

3

Everyone in the realm felt it. A wave of darkness washed over the land, and as it passed, it chilled the spine. The sky darkened. The trees took on an eerie appearance. Flowers shriveled up and died. The howl of the wind seemed to be alive and suffering. Dogs and wolves howled back at it. Other animals ran away from it. The celebrations immediately stopped in every city in Mythos. People looked around at each other and up at the skies to find the source of the darkness. It did not show itself. Across the realm, evil creatures, hidden for so long, sensed the change as well and emerged from their holes. Some people panicked and swore the end of the world had come. They didn't realize that the world ending would be a blessing compared to what was about to come.

In Aspiria, many people flocked to the palace of Mornak only to be told that he was not there. They did not take the news well. Some tried to force their way in, and the palace guards had difficulty trying to stop them without seriously hurting anyone. Rumours of the cause circulated until, inevitably, someone suggested that the Hall of Shadows had been opened. Then a city, once united in celebration, united in panic. The city guards moved in quickly to try to stop it. People were told to return to their homes, but many did not listen. Fighting quickly broke out, and the guards were forced to hurt innocent people to keep them from harming each other.

The mention of the Hall did not go ignored, however. Guards took to the walls immediately; their sights set in the direction of Shadow Wood. For a time all they could see was a gloomy sky accented by the occasional lightning bolt striking the ground and destroying whatever it had struck. Tensions mounted when a lookout spotted movement in the direction of the Wood. Eventually, their fears were realized when an army marched from its direction. Legions of Shadow Warriors approached in formation, but not alone. From the fringes of their ranks, other creatures began to appear—dark creatures attracted by the scent of evil from the army. Ogres, trolls, ettins, and lizardmen soon joined the troops. The army grew as it approached, and the nerve of the guards slowly diminished. The walls of the city stood tall and strong, however, and the army brought no siege weapons. They felt safe, for now.

At the head of the army strolled the Shadow Lord. Beside him marched the general of the Shadow Warriors, Askar. Askar had gray skin like the Shadow Lord, but with a bluish hue. Blue beetle-like eyes peered from a wide face with a curved nose and crooked elflike ears. His dark brown hair ran in strips along his head from front to back where it merged into a short ponytail. Stocky and muscular, Askar had hands almost like claws. He wore blood red clothes over which hung plates of blue gray armour with golden trim. He had a sword sheathed in a scabbard on his hip, but he also held a large spiked mace with a rectangular head. The mace's metal handle hinted that it should be difficult to heft, yet he carried it as easily as a torch.

The army halted before the city—just out of range of the archers and catapults. Askar ordered a halt, but a few monsters on the outer edges, anxious for battle, began a charge of the city. Arrows cut them down in seconds, and a cheer went up from the defenders on the walls. The Shadow Lord shook his head in disgust.

“A foolhardy attempt, my lord,” Askar agreed, “but without siege weapons, how are we to get any closer?”

“Stay with me,” the Shadow Lord ordered. Then he and Askar left the ranks to approach the city.

Following tradition, two others—in this case, the captain of the city guards and a city diplomat—exited the city to meet them in parley.

“You would do well to turn your army around and leave this place,” the diplomat began. “No army has ever penetrated our walls.” He gestured around to the fallen monsters. “And that is what happened to all those who have tried.”

The Shadow Lord smiled. “I have come to make you an offer. Open your gates to us, and the lives of most of your people will be spared. We do not wish to destroy this city. We only seek something within its walls. Be wise and spare the lives of your people.”

The captain laughed at the absurdity of the statement. A hundred archers had their bows aimed right at the Shadow Lord and Askar. A dozen wizards also manned the wall with spells readied. Even with siege weapons and magic, it would take days, if not weeks, to breach the wall if such a feat were even possible. “Why in the hells don’t you—” he began, but the diplomat cut him short.

“We wish no conflict with you. We wish only to live in peace. Please turn your army around and leave this field, or we will not be responsible for what happens to them.”

“Clear a path to the palace,” the Shadow Lord ordered.

“We will not!” yelled the captain.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” the Shadow Lord stated.

The great wall of the city then shook. The diplomat and guard turned to see what caused the disturbance. A section of the wall thrust out, taking the form of a great stone arm, and soon so did another. The wall above the arms crumbled to the ground, taking with it the men who had been standing there.

A giant head pulled free, its body following. It quickly became apparent that an entire section of the wall from top to bottom had come alive. Once free, it had an oddly comical look—almost like a giant cardboard cutout of a four-armed man—but this stone cutout towered five storeys high. The Shadow Lord had used the pretense of parley to get close enough to the wall to use the magic of the staff on it.

The stone giant left a great hole where it had been—easy access for the Shadow Lord's army into the city. But the army did not move. No one was willing to get in the giant's way. The guards on top of the walls ran in blind panic as sections around the giant collapsed as well. Screams of fear emanated from inside the city, and Askar smiled when he saw the fleeing citizens. Not everyone ran though. Wizards cast spells that melted or burned small sections of the stone giant, but the damage did little to slow it. Sergeants rallied their men to bring catapults to bear on it. Some even tried to attack it with swords and spears. The giant ignored them as it smashed open an even greater hole in the wall, taking out some wizards it seemed to find annoying. Then it began to make its way toward the palace, clearing a path as the Shadow Lord had ordered. People dashed about, trying not to be trampled by the giant, but it paid them no heed. It merely swept trees, buildings, and anything else out of the way so that the Shadow Lord could proceed unhindered.

While the captain and the diplomat stood stunned by the spectacle, Askar leapt forward, dispatching them both. Then he raised his mace high, and the army of the Shadow Lord surged forth.

* * *

Dara ran for as long as she could and then collapsed. She didn't know about pacing herself. She didn't know about moving stealthily. She was only eleven, and she was scared. So she stuck to the road to keep from getting lost, but that made her easy to spot, and knowing that only added to her fear. Mornak had meant for her to be accompanied by guards, not for her to go on her own without protection. He thought she would have summoned several of them to escort her. She knew they were trustworthy. But he had told her what to do, not what he meant for her to do. In her urgency, she had not thought it through. She had done what he had said, not what he had meant, and so, alone and frightened, she fled through a world that had just become a realm of shadows.

Hearing a cart coming up from behind her, she dashed off the road. Staying low, she didn't even check to see who drove the cart. She wouldn't even look up from the ground. She was too frightened. If someone had jumped off the cart, he could have walked right up to her, and she wouldn't have seen him looking down at her. Luckily, no one did. Her heart raced in her chest. Her stomach seemed to flip inside her. She knew she could not make it to Kashla on her own. She needed someone to protect her.

Making her way farther from the road to some nearby trees, she pulled out the Scroll again.

“Papa, I’m scared. I need help,” she said to it but received no response. She sat against one of the trees and cried. She cried as quietly as she could, but she couldn’t stop for a long time.

Then she remembered her father’s words. *I have transferred my power into the Scroll, and only you can use it.*

Perhaps she could use the Scroll to protect herself. The problem was that she knew only one spell. *Maybe that’s all I need*, she thought. She could summon butterflies, and her father said that one day she would be able to summon people. With the power of the Scroll, perhaps she could do that now. But whom could she summon? Who would be strong and wise enough to protect her other than her father? The answer came at once. She placed the Scroll in her lap and began to cast, pulling its energy into herself. Focusing her thoughts, she summoned the leader of the Axemen.

* * *

When Alex arrived in the studio, everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at him. Tanya broke the silence yelling, “You made it!” as she ran up and hugged him.

“Once in a lifetime,’ you said,” he told her as he hugged her back.

Tanya smiled, kissed his cheek, and then rushed back to her keyboards. Alex followed her onto the stage. The full studio was the size of a classroom, only with a higher ceiling and a stage set against the back wall. A glass wall down the middle of the room separated the sound stage from the recording booth, in which the producer, a techie, and what looked to Alex like the producer’s personal assistant sat. The assistant, a stocky nervous man, looked as though his main job was to suck up to his boss. The producer, a big man with a large gut, wore jeans, a dress shirt, and sports jacket. He hadn’t shaved this morning.

Maybe we weren’t considered worth the effort, Alex thought but then pushed the negative thought from his mind. He climbed onto the stage and knocked fists with Glenn, the drummer, a small Filipino with short hair and a goatee. He nodded to Scott. With his height and broad shoulders, Scott looked more like a teen heartthrob than did Alex. Dark brown hair hung to his shoulders and framed chiseled features that made the teen look a few years older. He wore the same clothes as Alex, but he also sported a black leather jacket over his T-shirt. Big Bamm, a Jamaican-born bass guitarist, towered over the other members of the band. He dressed like a cross between a hippie and a Rastafarian. His large Afro lifted skyward, pushed up by a large red headband. Bamm patted Alex on the back as the lead Axeman took center stage and plugged in his guitar.

Alex checked the microphone and then addressed the producer. “I’d just like to say thank you for seeing us on such short notice ...” He realized he didn’t know the man’s name. “Sir.”

The producer nodded slightly but didn’t say anything. It suddenly occurred to Alex that this guy might only be listening to them to gain points with Tanya’s dad. He looked as though he didn’t really want to be here, and

from the expression on his face, he didn't expect much from them. Alex realized that if he didn't play his heart out, they had as much chance of getting a contract as he had of passing the history exam. Worse, he just realized that he didn't know what song to play. A trickle of sweat ran down his back, giving him a wet tickling sensation. He turned back to Tanya, who mouthed "Little Rose." He nodded and addressed the others.

"Ready, guys?" Alex asked. The others nodded.

"One, two, three, four!"

Alex struck his first chord hard so hard that the amp shorted out. An electric surge raced through his guitar, throwing Alex back with surprising force. He tumbled off the stage, somehow getting his foot caught in his book bag. Despite the shock of the current in his body, he had enough sense to know the fall would hurt. He braced himself for the expected impact. It never came.

The next thing Alex knew, he was tumbling through some sort of vortex. The studio pulled away from him into the distance as his body seemed to stretch out toward some unknown destination.

I've been sucked into a black hole! he thought.

He saw Tanya's concerned face in the distance, but she already seemed a world away. He reached for her anyway, but by then, there were only swirling colours and a feeling of nausea. Then, just as suddenly as things had started, they stopped.

Alex hit the ground—actual ground—not the floor. He sat on his butt outside somewhere—no longer in the studio, no longer even in the city.

"What the heck just happened?" he exclaimed.

Alex stood up and looked around. He realized that he was alone and saw no familiar landmarks of any kind. Even the sky, which had been clear blue on his bike ride in, was a cloudy metal gray now; the area seemed unusually dark for midmorning. His guitar hung around his neck with two broken strings. His books littered the ground around his bag. He stood in a small grove of trees just before a dark forest that shot off in either direction as far as he could see. The woods made him nervous, so he took a step away from them. The branches of the trees almost seemed to be reaching out toward him.

Not a good place to go, he thought and turned around. Behind him in the distance, he thought he could make out a dirt road across a small field. Something in this place—other than the fact that he couldn't possibly be there—felt wrong; something made him shiver, even though it was not cold.

"This has to be a dream," he said aloud. "That's it! I was knocked unconscious by the power surge. They're probably trying to wake me now, or I'm being rushed to the hospital. I just have to ride this out until I wake up. Why doesn't it feel like a dream, though?"

Then the reality of the dream sunk in. "Oh man, I just shocked myself out of the audition! Now I've blown it *and* the exam!" he yelled.

"What's an exam?" he heard a voice ask. He jumped, hearing the sound, and searched for its source. From behind a tree, a little girl poked her head out and stared at him. "You're not the leader of the Axemen," she said disappointedly.

"Yes, I am!" Alex argued.

"Then where's your axe?" she asked.

"I don't use an axe. I use a guitar."

"Warriors don't use musical instruments," the girl argued.

"Who said I was a warrior?" Alex argued back. "Wait a sec. Who are you?"

"My name is Dara. I am the princess of Mythos."

"Of course you are," Alex said sarcastically. "And you've summoned me here to protect you from the evil overlord and save the world, right?"

"What evil overlord?"

"Come on. There *must* be an evil overlord. Where there's a princess, there's always an evil overlord or, like, a witch or a dragon or something."

Dara assumed that Alex spoke from personal experience. "You must be very powerful to have dealt with so many dangers," she said, feeling better about the mix-up already. She came out from behind the tree and approached him.

"Yeah, sure," Alex said uninterestedly. "I'm the most powerful weapon master in all the world. Villains tremble before my might. Yada yada yada."

Dara glowed with admiration. "Please, sir ... sir ...?"

"Alex."

"Please, Sir Alex—"

"No, just Alex."

"Please, Alex, my father has sent me to a city north of here, but I got scared and tried to summon the leader of my father's Axemen. I got you instead. Will you be my protector until my father can escape his prison?"

It's just a dream, so just play along, Alex told himself. "Of course I will, Princess Darla."

"It's Dara, sir."

"Oh, sorry." He rubbed her head. "Now point me in the direction of this city, and we'll be off."

Dara pointed up to the road in the distance, and they began to walk.

"So, summon people often?" Alex asked.

"You are the first person I've ever summoned. I didn't even know if I could do it," Dara answered.

"Lucky me," Alex said.

The snapping of a branch drew Alex's attention back to the forest. A guttural growl followed as a pair of glowing yellow eyes appeared in the trees, and then another set appeared. Slowly, a large canine head pulled free from the darkness with a second head close by it. Both snarled at Alex, and only when they came a few paces farther, did Alex see that both heads shared the same body—a body as big as his own.

"Now I know I'm dreaming," he muttered.

The chink of metal sounded as the dog's chain was pulled back. Someone was holding it, someone big. As his huge legs came into view, Alex thought it was an ogre. Twice his height, it was certainly big enough to be one. The hairy creature wore animal-skin clothes and had an ugly, caveman-like face with two



big fangs protruding from its lower jaw. When Alex saw that it too had two heads, he corrected himself. "Ettin. Crap."

"I'll need a sword," he said, and then he willed one to appear in his hand. This was a dream after all. But no sword magically sprang forth. Things began to feel far too real for Alex. Dream or not, they needed to get out of there.

"Dara?" he checked. She had moved herself right behind him.

"Yes, sir?"

"Run!"

They turned and bolted. In response, the ettin let loose his pet and readied a large club. Alex could have easily outrun Dara, but he kept pace just behind her. The dog closed quickly, and Alex knew it would take them both down. So he turned and stood his ground holding his guitar like a bat. As the beast leaped for him, he swung hard. The guitar smashed against one of its heads, snapping off at the handle, before the dog barreled into Alex. They both went down, but Alex scrambled quickly to his feet. The dog shook one of its heads, but the other head, the one the guitar had struck, hung unconscious.

Then the dog saw Dara, still running, and turned toward her, but Alex threw what was left of his guitar at it to get its attention. It turned back to him, snarling.

"Way to play the hero, Alex," he told himself, and then he bolted away again.

To Dara, Alex seemed insane because he was running back toward the ettin that was now marching toward him. Alex wasn't trying to get to the ettin though; he was trying to get to his book bag. He hoped that if he stuffed those heavy texts back in the bag, it might make a decent weapon. The dog was too fast though, and clipped Alex's calf just as he reached the bag and the books. As Alex tumbled down, the dog launched itself on top of him. He grabbed the nearest book and smacked the beast in the face with it. It let out a small yelp but then got even angrier. When it moved in to bite him, Alex stuffed the book in the animal's mouth. It ground the book and spat it out. Alex grabbed another book and opened it to try to shield as much of himself as he could.

"Help!" he muttered.

Suddenly a flash of light came out of the book, startling the dog but not Alex, whose eyes were now closed tight with fear. When the dog's bite did not come, Alex opened his eyes. The animal had turned its attention to someone else, and Alex couldn't believe who it was—Scorpius.

Dressed in his red leather armour with its silver chest plate and bronze shoulder guards, the Roman legionnaire stood in a battle stance that showed years of training as he faced off with the dog. Unlike Alex, Scorpius had a sword and a shield. Alex looked at the book he was holding. It was *Legend and Lore*, and he had opened it to the page with Scorpius's portrait on it. Only the page was now blank.

The dog lunged at Scorpius, but the Roman easily dodged the attack and drove his sword into the creature's side as it passed. It yelped as it crashed to the earth, whimpering from the pain. With a final effort, the dog tried to get

back up, but the wound was fatal. The second head went as limp as the first, and the dog fell dead on the ground. Scorpius then turned his sword toward Alex.

“You!” he threatened. “Why did you attack?”

“Not me!” Alex interrupted and pointed at the ettin who was now bearing down on them and who seemed very upset that his pet had been killed. “Him!”

The Roman’s eyes went wide when he saw the huge creature. The ettin roared and charged Scorpius. Scorpius yelled and charged the ettin. Alex could not believe his eyes. The ettin was twice Scorpius’s size. The Roman could not hope to win a clash like that. He didn’t.

The ettin swung its club at Scorpius, but instead of countering with his sword or blocking with his shield, the Roman dived down and used his body to trip the monster. When the ettin fell, its club went flying from its hands. Scorpius leaped up from the ground and attacked the monster at once. He stabbed its leg, but then had to jump back to avoid a kick. The ettin tried to get up, but Scorpius moved back in, slashing its side. The ettin howled and swung at him, but its hand connected with his shield, which made it scream in pain. Scorpius swung again, slashing its arm. Then the monster lunged up, but not at Scorpius. It moved off to the side and limped off back into the woods, whimpering as it went.

Scorpius turned back to Alex and began to speak, but as mysteriously as he appeared, he vanished. Alex opened the book again and looked at the page. The portrait had returned.

* * *

The Shadow Lord grew impatient. The ransacking of the palace had revealed nothing so far. The vault contained only useless gold and gems. What secret rooms he found held no trace of Mornak’s missing powers although the magical traps in them had destroyed several of his Shadow Warriors.

He was about to lash out at a palace servant just to release some of his anger when he sensed it. He recognized the feel of Mornak’s magic at once. Someone was using it for powerful casting, but not in the palace—not even in the city. The magic was north, somewhere north. He would move his men out of the city and comb the countryside. Finding the holder of Mornak’s magic was all that mattered.