

The Eye of The Dragon

Special thanks to all those that have helped in the making of
this book.

Hazel Stone (Mum), for inspiring me to write.

Susan Stone, illustrator, and inspiration for Eson and Skyrow.

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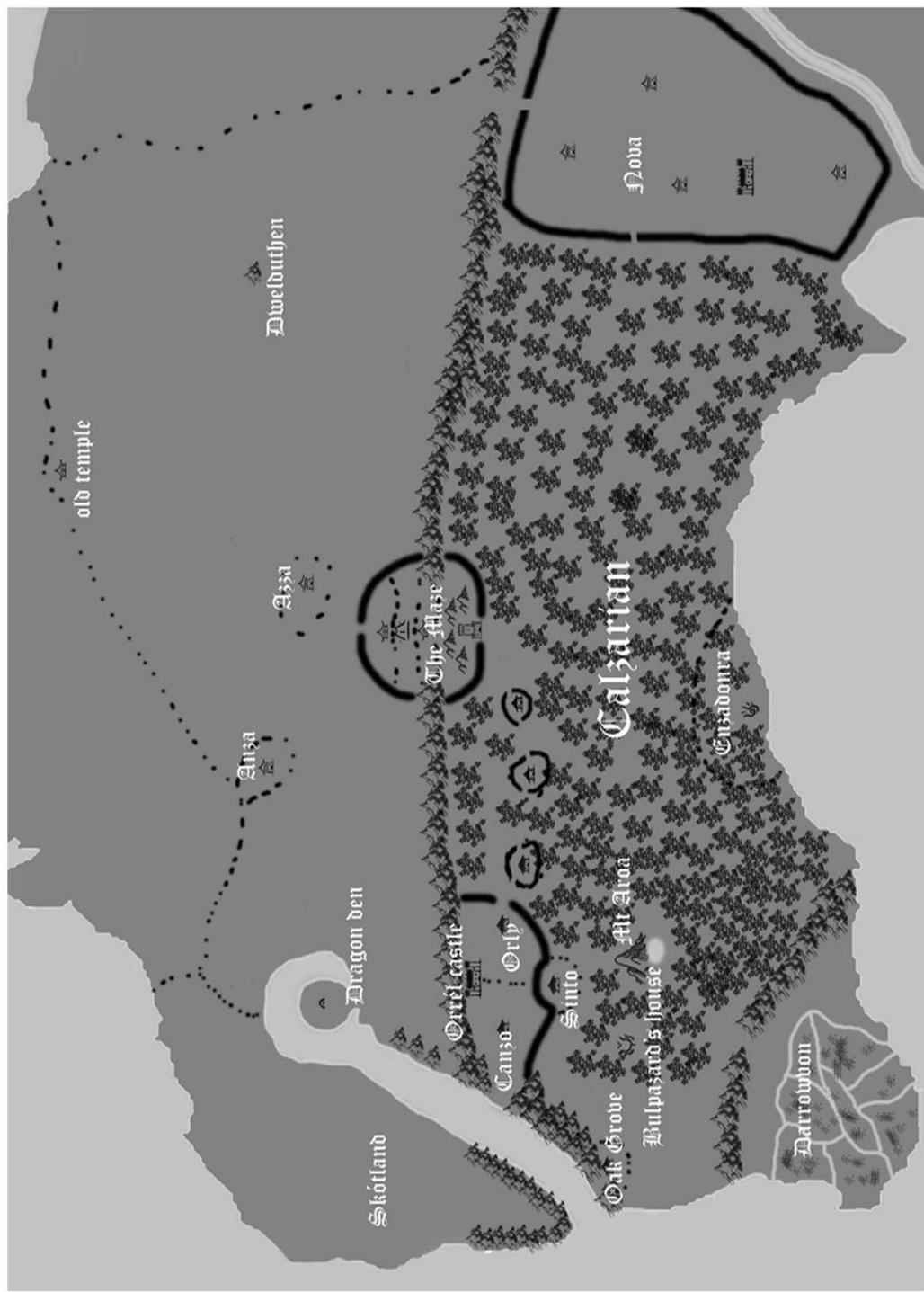
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Chapter One- Dark magic

As far as Bulpazard could recall, the two kingdoms of Mankind had always been separated.

The eastern kingdom of Nova. With its thick, tall black walls, protecting it from all sides, stood east of the mighty Calzarian forest. That deep and old place, full of all manner of creatures, had long stood at the heart of the vast land, always acting as a border between the two kingdoms.

Castle Rinver, as it was now known, stood proud to the south of the large city of Nova and acting as the capital for the race of Man.

The kingdom of Orrél sat west of the Calzarian. Tucked in at the foot of the great Dúraian mountain range that split the land in two.

There stood the ancient Castle Orrél, right on the borders of the twin cities of Orly and Canzo.

Bulpazard had known the two kings, Egiling Rinver and Dontus Conduits, since their early childhood. They often would run into him when he visited the castles to perform his duties as head of The Order. Much to his delight, the two boys had formed a deep friendship, and he hoped that they would unite the kingdoms of Mankind someday.

Little Egiling, a sweet, charming, dark-haired boy with those deep green eyes so full of hope, wonder, and a little mischief, now ruled over Nova.

Little Dontus, that shy, weedy, brown-haired boy with his deep blue eyes always sparkling in the sun full of kindness and hope, now ruled over Orrél.

They had both grown into great kings. Wise and strong, ruling with grace and kindness.

Soon the time for marriage had come. Bulpazard performed their ceremonies, and each acted as the others' best man. To still see those childhood friends as close as brothers filled Bulpazard's old Dwarfish heart with such joy.

Unfortunately, this friendship came to an abrupt end. One night after too much mead and wine, the two had begun to fight and argue with each other, perhaps over a misplaced or misunderstood word. Since neither would speak of that night, Bulpazard could not work out what had happened, and he deeply suspected that neither could either of them.

Bulpazard tried his best to prevent war between them, but war was declared. Although no blow or blood had come to pass, the tension and anger between the two could be felt across the land.

Bulpazard used his fellow Order member, Dengard's position as court wizard of Orrél to try and rekindle friendship between the two, but it seemed hopeless. The two had grown too cold and bitter towards each other.

It took, Dengard and Bulpazard three long years of hard work just to get them to agree to a meeting. The two wizards had arranged for the kings to meet in the Elven city of Teethoftheearth. Which the Dwarfs had gifted the Elves the city some time ago in an act of friendship.

For two months, the talks continued, and finally, in the spring of the second year, the two had agreed to put the silly argument behind them and once again become friends.

Bulpazard suspected that, in part, this was not only due to his and Dengard's perseverance but the fact that the two kings had more or less completely forgotten why they had started to war with each other in the first place.

One year of peace had passed between the two kings, and to Bulpazard's delight, they were again trading and speaking with each other, almost as if nothing had happened.

Not long after this Bulpazard was informed of the joyous news that Queen Crawa Conduits had given birth to a baby girl.

Bulpazard could foresee Yoji becoming a strong, independent person. A trait she had no doubt inherited from her late mother, whose life had been lost during the birth.

Her passing saddened the two kingdoms greatly. She was well-loved, and vast crowds had turned out for her funeral. Lining the cobbled streets as far as the eye could see, all waiting to pay respects to their beloved queen.

Her coffin was made of smooth mahogany, with four golden handles.

Flower reefs were placed all along its side, in that white carriage with the large glass windows.

The carriage was drawn by four black steeds, each with a deep purple velvet sash draped over their broad backs—both sashes, embroidered with the royal seal of a hand rising from a lake clutching a sword.

As the carriage rolled along, the people would throw flowers and wept as it passed to the east, where the queen would be laid to rest in the royal tomb in the necropolis just north of the outer farming district of the city.

For the next two months, the cities wept and mourned. Further delaying the traditional blessing of the new royal. It was usually performed the day after the birth and acted as protection. It also ingrained a strong sense of justice and honour into their very being.

Two uneventful years passed, and in the autumn of the third, the two kings met once again. Bulpazard facilitated the meeting, and that is when he learnt that Queen Ceolburh Rinver was with child.

Dengard had discovered the foetus was male, and this is what had sparked their meeting.

The two kings discussed this at great length, and to his surprise, they decided that their children were to wed upon the boys sixteenth year.

The kingdom of Man was to unite under one banner at last, and Bulpazard could not help but smile at the thought. He had desired this greatly and always hoped it would come to pass. Yet, he did not think it would happen within his long-life time.

Egiling invited Bulpazard to come to Castle Rinver and to stay until the boy was born.

Bulpazard hardly slept over the next few days, partly from the excitement of the coming birth and from that odd energy he could

feel. Bulpazard would pace the guest room, sending out his mind's eye to see if he could find where the energy was coming from.

He could feel its ill intent. Although it appeared to be a few miles away, it was coming closer. Bulpazard could not quite work out what it was at first, but something familiar was about it. He had felt it before some time ago. Back when....

Then it hit him. He knew who he felt in the darkness.... Reki.

Bulpazard had once taken her under his tutelage. She, unlike most of humankind, had developed her magical ability later in life.

Typically, Bulpazard test for magical ability before a child turns ten. Usually, by then, it is clear if they contain the spark or not.

But with Reki, she was a middle-aged scullery maid for the Lord of the town Tyne O Rew.

Bulpazard had only been passing by when he felt her power manifest.

Never before had an older human developed their magic. Bulpazard saw her cast down a bolt of lightning, killing another servant in a fit of rage.

Needless to say, she passed out after her limit had been exceeded.

She was so scared, and Bulpazard felt it his duty to teach her to control her power.

He soon came to regret that decision and should have stripped them when he had the chance. Reki grew powerful under his guidance, and he was pleased with her progress.

Bulpazard foolishly allowed her to join The Order. It was only after this that he caught her, reading books on necromancy and summoning a few times. But he dismissed this as an odd curiosity at the time.

Bulpazard should have listened to what the witnesses said. But he did not wish to believe them at first. One had seen her reanimate and command the butchered remains of that poor cat she had killed. Another said they had seen her summoning dark shadows.

By the time Bulpazard went to investigate, Reki had long gone. Disappearing from his sight and eventually his scrying spells entirely.

Twenty years have passed, and now she is searching for Bulpazard. He would have to prepare himself for a fight.

With the sense of foreboding, he could barely concentrate as he sat outside the king's chamber. Bulpazard heard the screams of labour and then the cries of the new-born.

It was the early arns of the morning when Markus had entered into the world so full of dangers.

Bulpazard entered the kings' chambers and looked to the pride on the faces of the king and queen. All three looked to the small sleeping bundle wrapped in silk. As he lay in his mother's arms.

The moment Bulpazard left the room, he got to work and warded the castle; He would not allow her to enter! Instead, he would meet her face on, outside the city, if possible, to limit the damage that he foresaw happening.

But late that night, Bulpazard felt his wards break with such force that it shook him to the core. Reki had grown strong indeed in those lost years. Yet, he knew she had something darker aiding her, for his powers were still greater than hers.

Bulpazard could not ignore this display of dark magic and rushed to the king's chamber. He had to get them out. She was bringing the fight to him at this very mark.

Bulpazard frantically tapped upon the heavy oak door of the king's chamber.

'My lord! A foul evil stirs this night. My wards are broken! You must flee!' He bellowed.

The door swung open, and there stood the king and queen dressed, ready for battle.

'Nay, old friend, we will not run but face whatever evil alongside you.'

It was then they heard the approaching footsteps. They were slow and calculating. The three prepared themselves but were relieved to see that it was the wet nurse carrying a fussing Markus.

‘Forgive me, my lords, lady. I did not mean to rouse you. The young prince will not settle this night. He refused his last feed. I hoped a walk along the corridors would settle him.’

The king gave a raised brow. He knew as well as Bulpazard that the ill-feeling about the castle had disturbed the prince greatly.

‘Fear not Hillary, give Markus to Bulpazard and flee. Something comes this night.’

As soon as he finished the sentence, the corridor became ice-cold, and an ill wind gust down the corridor.

That piecing scream of rage, bounced off the walls and echoed.

Ice erupted from the stones, and their breath turned to a mist.

Hillary ran, and Bulpazard tried to blink away, but something interrupted it. Nothing in this world that he knew of could prevent a blink. It confirmed she had greater forces aiding her this night.

‘What deal had she struck with the Arcmondane?’ He wondered.

‘Go Bulpazard, get Markus away from this place!’ Those words were the last Bulpazard heard from his dear friend’s mouth. He ran as fast as his stout legs could carry him and attempted to blink to safety, but each time he was stopped.

The urge to turn and defend the king and queen grew with each step, and when he heard that horn sound out, bellowing throughout

the castle, Bulpazard knew the king had called his knights. This was a battle he would have to miss.

The precious bundle Bulpazard carried stirred and fussed, but a calming spell put him into a deep slumber. Bulpazard could not risk the baby's cries drawing the attention of the enemy.

Panting and out of breath, Bulpazard had managed to get to the stables, hoping there would be a horse he could use, but to his dismay there was nothing.

Bulpazard tried to blink again, forcing his will to take him from this place.

The next he knew, he stood in the farming town of Oak Grove. The flickering of the lamps and the smell of animal dung told Bulpazard that he was only a few yards from the home of someone he had tried to help years ago.

A young couple that wished to have a child, yet despite Bulpazard's best efforts, he could not help them. This was an opportunity he could not give up. The child would be safe here, providing he dealt with her.

Bulpazard had to act quickly and forced his aching feet onwards. He hobbled, using his staff as support. For the first time, he felt his age upon him. He was not a young dwarf anymore.

Bulpazard banged on the wooden door, almost breaking it in his haste.

Serge and Hitony would take care of this child. He knew that much, but he could not linger and feared that he would have to abandon the child on the doorstep.

But a light coming from the cracks in the wooden door told him that he had at last roused one or even both of them.

Bulpazard summoned a thick mist to hide his presence here. He could not afford to be seen at this crucial moment.

It was Serge that opened the door and Bulpazard quickly thrust the quiet baby into his arms.

‘I have little time to explain. I must return at once to Nova. Please watch this babe; I shall return as soon as I can.’ With that, he blinked away.

Shocked and strangely relieved, Serge stood staring down at the sleeping baby wrapped in the soft silk blanket.

He and Hitony had always wanted a child, but to receive one like this, completely unannounced, was not what they expected. He could not help but wonder as to where the wizard had brought it from.

Serge closed the door and took the infant into his room. The wooden floor was creaking and groaning as it usually did.

‘What have you there?’ Hitony asked, her frail, weary voice coming from the darkness of the room.

She had been ill for over a week now. Some form of fever or so Bulpazard reckoned, his cures seemed to be lifting whatever it was and in good time too.

‘Bulpazard just gave me this little baby.’

‘Oh Serge, our dreams have come true! Did he say where it was from and its name?’

‘No, he put it in my arms then vanished. He said he had something to do in Nova. We must watch over this child till he returns.’

‘May I hold it?’ Hitony asked. She seemed brighter and appeared to have more life to her than she had before.

He gently gave her the sleeping bundle and that look on her face, barely visible in the darkness of the room. He could tell this child had brought her joy and comfort. He just hoped Bulpazard would not whizz it away with him once he returned. That would break both their hearts.

Hitony gently rocked the baby and held it close. They dared not unwrap the bundle as it slept deeply. Clearly, it was under some spell.

Bulpazard appeared in amongst the trees, a mile or so from the western gate of Nova. Her dark spell had prevented him from blinking into the city itself.

He could already see the smoke rising from the city, the stench of burning wood and flesh made him heave. He knew that one person could not have done a lot of damage in that time he was gone. No doubt Reki had summoned demons to torment the fleeing people.

Bulpazard suddenly heard the horrid shrill cries of the Mankai, eager to make him their evening meal. They clearly had no idea who he was!

As they drew close, he willed the tip of his staff to emit light.

They screamed and hid their delicate eyes from its blinding radiance. But something else drove them onwards. Normally the light would have been enough to make them run, but that mad glint in their black eyes told him they were either under some spell or possessed.

They came lunging at Bulpazard; he defended himself from their razor-sharp claws. He had no time to deal with these creatures. He had to get to the castle.

Bulpazard drew the petrifying rune in the very air and willed it to take effect in one motion. Within a matter of marks, the creatures, now stone bodies, crashed to the ground, shattering into pieces.

Bulpazard made haste to the castle, smashing through the wards she had conjured to prevent his return.

Bulpazard passed through the crowds of screaming people, running from fire and dark shadows. He knew only a few would survive this night.

Finally, he got to the castle where many a knight was deep in battle with lower-level demons.

He aided them the best he could, striking many a demon with the banishing spell. But there were too many of them. Bulpazard had to get inside, to her. Once he took her down, they would slowly fade from this place.

Egiling and Ceolburh fought with Reki herself and a foul shadow she had summoned inside the great hall of broken tables and blooded bodies.

She was not the woman Bulpazard once knew. Her bent, haggard form showed her old age. Yet, something prevented her body from decaying. She fought with all the ferocity of a young wild woman.

Bulpazard tapped his staff upon the ground with such force, the very stones cracked as he released his power, driving the wrench back.

‘Go!’ He shouted as he slammed her back with balls of magic.

Time slowed to a crawl at that moment as the two ran passed him to attempt to get to safety.

The sheen of a sword edge drew Bulpazard’s eye, and in that mark, that evil shadow had the king’s head. Bulpazard’s heart shattered, and his rage built. He could not let himself lose control and become berserk.

The queen swung in madness and grief. There was nothing he could do but watch as that foul blade pierced her heart.

Seeing her lifeless form collapse, choking blood broke Bulpazard, and at that moment, he lost control.

The infamous Dwarfish berserker rage took him, and his full power was unleashed.

Magic flowed from him like a river crashing down a mountain. Bulpazard had lost control of his thoughts, and his instinct took over. His power brought down the very castle itself. In his enraged state, he had opened a rift between the very fabric of reality and cast Reki into the endless nothingness along with her demons.

Bulpazard awoke sometime later, just outside the gates to the kingdom, and found that they had been sealed shut by powerful magic. He could hear the pleas and cries of those on the other side of those gates. His power had done this. He had trapped a number unknown in that city along with those foul spirits she had conjured.

There was nothing he could do; the spell had been cast in his enraged state, and nothing apart from his very death, in that moment would undo the spell. Bulpazard's heart wept for them, and sadness overcame him.

'What have I done? I pray I will be forgiven for this act. Nothing can enter nor escape my spell, and those within are doomed to die a horrific death.' He cried to myself.

All Bulpazard had to comfort him in that mark was the knowledge of those that had managed to flee the chaos of that night. That gave him strength enough to crawl from those gates, across the desert sand as far north as he could, before succumbing to exhaustion and blood loss.

-Oak Grove-

That thick mist had lingered for three days, although it is beginning to fade, much to the disappointment of the children of the village who would play in it.

Their careless laughter had awoken Serge from a troubled sleep. He had wondered as to when the wizard would return and had begun to worry for the old dwarf. For Bulpazard not to send a message was unlike him. Even Dengard had not had any news from him. But he didn't seem too troubled by it.

Serge still hadn't quite got used to those Fae appearing to deliver Bulpazard's messages. It always made him jump, but he missed it at this point. His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a knocking at the door.

How glad he was when he opened it to Bulpazard's smiling face. His salt and pepper fur almost matched the fading mist.

'There you are. I was beginning to worry.'

Serge step aside to let the wizard enter. He smiled warmly.

'There is no need to worry about me, my old friend. Tell me, how is Markus?'

'So that is his name! We were wondering what we should call him. I have to say; he is a spirited little thing when he's awake. He's sleeping with Hitony.'

Bulpazard nodded.

'Good, sleep is best for them both. Did you get the medicine and the bottles of milk?'

‘Yes, Dengard brought them. I even asked him if he knew where you were. I assumed you wizards all know where the other is. Anyway, that potion seems to be doing the trick. Hitony’s fever is down, and she is recovering well.’

‘My diagnosis is correct then. She has Gwerts. It’s not life-threatening as I am sure you know it is a common ailment around these parts.’ He said reassuringly.

‘I have to say that milk you sent; Markus seems to really like it.’

A smile crept across his furry face. ‘That is good to hear; it’s a special blend and will give him strength. I shall arrange for more to be delivered. May I see them both?’ He asked.

Serge knocked on the bedroom door in the hope that their voices had already roused Hitony.

Her sweet voice filled Serge’s heart with joy, and they both entered the room.

Hitony was sat up in the bed and leant against the wooden wall of their home with the bottle of milk in her hand, feeding Markus.

Her face half fell when she saw Bulpazard.

‘You both seem to be doing well. I did hope you would become well enough to care for Markus.’ He smiled as if he knew what Hitony had been thinking.

‘You’re not taking him then?’ She asked hopefully.

Her face lit up as Bulpazard shook his head. ‘No. He is safe here, and I know he will be cared for greatly. Please understand that I cannot reveal where he came from. This is for his protection and yours. Raise him as if he were your own. Should the others ask, Hitony

gave birth whilst ill. That would explain his sudden appearance. Speaking of your illness, give it a few more weeks, and you should be fine. It is Gwerts and will pass without any further harm. I will arrange for Dengard to bring the medicine and the milk to you, for I must away. I will be gone for some time. Farewell for now.’ With that, he vanished.

Serge still wasn’t used to wizards disappearing suddenly. These things still shocked him, and he often wondered how they did it. Neither he or Hitony had any magical powers, and he could only imagine what it was like to be a wizard.

Serge was shocked at how quickly the next nine years had passed. There had been no word or sign of Bulpazard in all that time. After all, Serge and Hitony had a hyperactive, imaginative child to deal with, and Bulpazard’s disappearance was all but forgotten.

Markus is a shy lad, and despite Serge’s efforts to get him to play with the other children of the village, he was more content with his invisible, hopefully, imaginary friends.

He would spend hours alone in his little room adjacent to theirs. It had once been a storage place for the pots Serge made. But now, he kept them in the lean-to where he makes them. The jewellery Hitony makes, he still keeps in his room. In the chest he made with his own two hands.

Hitony and Serge spoke one night about the possibility of Serge taking Markus to Sinto market. Many of the other children his age was already helping their folks in the fields and with the Doogins.

‘Perhaps the trip will do him good. He will have to speak with the customers; maybe it’ll bring him out of his shell.’

Serge could only agree with her. Markus was almost ten years of age now, and since the age of seven, he would ask to come along.

Serge was sure it would be safe enough, and, in his heart, he knew Markus would likely enjoy it.

‘I’ll tell him in the morning. What a birthday surprise that’ll be.’

Hitony beamed a wide smile as she pulled the woollen covers up to her chin, making herself more comfortable for the night. He soon joined her.

I heard them talking through the wall and had to hold my mouth from squealing in excitement.

Dad was going to take me with him. I had hoped I’d be able to go soon, and now it was going to happen. On my birthday too!

I don’t remember falling asleep. The next I knew; dad was gently shaking me through the fleece that kept me warm at night. I lay under that fleece, and on top of the sheet mum had weaved to keep the hay underneath from scratching me.

It was really early in the arn, way before sunrise, as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. Excitement filled me again as I realised it was morning.

‘It’s time to get up. Hurry and get dressed now. I’ll be needing your help in the market today.’

I jumped out of bed and felt the sting of the cold floor beneath my bare feet.

The cold air made my skin go prickly as I quickly pulled on my tunic and treads. They were way too big for me, and I had to tie the belt a few times. But I liked them; they were warm and cosy. My dad's old ones, I think.

I quickly followed after dad, and I could hear the pattering of my feet on the wooden floor. Our boots were kept by the front door, and I was hurrying to keep stride with him.

I pulled on the hide boots. Dad had made them for me a year ago. They still had plenty of life left in them before I needed new ones.

'Ready, dad!' I beamed wide, standing as tall as I could, my chest puffed out in pride.

Once we were outside, I realised how dark it was. The lamps were still lit, and I was a little scared.

'It's ok; we're safe. Go fetch Sharof whilst I get the cart ready.'
Those words eased my fear. I also happened to like Sharof. She was a fine horse. I wasn't sure how old she was, but I knew dad had her long before I was born. She had black and white spots all over her body.

This was the first time I had gone to get her from the little shed she was housed in. It was built a long time ago, probably when our house was. It sat only a few feet away from the house.

Sometimes, when dad was too tired from the trip, he would ask me to lead her back into her home. I had to make sure I tied the rope tight through that metal hoop attached to the stone wall.

I opened the big shed door, and in the darkness, I could hear her give a whinny. She knew it was me. She probably heard me coming.

‘Hello, girl,’ I said, approaching her calmly, just as dad had told me to do. I could just about reach up to her snout and gave it a little stroke.

Her rains were kept in the shed with her and hung on a bent nail from one of the posts. I had to stretch up on tip toe to get them down. I put them over my shoulders and could feel how heavy they were.

I managed to undo the rope and held it in both hands.

Sharof followed me out into the early morning. She was such a good horse, walking nicely, just behind me.

I led her to the lean-to my dad had built onto the house. I wasn’t allowed inside there until now, as that big kiln was often lit, and it made odd noises as the fire roared inside.

Dad was just outside the lean-to, busy putting the pots into the cart.

I handed him the rope, and he took the rains from my aching shoulders.

‘Thank you. I still have a few jars to put on. Could you go and fetch the jewellery from our room.’

I nodded excitedly and rushed off.

I was careful when I opened the door. I didn't want to wake mum. She worked so hard making the necklaces and bands. Often, she would not get to bed until late.

I peeked over as I opened the door of the chest; mum was still sound asleep.

I pulled out my tunic a little to make a pouch and carefully placed in a few handfuls of the things that were inside. I then hurried back outside, where dad was harnessing Sharof to the cart.

'Mum must have been up all night making these,' I said with a grin on my face.

'She was up well into the late arns. Come on now, place them into one of the pots and let's get moving. The sun will rise soon.'

I placed them carefully into the one closest to the back of the cart.

Then with a squeeze, I managed to fit in beside my dad on the driver's seat.

To my surprise, he handed me the reins.

'Tug and say yip.'

I did as he said, and the cart started to move. It was then I felt his hand take back the reins. He smiled and, with his free hand, ruffled my hair.

The cart bounced along down the dirt road that led from our home, passed the fields of wheat, barley, and the pens of Doogins, already grazing as the sun started to appear over the mountains.

We soon passed beyond the wooden gates of the village. This was further than I had ever been before, and the excitement was too much for me. I stared wide-eyed at the vast endless grasslands and, to our right, a deep wood. Beyond that wood, I knew, laid the Calzarian. I recalled the stories mum and dad had told me of the place. I was told never to go in there; otherwise, I would be eaten by the monsters that hid in there.

We rolled onwards, never straying from the dirt path, and soon passed through Theven wood.

The leaves of golden brown mixed with the fresh green shoots overwhelmed my eyes as the shadows cast by the rising sun danced on the leaf-littered path.

It was exciting and scary at the same time, but I had dad with me and knew he would protect me if anything came out from those trees. The bird song helped ease my fear, and soon, we were clear of the woods.

My eyes stung a little as we entered into the day light of the early morning sun.

A little way down the path, I could see other carts ahead of us, all waiting outside the set of wooden gates, much like the ones that protected our village.

Beyond the tall wooden walls, I could see the huge stones and towers that made up part of the Orrél wall.

One day, I will go beyond those walls and go see the castle, I vowed to myself.

It was our turn to pass through the gates. Two men with swords at their sides approached us.

They nodded to dad.

‘Morning. Who’s this little fellow?’ Asked the one with dull grey eyes. He stared at me intently.

‘Markus, my son. Don’t you remember me telling you about him, Fread?’

‘Yeah, never thought I’d get to see the lad, though. Anyway, you know where to go, have a good day,’ he said, moving on to the next cart behind us.

Sinto was only a small city. Seeing it for the first time was amazing. Those tall buildings with tiled roofs all pack together in rows along the cobbled streets.

Just to the left of those gates, I could see the market tucked into the corner just beside the large stable for the horses to rest.

The stalls were all made of wood and had cloth roofs.

We pulled up at one of the stalls, between a man selling spice and a woman selling rugs.

Dad undid Sharof from the cart.

‘Could you lay out the jars whilst I take her to the stables? She deserves a good rest now. Be careful. I won’t be long.’

Dad trusted me; I would not disappoint him!

As he wandered off with Sharof, I busied myself with unloading the cart.

Those jars and pots were heavy, and I struggled with lifting them but had managed a few before dad returned.

I helped him unload the rest and pull the cart behind the stall. It was quite heavy for me, but dad had no issue with it. He must have been as strong as Sharof!

Most of the pots and jars were now on the wooden table in front of us, alongside some of the bits of jewellery. Dad kept the rest of the jewellery in the jar, right next to him, and would often place the coins from the people in there too.

I helped him sell one of the necklaces that mum had made. A young woman had spotted it and had asked me about it. I was shy at first and almost hid behind dad. But I was soon speaking with her. Telling how it was homemade with lots of love.

The older man she was with gave me ten Drakná for it, and he placed it around her neck. She looked very pretty with it on. Those blue beads and shells really suited her.

Everything moved so fast in the market. Although I was very tired and my body ached, I kept going, helping dad sell the things we had brought with us.

I had never seen so many people in one place before! The swarms of people flooded the market so much that I could hardly see the other stalls. The whole market buzzed with chatter and the cries of the merchants attempting to get another sale. Everyone seemed so happy

and rushed about as if they were in a hurry. Many had not even taken time to look at what they had just got. Simply carrying it away with them as they rushed off to someplace.

It was then I noticed that the building to the left of the market was just as busy as we were. People were coming and going from it all day.

‘I wonder what that building is?’ I found myself asking out loud.

‘That’s a bath house. People go in to get clean. It’s like we do at home, but there’s a lot of people using a big pool of water to clean themselves and not an iron tub like we have. Perhaps I’ll take you in some time if we have the time and money,’ Dad explained. I blushed at the thought of bathing with strangers!

I was having so much fun and was too wrapped up in the excitement to realise that the sun was only an arm away from setting.

Panic gripped me as I realised the arm. I had just sold one of those cooking pots to a large man.

‘Dad...Dad! The sun.’ I panicked.

He smiled kindly at me and ruffled my hair.

‘It’s ok, Markus. We shall be leaving soon. Still, plenty of time to get home before dark. Though we best start packing things up.’

Dad had always warned me of the night when those monsters called Mankai came to hunt. Our lamps kept them away, but a few had managed to come into the village and took a Doogin.

Once again, dad had left me to pack away the left-over pots and jars. There weren't many at all, about four of five. The one with all the money in I couldn't lift, it was too heavy. So, I just stood guard by it.

Once dad returned, he lifted the last pot onto the cart.

As he harnessed Sharof to the cart, I crawled into the back, to help protect the left-over pots.

The hay that lined the inside of the cart itched and scratched me, poking my bare skin through my thick tunic, but it didn't bother me too much as I huddled up against the pots.

I was going to guard them all the way home. No matter how heavy my eyes were with sleep and how tired my body was, I was determined to stay awake all the way home.

But on that first part of the bumpy ride over the cobbles, the gentle rocking of the cart was enough to put me to sleep.

Chapter Two- The Wizard's Apprentice

‘Markus.... we’re home.’ Dad’s gentle words were enough to stir me. After a few marks, I shot up in shock and disappointment. I could not believe I had fallen asleep so quickly and so deeply. I had missed the whole ride home!

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes as I willed my weary body to move out of the cart.

I had not seen where dad had pulled that big leather bag from, but it looked very heavy.

‘Here, today’s takings. We did very well today. Your mother will be so proud of us. Go on and take this to her whilst I unload.’

I nodded and let out a yawn as I took that heavy bag from dad. I had to carry it with both hands and keep it close to my chest. I could feel the metal of the coins dig into me as I carried it inside.

Shocked, I dropped the bag. Coins spilled out all over the place. I could feel the blood drain from my face as I rushed over to mum. She was pale and lay amongst a few broken cooking pots, right by the fire.

‘Mum!’ I cried, touching her cold forehead.

Tears began to roll down my face as I ran to get help.

‘DAD!’ I shouted, choking on my tears as I ran out of the front door.
He poked his head out of the shed door.

‘What’s wrong?’ He asked.

‘Mum,’ was all I could say before bursting into tears.

Through watery eyes, I saw him run to the house, almost tripping over the door ledge.

I was too stunned to move and stood crying by the shed doors.

‘Markus...Fetch water.... Hurry!’ Dad’s shout scared me. In shock and with tears still streaming down my face, I ran, stumbling over myself and falling into a roll.

I quickly got back up. I didn’t even bother to brush off the dirt. I had to run to the nearest well.

Not looking where I was going and, in my panic, I ran head first into the Doogin keeper, Dean.

‘Hold up their young’un. What’s the ‘urry?’

‘Mum...water’ was all I could say through the tears as I rushed off.

The well wasn’t far now; I could see its wooden roof.

I turned that wheel as fast as I could until I heard the splash as the bucket hit the water below.

I pulled on the wheel and struggled to bring it back up, but I was determined to do it.

I was going to help mum no matter what!

Finally, I had pulled it up, and standing on the stone step at the base of the well, I poured the water from that bucket into the one kept beside the well.

Using both hands, I held the bucket to my chest and waded as fast as I could back to our home.

I came through the door and found dad and Dean had carried mum to the bedroom.

I rushed as fast as I could, some water slopping about the place as I moved and placed the bucket down with a grunt.

Dad soaked a rag in the cold water and placed it on mum's head.

'Is mum going to be, ok?' I worried.

'I think so; the water will help cool her down.'

But mum had been cold when I touched her. Something must have happened to make her burn up whilst I stood like an idiot at the shed door.

'I'll go find Bulpazard or Dengard. They will know what to do.'
Dean said as dad gave him a nod.

'I'll...I'll help!' I panicked and ran after Dean. I didn't hear what dad had shouted; I had to focus and catch up with Dean, but he was too fast for my little legs.

Before I knew it, I had run past the wooden gates and out into the forest.

Suddenly, it dawned on me that I was very lost and had no idea where to go.

I stood there in the middle of those trees, but I refused to cry. My fear kept me rooted to that spot as the darkness approached.

Shaking with cold and fear, I looked up and knew what lay sleeping in those branches. I had to get away.

'Perhaps if I run that way, I'll get back to Oak Grove.' I thought

But my body wouldn't move. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest like it wanted to run from the body.

I dared not scream or make any sound. I knew those monsters would soon be waking up.

Somehow the thought of those monsters eating me made my legs work again, and I ran.

I heard a twig or branch snapping in the fading light and jumped out of my skin.

I couldn't stop running despite my legs begging me to, and my lungs felt as if they were on fire.

My body failed me soon after, and I fell right into a pile of dead leaves.

I curled up as small as I could and hid there in the hope nothing would find me.

I could hear something out there. I hoped it couldn't hear my frantic heartbeat. I tried to quieten it but felt dizzy.

Once I saw those eyes, I thought I was done for. That yellow glint in the darkness; I hoped it hadn't seen or smelt me hiding here.

As soon as I heard it pass by my hiding spot, I ran.

I heard a snarl, and once again, I saw those eyes. They seemed far away, but I could not help but watch them follow me in the darkness.

I ran off and stumbled over something which sent me flying forwards.

I landed face down on the ground, tasting the bitter earth in my mouth.

I could hear the sound of a waterfall as I lay there, too scared to open my eyes.

After some time, I had to look. I could no longer hear the monster.

If it had found me, I would have been eaten already! Slowly I opened my tightly closed eyes and lifted my head from the dirt.

The bright light of the moons stung, and I had to squint until I could see better.

I knew where I was. Or at least I thought I did. I looked to the blue mountain bathed in the light of the moons. A great waterfall fell from up high and crashed down into the pool at its base.

'Mount Aroa,' I could not help but let out a relieved chuckle.

I remember Dean telling me about this place. We could see its outline from the farm.

He told me it was a special place, where those who were ill came to bathe in the water.

‘Tears of the Gods,’ he called the waterfall. At least here I was safe as long as the moons shone down.

I poked out my tongue to the darkness of the forest and lay down in the tall lush grass so that I could stay hidden and as safe as I could be.

I was very scared and shivered a little in the cold air.

I raised my head and looked into the darkness of the forest; I wasn’t sure what I expected to see out there. Perhaps it was the scurrying of the animals that had made me look or the fear that still gripped me.

I was all alone, and nobody knew where I was. Too scared to move or cry out, I would be stuck here for tonight, and hopefully, I could find my way out in the day.

After relieving myself in the nearby bushes, I once again lay down, making myself as small as I could to attempt to keep warm.

I lay there staring up at the moons, and as clouds passed by, I began to get scared again.

If the dark came here, those monsters would get me!

As the light faded, I panicked and tried to get up.

I would have to chance it. I could not stay out here all night!

My body would not move. My heart pounded as I struggled. Something held me in that spot.

It would not let me cry out either, and silent tears rolled down my face.

‘Do not cry. I can help you.’ That voice echoed inside my head like the buzzing of flies.

‘Relax, I am here to help.’

‘Who are you?’ I was shocked that I could speak again. However, my voice was hoarse and croaky.

‘I am a Fae. Sorry about taking your voice and restraining you. I thought you meant me harm.’ Its voice came again.

I sat up but found that was all I could do. There before my eyes was a small silver light floating in the air.

‘Let me go; I won’t hurt you,’ I cried.

‘Sadly, I cannot fully unbind you. My magic doesn’t work that way. You must first strike a bargain with me; only then can I free you.’

I knew nothing of the Fae, save for that which mum had told me. I knew they were messengers, but until now, I had never seen one.

‘What is it you want?’ I asked.

‘Nothing much, just a small drop of your blood that will seal our bargain. I free you, and you won’t harm me. Then maybe I can help you get out of here.’

The little light flickered, and, at that moment, a glowing fair-skinned woman stood before me. Her dress was made of leaves.

‘So, what do you say. A little blood and our bargain will be struck. I cannot take it from you; you have to give it to me willingly,’ she smiled warmly, pulling a small knife from her dress.

I could feel my hands move as I automatically reached for the knife.

‘That’s it. Take the knife and prick your finger.’

Before I could grab hold of the knife’s handle, a blinding ball of light slammed into the Fae and knocked her away.

‘Back! Get away from him!’ The deep voice commanded.

Another ball of light whizzed past me and slammed into the Fae.

She hissed, showing sharp pointed teeth.

Her whole body twisted and stretched as she became a stretch-out husk of darkness.

‘I said, get back foul shade!’

A blinding golden light lit the area. I had to shield my eyes from it.

I heard the creature hiss and then make a drawn-out piercing scream that hurt my ears.

I ran in fear and straight into the solid trunk of an oak tree.

‘Markus...Markus.’ That deep voice faded into my aching head.

The blurred image of that smiling furry face and those deep green eyes began to focus.

I scrambled up against the tree.

‘It’s ok, Markus. The danger has passed. Come, let me take a look at that bump,’ he said kindly.

Slowly the dwarf approached me; I was so scared.

‘Is he trying to hurt me too? He doesn’t seem mean or nasty, but neither did that creature.’

I felt I could trust this dwarf and allowed him to look at my head. He placed his hand over my head, and in a moment, the stinging had stopped.

‘There we are. All fixed up now.’ He smiled again.

‘Who are you?’ I asked timidly.

‘Oh, of course. How silly of me not to introduce myself. My old mind doesn’t work as well these days. I am Bulpazard.’

My eyes widened. I had heard dad speak highly of him. I could not believe I was actually with the famous wizard.

‘Come on now, let’s get you home. Can’t have you catching cold.’ He extended his hand to me and helped me up. He stood a little taller than me.