed and a wardrobe with two drawers. The simple furnishing lacked any personality.

Rhen had the largest room, and as this was to be the last room she had in the orphanage, she was allowed to personalise her room however she wanted to, so her plain room had become plastered with posters and vibrant colours. Most of the posters were written in languages that only she understood within the orphanage, and she liked it that way. It meant less people to realise that the posters were about.

On opening her door, she, much to her horror, discovered her personalisation had been removed by one of the sisters while she was eating (she had only tacked them up loosely, so it wouldn't have taken long). This confirmed her suspicion that Brother Aam had known about this before she had, and was planning to move Lottie, the girl below her in age, to her room.

Although, it struck her as odd as she didn't think she would be gone for that long. She would be coming back. Rhen considered this as she gathered her plain clothing, spell books and her few other personal items, such as her journals and quills. She had made up her mind to give Saya, the youngest girl in church care, her old tabby cat, Milkees.

Once her satchel was full, it took her a while to get it shut. In the end, she became so frustrated she used magic to close it. The problem with this was that Rhen had once set a stable on fire, which took the locals three days to put out. Strangely enough, she had been banned from using magic within the Church's grounds. Personally, she thought that as she was leaving in less than a day, she should be allowed to use magic if she wanted to, especially when it came to something that would help her leave.

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As the day drew to a close, Rhen undressed into her nightgown, stuffed away her day clothes, and left her travelling clothes and cloak, as well as her sword and daggers (Brother Aam didn't know about that one), on her simple desk. She lay on her bed, and drifted into a deep sleep...

A dark cloud settled over the horizon, darkening the land with thoughts of an upcoming storm. A man and his wife struggled to march through the desert, clutching their newly born daughter, just as a lion protects her young. The mother stumbled, and as the man helped her up, he saw a sight that made his blood run cold. In fear, he grabbed his sword and prepared to protect his family.

The approaching trolls yelled their battle cry, and then laughed as they knew the soldier would have no chance against a whole war band of trolls.

They grabbed his wife before he even had a chance to raise his arm, and chucked the child across the sand. They tortured her endlessly, slashing at her while grinning and laughing throughout. The man tried to stop them, but he was bitten by an attacker, who managed to draw blood. He didn't seem to notice, but the way he handled his sword from there on in was somewhat lapse.

A swift cut from one of the trolls ended the woman's life with a fountain of blood. Enraged, the man killed several trolls swiftly yet violently, before retrieving his wife's body and his child. Frantically, he climbed onto his horse.

Yet as he left, the trolls tried again with an ambush. Beating them back took all the strength he had, and, by the time he and his daughter had managed to escape, the trolls had claimed his wife's body...

Rhen woke up soaking wet and trembling. The terrifyingly realistic dream of her mother's death and Father's attempt to flee certain murder just showed how much a mind infused with magic can remember. All she knew from the adults surrounding her since her father's death was that he managed to retrieve her from an ambushing party but couldn't save her mother.

Trying to put the dream out of her thoughts, she strolled over to the window and saw that it was still around midnight, which explained why it was dark. Her suitcase and belongings were still where she left them, just like her room, which somewhat calmed her down as she recovered from the dream.

Milkees was on her bed, as she hadn't had a chance to give him to Saya yet. She lit a candle before writing a small note explaining all about Milkees to Saya and securing it within his collar. Then, she bundled him up in her arms (getting black fur all over herself), and transferred him out of her room to Saya's. Clambering back into bed, Rhen fell asleep almost instantly.

A high pitched bell awoke Rhen, and probably the others as well. Sister Clech was up and about with her morning call. She came into Rhen's room herself, and made sure that the young mage was awake.

"Rhen...Saya saw Milkees on her bed this morning and she's really happy to have him. Thank you, although I don't know why I was instructed to take down your things or for you to give away your cat when this isn't permanent."

"I don't know how long this is going to be for Sister...If you'll excuse me I have to go to breakfast to say goodbye to everybody." Rhen dressed straight into her travel clothes, but didn't put on her cloak since her own room was always nice and warm. Stalling on the stairs, she remembered that this would probably be the last time she would take this staircase down to breakfast. It was like letting chocolate stay in your mouth as long as possible so you could savour the flavour, before reluctantly having to swallow.

On arriving at the table, Rhen found a traditional breakfast of bacon and egg with tomatoes being served at the table. These were only given on special occasions, and Rhen immediately knew this special occasion was her.

Hating having everybody staring at her so intently throughout the whole duration of the meal, Rhen was almost glad when her luggage was set down in front of her when it was time for her to take her leave.

Taking swift glances at the staff, and then the children, and only muttering a small "thank you", to Brother Aam, Rhen climbed aboard Midnight. The letter that had condemned her to this long journey was in her hand, and it took her a moment to get her grip. She waved with her hand open, a smile on her face, before taking midnight beyond the gate.

As soon as she was sure she was out of sight, Rhen dismounted. She took Midnight over to a small clearing within a group of trees. Drawing an imaginary circle with her finger, Rhen began to mutter and inaudible, let alone understandable, incantation, before stepping back. An instant blue glow arose from the otherwise

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normal grass, and Rhen pushed the reluctant horse into the strange essence. The portal had not been on the curriculum of the school; her incantation professor had taught her alone without anyone's knowledge, thankfully for her.

The mage stepped through the blue gateway...

*****This chapter has recently been re-written!*****

Chapter 2: The Dragon Learns

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"You wanted to see me, sire?"

"Yes, Hacona, I did. The boy, where is he?"

"His pattern suggests he is heading toward Vetsom. We have scouts out to find him"

"Damn to his parents, causing us this much trouble."

"The boy was obviously going to become a paladin. If we had kept him we probably would have been in even more trouble than we are in now!"

"Pacis Quod Merisicordia cannot afford any more of this. See to it that your scouts find him."

"Yes, sire!" The Commander backed out of the hall, and began to set his men to work, afraid of what the king would say if he failed. Let's just say, he did not want to find out...

A stern and aging wizard looked down at Rhen. Her portal hadn't fully worked, and had been pretty rough, sending her spiralling and hitting the ground with enough force to knock her unconscious. Coming round, Rhen felt dizzy, but knew she could stand.

"Where's my horse?" Rhen groaned. A hoarse voice answered.

"Being looked after by the castle grounds keepers. The king wants to see you." The woman pulled Rhen up, and then nodded towards two people standing in the doorway.

"Amie! Samssoon!" Rhen exclaimed as her vision cleared and she was able to make out the figures of her two best friends. They smiled and ran to her.

"What are you guys doing here?"

"No idea", replied Samssoon. Amie simply shook her head.

"A mysteryâ 'How fun" Rhen said, more than slightly sarcastically.

"Your luggage is already in your room. You two, show her to it!" Amie rolled her eyes and grabbed Rhen by the hand, dragging her through corridors. After Rhen's eyes finally finished focusing and her head stopped spinning, she began to admire the scenery with awe. Pillars and towers sparkled in the moonlight, and the constant trees and gardens within the city walls were outstanding to look at, despite the diminished light. The buildings ranged in size and features, from small shacks, to large palaces with young, pretty girls hanging out of window, laughing at the streets below. Birds and other small creatures pecked and poked at large hats and scraps of food on the streets. Eventually, they came to a long river that flowed through the entire city, and across the water, white with the reflection of the moon, was the city keep. The building was the largest they had seen so far, and also the most magnificent. However, the outside was nothing compared to the inside. Carpets of royal red thread covered the floors, while the walls were coloured with majestic flavours, and gold wall decorations covered the walls and precious items made of metals that are likewise precious were on tables on the sides of the corridor. On either side of the corridor, passages and doors led to an array of different rooms and gardens. Eventually, Amie, Rhen and Samssoon came to a circular room with four doors. Samssoon went to his own room after hugging Rhen, and Amie pointed Rhen toward her room.

"Thanks, Amie! See you later"

"See you Rhenâ !" Rhen opened her door. The room in which Rhen was to stay in was almost an exact replica of her orphanage room. Clean sheets on the bed, a desk and chair, with a window next to the bedstand. But the furniture was more elaborate, and obviously comfier. Her satchel she had attached to Midnight was on the bed with a note on top.

Dear Rhen Sachem,

You will be lodging here for about two weeks, so feel free to unpack and get integrated into your surroundings.

Thank you

There was no name on the note, and Rhen began to unpack, while dwelling on who could have attached it. The handwriting looked like her own, which had changed after she studied magical runes. Therefore, Rhen supposed it was probably written by the mage she had woken up to. However, exhausted from her earlier fall, Rhen lay down on the bed and fell asleep !

A young girl ran up and jumped onto a bed. A man was sleeping on the bed, covered in sweat and trying his best to cuddle his little girl, but was unable to. A man dressed in magnificent clothing entered the room and removed the girl from the bedside. The King whispered to his friend, and told him his little girl would be O.K. But the man heaved a deep breath, before releasing it and taking in no more. The king picked up the dark skinned elf girl and gave her a squeeze, before handing her to the Brother in front of her. He took her in his arms and whispered a prayer.

"What is her name?"

"Rhen Sachim, an elf, with possible magical attributes." Brother Aam took the child out of the keep, and into the forest !

A stream of light pouring in through Rhen's window woke her up. Grateful for being allowed to wake up when she wanted to, she slowly got up. No shrill bell to answer to, Rhen dressed at her own pace, pondering her dream. She had always had dreams about her father and mother, but they had always been alive when she had done so, with herself, happy and living all together. A child's dream about her lost parents. But recently, she had begun to remember what actually happened, and it stung her mind to think of it. A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts, however.

"Rhen... Samssoon wants you!" came Amie's voice.

"Coming!" Rhen, dressed in a short, blue and purple dress, (It was too hot to wear a heavy robe), came out of her room and greeted Amie, who was dressed in similar attire, but her dress was green, and was fitted to allow herself to have a quiver and bow on her back. She wasn't armed, so Rhen put her daggers down on the desk behind her. Amie enquired how Rhen was feeling, and Rhen was optimistic in her reply that she was. Then, Rhen skipped over to Samssoon's door, and knocked, wondering why he would want her first thing when she woke up. After a minute or two passed, and Samssoon didn't answer, Rhen knocked again harder. This time the door opened, with the dwarf on the other side. Her height compared to Samssoon's made it hard to imagine that the two could be friends.

"Rhen, come in," Rhen entered the room with Samssoon in front, staring at the walls. The room had been decorated exactly how she had expected it to be. Posters of the Dwarf band, LittleBig'uns, who often played in the centre of Vetsom, the Dwarf city, and in the main court of Malwrym, were plastered all over the walls, His clothes were thrown around the room, and his guitar was propped up against his bed. A stereotypical dwarf's room.

"So, wassup?" Rhen was concerned when his expression suddenly turned grave.

"Rhen, Amie..." Before Samssoon could finish, Amie entered the room and interrupted the conversation.

"The King wants to see us-now" The three of them left the room and met the Lieutenant Colonel Genba Milriat. The human looked somewhat nervous when his eyes met Rhen. Rhen herself felt uncomfortable, and tried to avoid eye contact.

"Follow me," They did as they were told, and admired the scenery as they went through even more elaborate parts of the keep. Eventually, even Rhen lost track of all the twists and turns they encountered as they moved throughout the corridors.

"Out of interest," Rhen interrupted the silence, "How did you guys know I'm here?"

"We were told that you had arrived. To be honest, we wanted to know if you knew anymore about this whole affair than we did."

"I got a letter, just asking me to come here by order of King Kocure, you?"

"Samssoon and I were the same."

"This whole thing is weird. Well hopefully thisâ 'willâ 'sortâ 'thingsâ 'outâ !" An indescribable room lay before them. Pillars of gold lay either side of a pathway through a grand hall. Workers and scribes dressed in almost regal attire walked hastily in between these pillars, seeing to their business. At the end of this hall, a throne, covered in golden drapes made of majestic fibres, had its occupant sit up at the sight of the three teenagers. He clapped his hands, and immediately, the bustling and noise of the people in the room ceased. The Lieutenant Colonel beckoned for Rhen to walk forward, followed by Amie, and then Samssoon. The elf on the throne, who Rhen and Samssoon had immediately recognised as King Cameterie Kocure, (The King had helped a lot with the dwarf population in Shen (Where Samssoon grew up), during the Vetsom civil war, which is why Samssoon knew who he was), and Amie soon identified him after, spoke in a grand voice, full of confidence and, as soon as he spoke, you felt an imposing presence.

"Rhen Sachem, Amie Hammer and Samssoon Urmon. The three of you together is no mere coincidence. However, that is a story for another time. For the time being, you need to focus on the job at hand, rather than philosophy and prophecies. I need you to retrieve and artefact for me."

"Sire, with all respect, we are sixteen, and Amie still fifteen. What can we do that your seasoned warriors cannot?" Rhen was the first to interrupt the King, and received glares from members of the crowd. However, Rhen held her nerve and ignored them.

"I cannot explain, young mage. My mind is made up. There will be no further discussion on the topic." Stern words they were, and Rhen and Amie were set back by them. Samssoon instinctively reached toward his axe, as he always did when he felt scared, or when an attack was imminent. The three bowed before the King and then left the room. Samssoon was unusually quiet, and Rhen had a good idea why.

"Well, I'm going for some target practice, we probably going to need it, coming, Rhen?"

"Will you be Ok Samssoon?" Samssoon nodded at Rhen, before heading off to his room with the Lieutenant Colonel. Amie and Rhen followed when they remembered that they needed to pick up their bows from their rooms (and in Rhen's case, a few pieces of parchment too). The corridors were just as confusing as before, and Rhen assumed that this was probably a different route, as many of the paintings did not match what she had seen previously. Arriving in her room, Rhen found that her old knives and bow was still there, but there was also two new, shining daggers and a proper, Elvin bow made of fine materials. Holding it up, she noticed that her name had been engraved in the wood. She smiled and grabbed her quiver, daggers and parchment. On closing her door, she saw Amie with a great big grin on her face, holding a new bow. It was even more majestic than Rhen's, and the two of them walked through the castle with their weapons, talking the whole time.

"You failed, Hacona. You are lucky you do not share the same fate as your scouts."

"Sire, if you please, the boy is on the road to Vetsom, and the trolls have sparked up a war with the dwarfs. We cannot travel the roads without encountering ambush after ambush."

"I have provided you with the finest soldiers, scouts and mages from our arsenals, let alone members of the High Arcane Council. If you cannot handle it, then I shall just have to find a replacement..."

"NO! Sire, I will get the boy. We will leave tomorrow, and not return till we have him"

"Good, otherwise, you know what will happen..."

An arrow landed straight on where the heart would be on an enemy. Rhen stepped up and hit the same target.

"So, Amie, your parents ok with this?"

"Ummmm well, they don't actually know about it."

"Come again?"

"Well, you know I never liked them, well when we left school, I went home when they were out, grabbed my things, and came to Malwyrn. I was living in a house when I got my summons. Samssoon was with me because his mother never came home to meet him. He has no idea what happened to her, so don't mention it, please."

"Well, you hated your parents, especially your mother, but for Samssoon... His father's still on the front line isn't he?"

"Yes" Rhen couldn't portray how sorry she felt for Samssoon. She had lost her parents at such a young age she didn't even remember them, but Samssoon had known them all his life.

"What about your parents, Amie? Surely they must be worried?"

"Doubt that." Amie avoided eye contact for a few minutes of uncomfortable silence. The two of them took turns throwing arrows, and in Rhen's case, spells at the dummies at the first underground level of the keep.

"Rhen, what do you reckon that we have to get, this artefact?"

"No idea, but we don't need to know. If we did, we would have been told" Rhen doubted her words as she said them, "But I do know something. We need to be getting back soon, otherwise Samssoon and the guards will think we've been kidnapped or something. They'll send a whole army after us" Amie laughed at this. The both of them knew this was only because there wasn't much to laugh at anymore. They made their way back to their rooms, and quickly made their goodbyes. Rhen checked with the guards that Samssoon was in his room, before returning to her own room. She wasn't sure how she was going to cope with two weeks of this...

Children of ages as young as eight, dressed in varying yet similar uniforms, all dictating what classes they belonged in, ran through halls, while the older ones, dressed in respectable attires that had badges of status and achievement all over, walked calmly and proudly through the halls. Three students of fifteen laughed as they walked with unchallenged pride. They wore the highest clothes of each of their classes, and each of these sets of clothes was different. One of the girls wore a sea blue robe, with many badges dedicated to arcane magic achievements. The other girl wore a tunic, with a bow and quiver on her back, again with numerous badges. The boy wore heavy mail with a mace on his back. He had the least badges, but he was still extremely proud of them. As they parted in a three way corridor, they smiled, wishing that these times of harmony would never end. But as they reached their classroom, they were all told of a war that they were supposedly destined to fight in after their period of study. The halls no longer echoed joyful laughter, but the footsteps of superior students being taken to join an army that would never return...

Rhen awoke scared of the vision she had just had. Her time at the Alroom Academy with Amie and Samssoon had parts that she never wanted to remember or see again. One day, she thought, you could meet someone, the next day, they would be gone. She and her friends were lucky, but not everyone was so fortunate. Becoming scared of her own mind, which was trying to torture her with her worst memories, the majority of which so far she did not even know she had, Rhen tried once again to ignore the dreams, but it was becoming harder with every new one. She left the room, fully equipped with weapons, as concern was gripping her and providing her with fear...

Chapter 3: The Dragon Laughs

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"Sire! Sire!"

"You had better be here with good news, Hacona. My patience with you has almost run out." The Commander was set aback by this statement and waited a minute or two before speaking again.

"Y-yes Sire! We have him in custody..." A crash interrupted the Commanders victory statement, and he swiftly turned, swords in hand. His surviving scouts and warriors, as well as mage or two, stood behind him, ready to be the King's armed defensive force. The King himself raised his grand sword with both his hands. Etched on the blade was the sword's name, Alcedonia, a word which had scared generations of elves, dwarves, gnomes, cathams and humans that did not agree with who stood holding it. However, it did not stop a boy of merely seventeen years of age and his small group of forces, walking straight through the hall, swords raised; ready to engage in combat if necessary. A mage much older than her leader surrounded her side of the battle ground with an impenetrable force field, allowing the boy to negotiate without fear of attack.

"King Gonmo. Allow us to leave, now, or my forces will launch an attack big enough to flatten Pacis Quod Merisicordia once and for all." The mage who had set up the force field had her back turned to the King, so was safe to show her concern at the statement. She knew full well that the group they had with them, in this grand castle hall, was the biggest pack of warriors within their arsenal, and that the boy was taking a huge risk. They had neither the numbers nor resources to even attempt to touch the city. The king was not pleased. He was not about to give into a seventeen year old amateur though, and gave the order for Hacona's men to attack. The boy also gave the same order, and the hall soon became a battlefield. The mage who had once held up the force field had now abandoned the position of defence and was working strongly on the offensive side. Her fire set back the enemy but did not stop them. Her leader slashed his way to the king. He was red with anger and lashed out at the unsuspecting monarch. They parried and dodged blows in a world of their own, absent of the scene next to them. King Gonmo knew that the rest of the city would not have a clue of what was going on in the palace, but also was assured that he could never be beaten by a child. Sure enough, the king managed to place a deep slash in the boy's arm, but it did not even slow him down. But they were no match for the foe, as they were double in size, and the boy soon retreated back into his forces. He nodded toward the mage, who was more than happy to conjure a portal. But by now, her side was reduced to only five warriors, and she knew that her leader would take this too personally. She was the last to leave, but not before setting a fire that would burn their corpses, a final sign of respect...

King Kocure paced up and down his throne room. He seemed extremely restless as he almost ran along the hall. But a knock at the door interrupted his thought process and he quickly sat down.

"Enter," A human walked into the room, and he was recognisable as General Milriat. The general made a quick bow, before conveying why he had come to see the King.

"They have left, sire."

"Excellent. If they bring back the news I wish, then we may have a chance here, Milriat!" The general seemed doubtful, and the King saw it in his eyes straight away, "You do not think I shall get the result I wish for,"

"Forgive me sire, but how do we even know the creatures even exist? There is no solid evidence! And the children you have sent on this mission, do you believe they are up to the task?"

"For the first question, I answer you with a yes I am sure, and for the latter, my response is that they will not be alone. They will meet others and they will succeed." The King's aura of pride grew stronger when he spoke, and the General hurried out of the room.

Rhen awoke, startled to see Amie looking down on her.

"Rhen? Are you ok?"

"Yes...ummm..." Rhen got up and saw Samssoon on a hill in front of her, and she went to join him. Rhen was transfixed by the scene before her. The land was barren and charred, and the shells of huts and settlements were all that remained of the once massive trade community that was right outside of Malwrym. Even Samssoon felt the effect of the terrain. Nothing had touched the landscape surrounding Malwrym for centuries, and they had not known the war that many of their friends had been drawn into was going this badly. If Rhen was right, the last time that Malwrym had been hit was centuries ago, when King Damien Emerald Saunam had been on the throne, and that was during a time of civil war and utter destruction, before the alliances even existed.

"Amie, Samssoon, keep your weapons at the ready. You never know what we could encounter he-..." Rhen dropped off when she spotted some creatures rushing towards them at tremendous speed. Kobolds. The filthy creatures were too uncivilised to hold allies for long, though they had once been allied with the orcs. This had fuelled their hatred for elves, and they tried to breach through Malwrym whenever the city was vulnerable. But for all their disfigured appearances and brutal traditions, Kobolds were a worthy foe. They would not stop till they were killed. Amie had already drawn her bow and was waiting for Rhen to be ready before firing. Samssoon's choice of weapon- two axes, were already in his hands and he was ready for anything. Rhen had her hands raised, and on her nod, Amie fired...

In the horizon, the leader of the rebellion against Pacis Quod Merisicordia stood and watched. He saw a group of Kobolds descend upon three children of around his own age. He watched in amazement as they fought their way through the kobolds, but the boy knew the battle was not going in their favour. Faced with a tough decision, the boy debated what he should do. He was on his way to Malwrym to find new followers, and he could either complete that mission, or he could join the trio. But his choice was already made for him. The Kobolds were now winning with a clear advantage, and he only had one thing he could do. He ran at top speed toward them, and bashed in the skull of the first beast he came upon with his mace. His old mail tunic was immediately covered in blood and brain matter, but he did not care. He fought his way toward the elfin girl, who he presumed to be the leader. She looked upon him with an uncertain face, but she nodded. This boy may be their only hope for victory...

Rhen fought alongside the human who had joined them. She had abandoned casting as they were too close to her, and was now thrashing her two daggers at them. After a particularly difficult encounter with a kobold, she swiftly cut his throat. As the monster fell to the ground, Rhen saw a flashback of the first dream that had frightened her. But she shook her head before carrying on. Within minutes, thanks to the new addition to the party, the Kobolds were all either dead or dying. Before the boy even had a minute to breath, Rhen asked him a quick and blunt question.

"Who the hell are you?" The two of them laughed at each other. Amie and Samssoon exchanged quick glances, before joining in.

"Well, let me see," The boy began, "I am a paladin; I am the leader of the rebellion against Pacis Quod Merisicordia, and did I mention, my name is Avey!"...

Chapter 4: The Dragon Realises

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A howling wolf pack disturbed the quiet night. Crackling flames danced in front of Rhen as she pretended to examine the curious object they had found on a corpse of a troll. But her mind was otherwise engaged, and her thoughts were directed towards Avey. She somehow trusted him, and she hated it when she couldn't explain something like that. The human, she guessed, was about seventeen, and half of her told her he could never lead a force against Pacis quod Merisicordia, but the other half believed it. He wore a worn expression, that of a troubled leader, so, for now, she decided to trust him.

"So, Rhen, what are you and your friends doing out here?" Avey's voice interrupted Rhen's thought process, and she was startled to hear him speak.

"Ughh, I don't really know myself to be honest, we were sent out looking for something by Malwrym..." Rhen hesitated and wondered whether she should include the information she had been given in the dream, but she decided against it. She couldn't tell someone she had only known for a few hours something that she could tell her friends she had known for seven years.

"Mmmm...Rhen, what is that?" Avey pointed to the shard and Rhen shrugged. Just then, Amie and Samssoon came back from hunting, with empty hands.

"There's no animals left Rhen, we need to move soon or..." Samssoon noticed the shard Rhen had in her lap. "What's that?"

"A shard a found on one of the corpses, why?"

"That's a fragment from a dwarven broad sword..." Samssoon was becoming pale, and Rhen was a little confused so as to why. It wasn't unusual for races to get their hands on other races' equipment. "Those broad swords are kept hidden within the castle and are only used by skilled warriors, Kobolds should never be able to get their hands on them unless..."

"Unless?" Amie was as confused as Rhen, but Avey suddenly had a look of realisation.

"Unless they were being sold through a black market by a force that had penetrated Vetsom..." Samssoon slowly nodded. As a dwarf, he was proud of his city, even though he had never been there. Rhen nodded at Samssoon. She had made up her mind; they were going to Vetsom...

The secret force was slowly revealing itself. It no longer hid in the shadows from whence it came, but plagued the citizens of the world, invoking war and the slaughter of thousands. The orcs had bore the brunt of the influence and were wreaking havoc around the world. They fought amongst themselves, and their evil was spreading amongst the other races. The undead were crawling out from their usual hiding spots underground, and the elves were falling due to war. And the leader of such a force, just sat by, and watched...

Samssoon checked a blow. The troll before him suddenly burst into flames and began to scream, allowing him to slice the troll open and finish it. Corpses lay around with arrows piercing their chests, and Avey stepped over Amie's kills, while using his mace and limited magic to smash the remaining foes. The trolls were small in number and the teens soon defeated them. They were worn out, Samssoon most of all. He had never been to Vetsom, but he knew much of it, and it caused him grief to see that the roads leading up to the dwarves' proud city had become so dangerous. Rhen had not been troubled by dreams for a matter of days now and she was beginning to think that they would never return, so she had been able to put her mind at rest, and the magic was not as physically draining as it should have been. Amie was worried as she was running out of ammo, and she didn't know if they would reach Vetsom before she needed more, while Avey's thoughts remained well concealed. Paladins were apparently very good at keeping their own secrets. Rhen had been trying to figure him out, but she was finding it very hard, as his actions and speech did not portray anything useful. And as they set up camp for the night, Rhen once again tried to break the barrier Avey had sculpted around himself.

"Avey, where do you come from, I mean, originally."

"Long story really..." Avey was avoiding Rhen's questions and it was starting to annoy her. She was a somewhat stubborn person with a curious touch and it got on her nerves when she couldn't figure something out. So, she dropped the conversation and went to bathe in a nearby river. It was an abnormally hot day, and to Rhen it seemed that even the seasons had been affected by the never ending bloodlust. She looked down upon her arms and saw that the patterns had become more complex and reached further up her arms. She found this bizarre as she had been told her markings would never change, but she had more important things on her mind. They had no map, and as she had never been to Vetsom before, she was unable to open a portal there, as she did not know the magic codes. They only had Samssoon's memory to go by, and she feared that they were veering off course. Amie had asked if she could go ahead and see if she could find the way, but Rhen had refused instantly. Four of them were having trouble with the constant ambushes, let alone Amie all by herself. Rhen climbed out of the water, redressed, and went to see her friends who were setting up a makeshift camp. The light of day had faded, but there were no stars. The moon was bright in the sky, but its friends in the stars had abandoned it. "Even Chiansha's sky has been affected..." Rhen thought as she wondered over toward Amie, Samssoon and Avey. As she sat down, and looked at her fatigued friends, Rhen began to realise just how hard this was going to be.

Empty shells of once highly populated huts lay on a barren field. Ashes from the fire that destroyed the homes floated around in the air, before settling on the burnt ground. Crops that had once grown tall above the grass were now no more than piles of blackened dust, and the trees that had not been consumed by the fire, were burnt at the bottom, and were in danger of giving way any second. A group of humans watched as the last flames died out. At the front of the spectators, there stood their leader. His second in command approached him.

*"Avey, there are no survivors. With luck, this will convince Pacis Quod Merisicordia that we are serious."
"Good. We need that to continue with our work..." Avey signalled for his men to follow, and as they left, the last flame lost its grip on life...*

"AVEY!" Rhen shouted as she awoke. Breathing heavily, she checked that she hadn't woken the others. Thankfully, only Amie stirred, but did not wake up. Rhen picked up her weapons and cloak, as it was unusually cold. In the distance, Rhen could see tall buildings that glistened in the early morning light. The roads looked clear, and peaceful. The only conclusion that Rhen could come to was that the Vetsom guards had kept those roads clear, and that those buildings were the first glimpse of the dwarf city. She felt a small sense of achievement, as they had made it there. Rhen turned back to the camp, but the sight of Avey brought her dream flooding back. She had trusted him, but could someone who burnt down an entire village really be trusted? But she had little time to dwell on the subject, as she noticed her friends and Avey were waking up. Amie was soon on her feet, as Rhen had noticed, she never truly slept.

"Is that Vetsom?"

"Yup, I think so" Rhen and Amie smiled at each other, glad that they had managed to come so far. Avey and Samssoon were soon awake, and the four of them set off down the road, headed for the city in the distance...

Chapter 5: The Danger of the Dragon

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Dwarves dressed in uniforms bearing the insignia of the Emerald Alliance ran around frantically. They pushed past Rhen without a glance, while the four of them stared at the sight they held before them. Splintered wood covered the floor, and stones of all shapes and sizes were scattered about. A wall was crumbling, while the gates to the city were on their hinges. As the party clambered over the wreckage, they watched civilians walk quickly with their heads down and priests carrying the bodies of dead or wounded dwarves. Samssoon took the lead, as he knew the presence of a dwarf among two humans and an elf would put people more at ease. They headed toward the castle, with little time to admire the remaining buildings. But as they approached, they saw getting in would be easier than they thought. The doors were open and were unguarded, which was somewhat strange, as castles were very rarely left unprotected. They entered the building, and asked a nearby guard where they could find the king. The guard shrugged and pointed toward the door at the end of the corridor. Rhen for one found it strange. What force could have possibly done this much damage for the dwarves to leave their king unprotected? They knocked on the door, waiting for a response.

"Come..." The voice was rough and deep, and it spoke in the dwarven tongue. Only Rhen understood it, for it was customary for mages like her to learn all languages spoken by the members of the Emerald Alliances, and Rhen had also studied a few more than that. She gave an encouraging nod toward the others, who followed her into the room. The ceiling was low as it was built by dwarfs and the floors appeared to be made of pure gold. Maps with numerous markings hung on the walls, and a large table was situated in the middle of the room, which was circular in shape. At one end of the table sat a troubled dwarf. His armour was made of finely crafted materials, and his sword was immediately recognisable as Sawniea, the sword of the dwarven royal blood line. The King himself wore a worn expression, and he was fiddling with his thick, black beard. Rhen spoke in Dwarfish, so as to not sound hostile.

"Your majesty..." the King jumped in his seat and looked up to see the teenagers. Samssoon found himself shrinking in his King's presence.

"Yes?" the King regained his composure, and then carried on. "What is it you want? I'm afraid I am very busy..."

"We recovered this shard from a troll corpse on our way here." Rhen showed him the shard, and then spoke in the common language. "We... We wondered why, and how, it had gotten into the hands of a troll..."

"To tell the truth, young mage," The king gestured towards Rhen's markings, which made her feel somewhat uneasy, "We are under attack. The attacks mainly co-ordinated by the trolls." Rhen, Samssoon and Amie were all shocked beyond belief. But a huge explosion diverted them from continuing with the conversation, and made them instinctively reach for their weapons. They spun round to face a group of trolls approaching them and the King. Amie ran back and stood next to the King, bow in hand. Rhen joined her, while Samssoon and Avey held their heavy weapons with ease in their hands, ready to embrace the opposition in full on hand to hand combat. The trolls snarled and laughed at the small pack of fighters as they arranged their forces. The royal guard showed up to help the King, but there were very few of them, and the trolls outnumbered them at about five to one. But they were not about to give up. Avey lunged for the first troll, missing by barely an inch. But on the next strike the troll wasn't so lucky, as Avey struck him hard on the head, knocking the troll cold until Samssoon plunged his sword into its chest. Amie had problems with accuracy amongst the growing chaos. Rhen had the same problem, as she was unable to get a clear shot of the opposition without the danger of hitting Avey, Samssoon or the guards trying with all their might to protect their King. Amie abandoned the bow and drew her sword as the opponent grew closer. She slashed with accuracy at the hideous trolls, killing them before they could get anywhere near the King. Blood splattered everywhere as she cut the flesh of her victims. Rhen managed to launch a bolt of lightning at a line of trolls, frying them as they dropped down dead. But with all the success of the battle so far, it was a long way off over. The trolls just kept coming in large

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numbers, and the King's forces were having trouble holding them back, and they were soon overwhelmed. Rhen knew this was going to be close. But what she didn't know was that a troll was approaching fast from behind. She stabbed a troll in the heart, and turned round to see a dagger plunge toward her own chest...

Chapter 6: The Dragon Escapes

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King Timetory and his dwarves fought hard and long. He had noticed the dwarf among the group of teenagers that had approached him fought with honour, but the King had not recognised him as a member of any families he knew. Someone who fought so well was surely from a noble family. And as the King began to consider this, he saw a troll aim for the boy's friend. Too far to do anything, all King Timetory could do was watch as the dwarven boy arrived too late...

Samsoon dashed toward Rhen. He had not seen the troll before it had attacked Rhen, and he feared it was already too late. He saw blood stain Rhen's robe as the troll's dagger met with the flesh surrounding her heart. Samsoon charged and tackled the troll by jumping on top of it with tremendous force. The attacker was immediately knocked unconscious, and Samsoon hurried to see Rhen. She was on the floor, clutching her chest. But the dagger that had been used to puncture the skin was not still lodged between flesh and blood, and this made Samsoon hope that maybe it hadn't penetrated deep enough to kill her. Amie also came running over to see what was going on, and spoke in horror as she saw what had happened. "Rhen..." Amie could not finish her sentence as a lump in her throat prevented her from doing so. Rhen slowly removed her hand to show them the wound. It was bad, but Amie was sure that it had not done enough damage to kill Rhen. Amie nodded at Samsoon who reluctantly returned to fighting, and then dragged Rhen out of the room. Upon closer inspection, Amie was convinced that the blade that had belonged to a hideous troll had not killed her dearest friend. And as the sound of clashing metal from the other room soon died down, Rhen was almost able to smile. Even when death was so near, she had not been snatched from life's clutches...

"Ouch, don't do that!" Rhen flinched as Amie applied a dark green ointment to the mage's wound.

"Stop fidgeting,"

"Well don't put so much of that on me!" Rhen nodded toward the small tube of ointment on the table.

Samsoon and Avey were out helping the King with a small yet dangerous pack of trolls that had breached the gates, so Rhen had a chance to talk freely about Avey with Amie.

"Umm, Amie, what do you think of Avey?" Amie shrugged in response as she applied a small bandage to Rhen's wound.

"Seriously Amie..."

"Well, to be honest, I have no idea why you let him come with us!" Rhen had never heard her friend speak with such a blunt tone and she took it by surprise. "Rhen, I'm sorry..."

"No it's O.K. I'm having second thoughts too..."

"Why?"

"Well, he's too...too...too perfect," Rhen struggled to find a word that would not portray the fact she knew more because of her dream. She did not want Amie or all people to find out about the dreams.

"What makes you say that?" Amie finished with Rhen's bandage and collected her supplies before sitting down on a table opposite her friend.

"Well, he claims that he's the leader of this big rebellion thing, but you're a human Amie, *Pacis Quod Merisicordia* is too big for one boy to make even a dent..."

"*Pacis Quod Merisicordia*...Do you know what the name means in the old human tongue, Latin?"

"No..." Rhen thought hard and searched her brain for the answer, but she couldn't find it. It seemed odd to her as she had studied Chiansha's history extensively during her time at school.

"It means Peace and Mercy... The most ironic name in the history of Chiansha..."

"What makes you say that?"

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"After the battle for Zams-Shen, the humans who lost began to build that city, but it was based on warfare and slaughter. They have never been peaceful or merciful, and never will be..." Rhen and Amie both remained silent for a few moments, before continuing on the subject of Avey.

"Well... He just feels too good to me. We need to keep an eye on him..."

"I already have been Rhen..." Amie confessed, and the two looked at each other for a while, without talking. After spending a long time with someone, you can almost see straight through them, and that's what the two friends did while they waited for Samssoon and Avey.

"AMIE!" someone screamed for Amie in a voice that was immediately recognisable as Samssoon. Amie grabbed her bow and made for the door of the small palace room. Rhen struggled to get up to follow Amie, but Amie immediately pushed Rhen back down onto the bed.

"You were almost killed there, Rhen. I'm not letting you fight yet..."

"I'll stay back Amie..."

"No, you won't. If you dare try and follow me than I don't know what I'll do," Rhen sighed sat back down. She knew she wasn't going to win this one. But as Rhen listened to the viscous battle cries of the trolls mixed with the high spirited dwarven ones, she feared for her friends' life more than ever...

"Gotcha!" Amie exclaimed as her arrow hit the target perfectly. Avey made his way up to her as trolls approached the hunter. He might not feel inclined to reveal his secrets, but he wasn't about to let someone who had been so kind so as to accept him get hurt or possibly killed. He stood to the side of Amie and engaged in hand to hand combat with trolls who tried to stop the hunter who was slowly killing off their forces one by one. Amie watched Samssoon do so, and she found it strange that someone she was very unsure and uneasy about, should risk his life to help her. She knew full well that was what he was doing. She knew every time any of them engaged in combat that they could die. Rhen had proved that earlier in the morning. But as the trolls finally were all finished off, Amie realised that they were extremely lucky not to be dead already. They had been sent out on a fool's mission and were doomed to failure...

Chapter 7: The Dragon Wins and Loses

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King Timetory paced up and down in his study. The arrival of the four teenagers had brought a mixed response. Some were uneasy and felt as if they could be spies for the trolls, but on the other hand, they were helping the dwarves immensely, as they were extremely talented in the art of combat, and had come as a moral boost to many of his soldiers. The arrival of two humans, an elf and a dwarf together symbolised the relationship between the races, and it had made the dwarves realise that they were not alone. However, the King had his mind on more pressing issues. Four people were not going to overthrow an entire troll army. They had reports that the final siege was due tomorrow, and he was less than unprepared. He had begun arrangements and sent out for some aid from Malwrym, and Timron, city of the Gnomes, but so far he had received no response. He didn't expect to hear from the Gnomes, as from all accounts their city was in disarray. "Something to do with a missing member of the royal blood line, apparently," the King thought.

"Sire! Sire!"

"What is it, Parmen? I'm afraid I'm busy preparing for the assault tomorrow..."

"That's just it, sire. The trolls are approaching here, now!"

"What?!"

"Our scouts have just spotted them!"

"Assemble every force that can be spared. Do not leave any part of this city undefended. Gather the civilians into the assembly room, and do it NOW!" King Timetory picked up Sawniea, and then left his room. It was time...

"Oh for goodness sake Amie I'm fine!" Rhen cried out in frustration. After they had been told Vetsom would soon come under heavy attack, Rhen had tried to convince Amie to let her fight. Amie was as stubborn as any other hunter and she was determined not to be moved on the subject. Thankfully for Rhen, Samsoon decided to intervene.

"Amie we are going to need every sword we've got, or in Rhen's case, magic. Very few dwarves have the gift of magic she will be of great help!" Amie gave in reluctantly. Two against one was not good if it flared up into a full blown argument. She left to get some more arrows, and Samsoon, Avey and Rhen were left in a room together. Rhen stared involuntarily at Avey. She still hadn't been able to figure him out, and she was close to asking him point blank what he was hiding. He wouldn't answer any of her questions. He only seemed to talk to Samsoon, but as far as Rhen could tell, Avey hadn't told him much either. Rhen detached herself from her stare and gazed down at her markings. They had changed again. A little spooked by the combination of strange dreams and impossible changes to her mage identity, she left the room, soon followed by Avey and Samsoon. They heard a loud horn as soon as they stepped outside. The battle of Vetsom had begun...

The ground suddenly burst into flames. The dwarven soldiers were somewhat scared at first, but they noticed only the trolls and the sprinkling of Orcs were affected. The fire was somewhat short lived, and it only killed a few of the attackers, but it was a start. Explosions went off left right and centre as the trolls tried to breach the walls. Rhen gave everything she had to setting out curse after curse, and setting troll after troll on fire or frying their brains with electricity. Amie happily shot out the new arrows at the unsuspecting trolls. She missed occasionally, however a miss was soon followed by a direct hit. Avey smashed brains and flesh as he engaged in combat with the uncivilised creatures, usually back to back with Samsoon, who wielded his sword with great strength. The King himself was forced to stay back in order to avoid injury, but from where he was, he did a great deal of damage. Despite his age, the King was still as stealthy and had as much strength in his muscles as any other dwarf. But despite these individual successes, they were still losing the battle. They were outnumbered heavily, (by about ten to one), but they did have one advantage-they fought together. The trolls

mainly went their separate ways, killing on their own. The teens soon began to realise this was why the trolls had to have so many in each army, because if they did not they would have no hope. The trolls seemed to try to exhaust the opposition into defeat. But it was not working here. Between the mages, hunters, warriors and paladins, the dwarves were slowly turning the tide of battle. The pace of the battle quickened, and before long, over half of the trolls were dead or dying. But there was still a long way to go. The dwarves soon hit a stumbling block as the trolls were now approaching on all sides, closing in on the army.

"CLAR SON'ACH MUQUAN!" bellowed the King. The ancient battle cry put spirit back into the dwarves' blood, and they fought ferociously, decimating the trolls quickly. The creatures began to retreat slowly, but they did so with a grin on their faces. And as the other dwarves cheered at the victory, King Timetory knew something wasn't right. Rhen saw it in his face and she made her way over to him.

"DIE!" cackled a troll hunter in a menacing tone. It launched an arrow that pierced the King's chest, who fell to the ground instantly. The crowd screamed and shot down the troll. Civilians and soldiers alike fell into complete mayhem; running, crying, screaming and trying to reach the King. Priests rushed forward, but they knew it was already too late to do anything. The King's army general and adviser had not only his trusted friend's death in his mind, but also who would now control Vetsom, with no heirs to the throne that had been in the King's family for generations. He reached down toward the King, feeling the life force leave the body, and grew pale. Amie, Avey, Rhen and Samssoon stood behind the crowd after being forced back by the grieving dwarves. A monarch's death was a tragedy, whether of your own race or not. The terrible shrieks of the dwarves chilled the blood of the travellers. Rhen shook her head and moved further away from the mourning crowd, followed swiftly by Amie. Samssoon stood there, paralysed, next to the human he was slowly coming to call a friend. The scorching daylight soon became a peaceful, cool night, and the crowd thinned as they retreated to their homes, minds numb with the prospect of the events of the previous hours. Couriers left the city with notifications of the King's death, headed for Malwrym, Zams-Shen, Timron and Abasham. The citizens of Vetsom wept in their sleep as the night drifted on, wondering what would become of them now...

Chapter 8: The Dragon Loses

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"WHAT? That's impossible!" Samssoon exclaimed at the dwarven general.

"No, it is not. The King suspected it, and had me check it out. It is true..." Samssoon bit his lip hard, drawing blood, and turned his back on the general. He was quiet and secretive, but at heart he was a warrior. He would not show any weakness to anyone, be they friend or foe. The dwarf left the room, headed for the room in which he and his friends had been staying. The streets outside were silent, and could not a single sound could be heard from outside the castle walls. Only two days after King Timetory's death, the city was still covered in a cloud of dark emotion. The dwarves who stepped out of their houses dressed only in bleak, black clothing, although most of the citizens stayed indoors, afraid of walking on the blood stained streets. The army would normally have a huge celebration after doing something as big as driving the troll menace from their city, but instead they had gone straight home to their families and were adopting the same behaviour as everyone else. Even the many children of Vetsom had felt the loss of the King, and were mourning along with everyone else. The wounded stayed silent, wishing to let the spirit of their King rest in peace. Rhen had noticed how distant Samssoon was becoming, and it grieved her to see her friend so distressed. Her own hatred for the trolls had buried even deeper in her heart when she had seen the lost faces of the dwarven citizens. She found it hard to believe that the barbaric trolls had managed to pull together a force that had done so much damage to a major city, and knew they had to have had some sort of outside help. When he entered the room, Rhen attempted to spark up a conversation, but failed as she realised that his meeting with the General had probably not been great. Suspecting that the news had been something to do with either their presence at Vetsom, or possibly Samssoon's missing parents, she left him alone, and wandered around the castle till she found Amie, who was in the darkened throne room. No candles had been lit within the room since the death of the King, and all but one of the windows had been blacked out. The one that still let light through was behind the throne, and cast a long shadow of the empty chair.

"What are you doing here, Rhen?" Somewhat startled that Amie had been able to tell Rhen had come into the room, she replied only after a few seconds of surprised silence.

"Looking for you... in fact, why are you here?"

"I..." Amie hesitated "I came because it is quiet here..."

"But, Amie, it is quiet everywhere. The city is silent," Rhen replied, confused by the strange answer.

"Not to me it isn't... It's hard to explain..."

"Ok... I think we should leave within a few days Amie. The dwarves cannot help us. I do not want to keep Samssoon here for much longer to be honest; it worries me to see him like this. He is a quiet person by nature, yet his behaviour recently has been strange even for him..."

"Yes... However, I did get a chance to listen in a little on Samssoon's conversation with the general..." Rhen shook her head with slight annoyance (she thought Amie really needed to learn the meaning of privacy), but let Amie continue, "I didn't hear it all, but I did here something about who is to take over the throne-..."

"WHAT?! Damnit, Amie why didn't you tell me earlier?" With this Rhen sped out of the room leaving a confused and worried hunter behind...

That night Samssoon turned uncomfortably in his bed. He was exhausted yet could not sleep as his brain would not be quiet. His head pounded, and even this severe headache could not put his mind off the thoughts that were running through his head. Eventually, he tossed aside the covers and dressed into his armour. He lit a single candle and glared at the parchment in front of him. The handwriting was obviously that of a dwarven scribe, and as he read, it annoyed him that he was only able to understand the dates and names on the family tree before him. Expecting never to come close to Vetsom, Samssoon had never learnt his own race's language, and now it stung his mind to think of the numerous opportunities to learn it that he had wasted. Just then, the

door flung open, and Samssoon reached for his axe. He was about to strike at the intruder when he heard a familiar voice.

"Samssoon!" Rhen cried out, a look of anger on her face. "What are you reading?" Before he had a chance to answer, Rhen ran past him and over to the wooden desk, examining the writing quickly. As she reached the last name, it explained it all to her.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Rhen whispered.

"I... I wanted to think about it before I told anyone..."

"Samssoon, surely this is impossible?" Rhen muttered. She re-read the entry in front of her. "Samssoon Urmon, Rhei ot Gkni Bacces Timetory." It read in dwarfish. In the common tongue however, it read, "Samssoon Urmon, Heir to King Bacces Timetory"...

Chapter 9: The Dragon Falls

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The floor was littered with dwarven corpses. Once great buildings were now reduced to mere piles of ashes. A few injured dwarves tried to stand, to leave this wicked place, and pulled themselves along with every strength they had left in their bodies. For some, it was too much, and they soon collapsed on the floor, either dead or dying. The rubble of the once magnificent castle lay still. Only one body stood out among the crowd. This body was clothed handsomely, despite the recent financial difficulties of Vetsom. His head was covered by a precious crown, its jewels hanging on by mere will. The face of this particular dwarf had been much welcome in dwarven society. He had had the power and the popularity, as well as the strength and intelligence to run the city with ease. However, nothing could have stopped the force that had almost completely wiped out the dwarf race. And the corpse of King Samssoon Urmon proved that fact to any unwilling to accept it...

On awakening, Rhen found herself face down toward the floor, with a terrible pain striking her head. Her palms were covered in sweat, as well as her forehead, and she noticed how pale her face was when she struggled up off the floor and looked in the mirror. Rubbing her eyes, Rhen once again saw the awful visions of her dearest friend's corpse. "It's nothing. Just my imagination..." She said aloud to herself, but she doubted every single word. The dreams had reappeared, but they were no longer of the past...

Samssoon sat still, running the words over and over in his head. "I am King, I am King," He stared in silence at the marble floor beneath him, with Avey by his side. The two had sat, speechless, in the Court room for hours. It was Avey who decided to disturb the air with the sound of his voice.

"Samssoon, you have to do this..." Samssoon looked up in horror at Avey.

"No..."

"Yes. I know it's hard, but these dwarves need someone new. Someone not plagued by the politics of running a city!"

"What these dwarves need is stability. I cannot give them that!"

"Yes you can! You've just proved it yourself! You know what these people need, and you know deep down how to give it them! Look, I could be wrong, I've only known you for three weeks, but Rhen and Amie think you can do it too, and they've both known you for years! What I do know, is that if you don't do this, and something happens to this city that you could have prevented, you will never be able to forgive yourself. Trust me, if I know something, it is that guilt is deadly, and you won't come through the other side the same."

Samssoon stood up, and stared intently at the paladin.

"I need to think..." Samssoon muttered and walked hastily out of the room. Avey looked down at his hands and thought of the three friends who had so recently accepted him. He wondered how he could have so easily tricked them into believing his falsehoods. Some of it, of course was true, but he hadn't even told them his real name. Smiling slyly at his success, he wandered out of the room, looking for Rhen...

Amie watched the city as it rebuilt itself. The pale faces of dwarves that roamed the streets haunted her dreams, while the shocked faces of those of other races felt the dwarves' pain caused her to feel the loss of the King all over again. The children had resumed their studies, but it was still as quiet as ever on the lonely streets. No one ever spoke or even acknowledged each other's presence, still silently mourning the death of their lost King. Blocks of stone were stacked as high as the eye could see, while tons of labourers tried to save the remnants of the demolished and charred buildings. A particular sight caught Amie's eye; Samssoon was roaming the streets, hindered by a large group of rowdy dwarves. She frowned and left the room, and then the building, looking for the party surrounding her poor friend. Of course, she should have suspected this. The dwarves would never be happy accepting a King who couldn't even speak their own language. It was true that Amie and Rhen knew that their long and close friend could do the job, but the general population would never

be so easy to persuade.

"Hey!" Amie exclaimed as a particularly ugly, (and more than likely, very drunk), dwarf punched her in the face for absolutely no reason. She returned the gesture willingly, and the exchange of blows soon turned into a full blown fight. The whole mob was against her, but Amie was still able to easily fend them off. Samssoon noticed the brawl behind him, and instinctively reached to fight, restraining himself only when he saw what was actually happening. Sighing, he made his way calmly over to Amie, parting the sea of drunken dwarves to clear a path to his companion.

"Stop!" He commanded. "Look at you, brawling like common street thugs!" Amie blushed slightly as she knew full well there had been no need for her to react to the first blow. "Leave it!"

"Why sh-should we listen to you? Shupid dwarf, calling shourself our King!" The first dwarf who had assaulted Amie spoke with a slurred tone.

"I do not call myself your King! I have never said that! I cannot replace King Timetory, nor can I bring him back. But I can pick up where he left off. So shut up, and go away, damn you!" The dwarf stumbled away, annoyed by Samssoon's speech. "Are you OK, Amie?"

"Yes! That was great Samssoon! Why do you doubt yourself so much?"

"I don't anymore. Finally, my decision has been made. To be honest, I think I knew the answer would be yes all along!" They smiled and the laughed as they walked back toward to castle. Rhen had been observing the scene from her window, (she hadn't been out of the room since the morning; she was still pretty frightened after the dream), and smiled to herself. She knew full well her friend could do this.

A knock at the door alerted her to the world around her.

"Urr, come in!" Rhen called. Avey Entered, sword in hand, a grave expression on his solemn face.

"Rhen, I need to talk to you," Rhen nodded so he continued; "I will go straight to the point. You don't trust me, do you?" she was slightly taken aback by his blunt words. She stood speechless, staring at him. "I thought so..." He turned to leave.

"Wait!" He looked back at her, "It isn't a matter of trust, Avey. It's just we don't know each other well at all, and you are already laying down your life for us. Why?"

"I...I wanted you to help me. I thought that if I helped you, you would return the favour..." Once again he turned toward the door, but this time, Rhen let him leave, doubts crawling into her mind...

Chapter 10: The Dragon Protects

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***PLEASE NOTE:IF YOU READ CHAPTER 9 BEFORE AND I HAVE JUST
UPDATED YOU, YOU WILL NEED TO REREAD IT, I HAD TO CHANGE IT:)***

The coronation was a fast and private affair, once Samssoon had agreed to become King. For the leaders of Vetsom were afraid of leaving the city without leadership for too long. Only a few guests were present, all of whom were parliament members, apart from Rhen, Amie and Avey. They filed into a grand hall hidden within the castle, and took their seats. Very few spoke, all acknowledging the importance of the day. The religious part of the ceremony had all ready been completed behind closed doors, and the dwarves, humans and single elf in the room all held their breath as the crown was slowly lowered.

Rhen felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. Something was behind her, something hostile. She turned discreetly, but saw nothing. Yet she could feel it, feel a presence that was not meant to be there.

Rhen stood up, and aimed a fireball against what looked like a simple, closed door, and the whole room stood up to face her target. The figure standing before her had not been touched by her attack, confusing and irritating her. Through her thoughts, she only just managed to get to the ground in time to avoid the knock back spell. Getting up from the floor, Rhen saw that no one else had been so fortunate.

"Kalasagg! She screamed, and a shield surrounded the company, allowing enough time for her to speak to the mage before her.

As the smoke cleared from the destruction of the door, the figure in the doorframe was strangely familiar to her.

"High...Sorcerer?" Rhen's confusion was apparent on her face. The sorcerer took one look at Rhen, and vanished...

"Who?" Amie questioned Rhen.

"Look, I can't tell you his name, I'm not allowed, and all I know is that if he is against us, we are in trouble. If he is against us, then most of Canashara's magic is against us."

"What I don't understand is why the hell he was there? It wasn't like he did any major damage, apart from some bruises and a few minutes of being blacked out..." Avey commented.

"He could have done much more than that if what Rhen says is true..."

"Indeed he could have done, Amie. I mean, I'm not that scary, to be honest. Yet I detected a flicker of recognition within his eyes..."

"This is stupid. Why are we still here?" Rhen shot a fierce glance at Avey.

"Because Samssoon wants us here. Got a problem with that?" He shook his head.

"Am I interrupting anything?" a voice came, emerging in the doorframe. Samssoon stood, looking at Avey uncomfortably. Avey had a guilty look, but soon overcame it. The dwarf, still dressed in the ancient coronation robes, sat down next to Rhen, exhausted.

"Why is it that MY coronation is sabotaged? I don't need any more unrest. I don't need these dwarves left unable to trust me..."

"Samssoon-I..."

"Samssoon, we need to leave as soon as possible," Amie's comment shocked all but the dwarf for whom it was aimed.

"I agree. I really will miss you guys, but the people can't sleep easy knowing that a group of unofficial mixed races is in the city..." Rhen nodded, but left the room without showing her face. Avey left Amie's room too, leaving only two members of the group together. That number reduced to one when Samssoon left to get to "Official Business".

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Amie stood and stroked the arch of her bow. Something wasn't right. Why couldn't Rhen tell them who, or what, the being was?

Chapter 11: The Dragon Sees

The arrow smacked into the soft fur and pierced the flesh of a young lion cub. He let out a small yelp before falling, dead, from the impact. Amie sighed and moved forward to collect her kill. She yanked the arrow from the corpse and examined the damage.

"Damn..." she muttered. That was the third arrow that she had lost in the space of two days.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Rhen and Avey crowding over a map. It just wasn't the same without Samssoon.

Amie discarded the arrow and made her way over to her comrades. As she approached, they fell silent, letting her sit down before continuing. Rhen saw Amie glance nervously at Avey, but dismissed it quickly. She needed to focus, and their hostility was not the top priority.

"Amie, did you get a look at the terrain?" After placing the dead lion beside her, Amie answered.

"Yes. Mostly rocky, nothing we can't handle."

"Hostile?" Avey put in. Amie shook her head and began to work on the corpse.

"Rhen, out of interest, how do you actually know where we are going?" Avey enquired.

"The King gave me this. It doesn't tell me what to look for, but it does tell me where to look for it," Rhen, of course, did know, her dream had given her a good idea of what it was, but she was reluctant to say so. "Samssoon asked around for me, there's nothing valuable in Vetsom apart from gold,"

"Where's next on the list?"

"Pacis Quod Merisicordia..." Avey turned pale and nodded, before moving away from his companions. Rhen turned to Amie. "What the hell is up with you?" The hunter shrugged, and Rhen sighed. "Amie, he's helping us. If anything was going to happen, it would have happened already!"

"Fine, believe it if you want,"

"Look, I'm not replacing Samssoon with Avey, but we can't afford to turn down any help,"

"How, in the name of Chiansha, is this task going to be possible with an army, let alone three of us, if we don't know what we're looking for?"

"I do-," Rhen began. She had said enough to draw Amie's attention away from her work,

"What? Wait, I know! It's these dreams isn't it?"

"What dreams?"

"Oh come on, Rhen. I'm not stupid. We all know they've been bothering you. My magic's enough to tell me a little bit more, like how you're a Se-,"

"I'm not a Seer!" Rhen hissed, "Don't even say things like that..."

"Why? It's true! But that isn't the point!" Amie hushed her voice a little before continuing, "If you know what it is, then you have to tell us!" She nodded at Avey, "Both of us, despite whether we are to be trusted or not, we are all on the same side at the moment!"

"I know! But the truth is I'm not even sure if I'm right anyway!"

"You're a-," Amie checked herself, "If you're a Seer, then of course you're right!"

"I'm not a Seer Amie! But in any case I can't be right about this. The object that the King wants cannot be real..."

"Oh come on Rhen, as if that's going to stop me asking. Just tell me!" Rhen shook her head. Fuming, Amie chucked the half skinned lion onto the floor and stormed off. This is going to take a hell of a lot of organising, Rhen thought...

He laughed as he watched the dwarves squirm. The fire spreading at their feet began to lick their toes, providing a sadistic thrill for him. 'Magic is a truly wonderful tool,' he thought.

"High Sorcerer!" he spun around to see Yulia standing behind him.

"Yulia. How goes training?"

"Fine..." Yulia's nervousness about the now screaming dwarves was very apparent. "The recruits show promise,"

"What of her?"

"She is on the right path, High Sorcerer. In fact, it will be no more than a day before she reaches us," in a hushed tone, she added, "Do you think she can hear us now?"

"Oh, I'm counting on it. The more she fears, the easier she will fall!"

"What of her allies?" the High Sorcerer chuckled,

"They won't be her allies for much longer. The one curse of someone with such talent is an amazing ability to alienate people. One which I myself work hard to avoid," Yulia prevented herself from voicing her opinion about this, instead saying,

"But she is dangerous. You said so yourself..."

"Dangerous, but mortal. Thousands of the immortal against one mere mortal? A blood bath worth watching, I think..." The dwarves had by now ceased to scream. The High Sorcerer scowled; he had expected them to last longer than that. "Dismissed, Yulia,"

"Yes, sir..." Yulia cautiously backed out. She breathed a sigh of relief as she closed the door behind her. The whole world's going to hell...' she thought as she moved away...

Rhen awoke with a start, much like the nights before they had arrived at Vetsom. Much to her relief, Amie and Avey were fast asleep. She rubbed her eyes and pondered the dream. Yulia... Why did she know that name?

She didn't have long to think about it, however, before she noticed what was ahead of them, far in the distance...

Chapter 12: Qusumsix

"General!" King Samssoon bellowed

"Sire!"

"Where are they?"

"Who?"

"You know who, General. Stop playing games with me,"

"If you mean the approaching training camp, then they've been delayed until further notice..." Samssoon looked up at his General from his papers.

"Do you know how long?" The General, a confused look on his face, returned Samssoon's look.

"No idea, Sire..."

"Very well... Dismissed..." The General stiffly bowed and made to move out of the room. "Wait, hang on..."

"Sire?"

"Send me the best available scouting group as soon as you can,"

"Yes Sire..."

"And General, I mean it. I want the best..." Once again, the General went to leave, and this time Samssoon let him...

"Amie! Get up, now!"

"What the hell Rhen?" murmured Amie as she rolled over.

"You said the terrain was clear!"

"It is, for God's sake. Let me sleep..."

"Amie, wake up!" Rhen shook Amie hard, and she eventually gave in. As Amie tried to clear her head, Rhen went to wake Avey.

"Avey?" she called out to an empty space. "Avey?" she called as loud as she dared; it was too dark not to be cautious.

Amie wandered over to Rhen, her bow in hand.

"Seriously, Rhen, what's up?"

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"Where's Avey?" Rhen asked, but it was clear that it wasn't a response to Amie's question.

"Probably having a midnight stroll," the sarcasm in her voice annoyed Rhen more than she showed, "The real question is why you woke me up at this God awful hour for no reason!" Just then, Avey approached them from behind, making Rhen jump when she saw him.

"Rhen?"

"Stay in the camp Avey, you don't know what's out there..."

"Rhen, what is wrong?" Amie asked for the third time, "You look like you've seen a camp of ghosts or something..." Rhen pointed over the hill.

At least ten white tents were standing, the largest being at the centre. The formation was almost circular. Sentries had been posted at what appeared to be an entrance, and several robed beings were roaming the camp, occasionally exchanging stiff nods.

What was really intriguing was the variation of races. Humans and elves mixed with orcs and trolls. Although it was rare that the different races acknowledged each other, there was no obvious hostility.

The one thing that caught Amie's attention, however, were the flying banners. A blue canvas was accompanied by what, from afar, looked like a swirling pattern. Amie knew that, when up close, it was a much different picture.

"Oh," Amie muttered. Nodding at her, Rhen turned to Avey, who was oblivious to what the symbol meant.

"Avey, meet the Qusumsix..." Avey stared at the camp, shocked...

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