Chapter 1

Fallfell Fell

The smell of burnt wood and despair assaulted Rain's nose as she stepped through the portal into the cellar of the Gray Star Tavern.

Her expectations of seeing Pagdal, priest of Latarris, were instead met with a severed finger and a large pool of dried blood at her boots.

Having been raised by a true warrior, her Djinni father, Rain understood in her heart the meaning of the empty room before her brain registered the danger.

The warrior eased herself across the room toward the stairs, moving from shadow to shadow, avoiding the bright beams of light.

Sunshine from the upper floors, thought Rain, *no roof.*

Caifiel passed through the portal behind Rain, saw the warrior tensed at the bottom of the steps, and froze, her brain still fuzzy from the spell she had used to get them back to Fallfell.

"What's happening?"

Rain took one step. The sounds of steel against steel had the warrior in no hurry to find out what waited above. "Nothing good."

Caifiel's adrenaline began to pound the fog from her brain, the enchantment replaced by one thought, "Pagdal!"

The priest raced to the stairs and flew up them. Rain grabbed the rear of the girl's cloak as she passed, but it ripped off in the warrior's hand.

The warrior did not expect the priest to be so brave or reckless as to rush up into the unknown. Rain shook her head. "The gods gave more brains to sheep. They run *away* from danger."

Half way up the stairs, Rain slid Nightbane from its sheath and dropped her pack. Screams from the streets above did not hasten Rain's climb up the stairwell.

A warrior that rushes into combat is defeated before the battle begins. That was just one of the many sayings her father spouted.

Rain peeked up through the opening. The Gray Star Tavern was only a scorched-out shell of its former self. The stained-glass windows were gone, the ornately hand-carved doors burned out of their frames. The plush furniture customers used to ease their pains, gone. Portions of the building still smoked.

Through what used to be one of the windows, Rain watched chaos moving across the streets of Fallfell. The scream of a child forced the warrior out into the road.

Three riders, laden heavy with studded leather, corralled a small group of women and children across the street from the warrior.

"You! Orc stain!"

Two of the riders spun their horses, racing at the warrior woman.

Rain stretched her shoulders, then her neck, flexing muscles stiff from being under the Ruby Mountain. Rain had been tortured for so long; deep in the darkness of that place, it felt good to once again breathe fresh air.

The warrior was in no hurry to prepare for the oncoming evil. The last battle she faced was against two Guath and a Dwarven wizard. What could two gutter rats do to a survivor of such?

The riders, weapons drawn, each blade still dripping with the blood of innocents, spread their horses' gaits to arrive at the warrior in succession.

Rain waited till the last split second. Then, before they ran her down, she spun. Looking more like dancing than combat, she let Nightbane loose from her grip, sending the blade as an arrow at the man riding at her. The brigand on her right made a futile try to block the blade. Instead, it sunk so deep into his chest half the sword came out the back of his armor. The bandit fell off backward, his horse still at full gallop.

The other pulled his horse to a hard stop when he witnessed his friend fall dead.

Rain waited for the riderless horse to reach her, caught the beast mid-stride, pulling herself into the saddle. Spinning the animal with expert hands, she took off at the other bandit.

The woman warrior rode hard at her foe, no weapon in either hand. A few hoof strides from her enemy Rain stretched out her left palm, and the weapon that was Nightbane suddenly appeared in her grip. The bandit, without time to flee or fight, took the blade broadside, cleaving him in two.

Rain raced the horse ever forward, headed straight at the last bandit, still corralling the women. She had no intention of stopping. The bandit turned in time to catch Rain's horse slam into his. The momentum took the four of them into the side of the building, crushing the man.

Rain backed her horse out of the pile, she and her mount no worse for wear. Her opponent did not fare so well. His legs jutted out from under a dead horse.

The warrior slid off her mount sidesaddle, with little more than a single bead of sweat passing her cheek.

"Thank you." One woman grasped the warrior's wrist. "I say truly you have saved us."

"What is happening here? What happened to this town?"

"Fallfell has fallen. Evil races through it."

"How long ago?"

"Two moons."

I've been gone that long, thought Rain. The warrior's head pounded. It was more than adrenaline. It was the realization that she had been underground in the Dwarven mountain for most of the season.

"This has been happening for two moons?"

"No." The woman still clutched Rain's arm. "This is the newest plague. They ransacked the city two moons past, and now every monster from the river to the Great Forest rains down on us."

"Take the children, find a place to hide—"

The cry of a familiar voice snapped Rain to attention. The warrior sprinted back towards what remained of the Gray Star. The same familiar scream changed her course deeper into the village.

Rain passed bodies of all kinds, lying dead or dying in the street. She rounded the corner of a building, one of the few structures untouched. On the steps lay a body, its pristine white robes stained with blood.

"Caifiel," Rain knelt over the body of the priest. The cleric's eyes stared at a sky they could not see.

Rain's head fell. She had known the woman briefly, but the warrior felt a great sadness. *What a waste. So young…*

Rain lay the body gently back on the ground, covering Caifiel's eyes with her blood-stained palm. "May you pass through the darkness."

Another scream, this time from inside the building.

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Lady Cratha sat behind a large stack of papers, safe but not content in her secret hiding hole. She contemplated the number four of all things.

No matter how hard I work. How tireless members of the league slog, I can never get the task list below four.

It was an odd thought to have, but these days Cratha had been having many weird thoughts. The Lady of the League looked over the small parchment in front of her, scribed in her hand. It was a list of sorts — first the number one followed by the words, *Nothing from the floating city. Two, Red Mountain is quiet. Three, war in the Straights of Aganon.*

Cratha scribbled next to number three, *pirates.*

She then wrote, *Four… Obadella?*

The woman turned savior of the people, turned librarian, turned woman hunted and on the run leaned back in her chair. She rolled the chunk of Turomite in her hand then held it up to the light.

"I guess this makes five on my list."

Heavy boots attached to an even heavier man worked their way down to Cratha's secret parlor.

"Luli?"

"My apologies for disturbing you this late."

"No problem." Cratha spread her arms wide to show the secret door.<"My door is always open."

The usually jovial Luli did not laugh nor even crack a smile.

"Yes, of course. Bad news." Cratha leaned forward in her chair. The muscles in her back tightened, waiting for yet another tragic disappointment.

"Fallfell is… gone."

Cratha took a deep breath. When she ran from the town, it was in dire straits, but she always believed the Sisters of the Eternal Light would recover and rebuild.

"And the priests?"

"Their church is all that is left. They appear to be resigned."

"The Matron Mother?"

Luli shrugged. "I do not have specifics."

Cratha shook her head. "Thank you, Luli. I—"

The mountain of a man had already turned and left.

Cratha slumped forward onto the desk, her head landing in her arms, yet she refused to cry. There were no tears that could replace what had been lost—only gritted teeth and the growing realization that the Iron League was crumbling.

Without raising her head, Cratha asked, "You heard that?"

A shadow rose from across the room, hidden behind a stack of empty kegs. "I did."

"See it for yourself. Then get back to me."

The shadow moved to the stairs, dowsing the torch that lit them. "Our love affair continues."

Lady Cratha did not look up to watch him leave. "It does."

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Rain burst through the outer doors. No longer did she wish to be stealthy. The vision of Caifiel's face laced with screaming from inside the building hurled the warrior into a rage beyond caution.

Inside the hall was chaos. Two priests knelt by another while a third fended off three attackers.

"Puke stain!"

The three turned to see Rain, no weapon in her hand, arms outstretched as if pleading for the lives of the priests. Muscles taut, a warrior's build, Rain was a formidable vision. She smiled at the men, not something she often did. "Let us pray."

Two of the men rushed towards the warrior, the third staying to handle the priests.

Two. Not even worth soiling my blades.

Rather than draw steel, Rain grasped the nearest heavy object, a large iron cast bust of some deity, swinging it up and into the man on her right. She thought she heard "No" before smashing it into his skull.

The other foe swung short, missing Rain's stomach. His attack caught nothing but air, embedding the blade in the side of a pylon. The man tried to pull the sword free.

"Bad day for you." Rain brought her knee up hard to the man's grip, smashing his wrist, forcing it the wrong way. A satisfying crack caught her ears.

The man screamed in pain.

Rain wrapped her hand around the handle of Nightbane. "It will only get worse."

"Maka, help me!" the man cried out, but no response came.

Rain glanced over the bandit's shoulder to see the priest had handled the third brigand.

"Your friend's dead."

The bandit's eyes shot back and forth widely. Rain recognized the look — fear mixed with pain.

"Door's behind me. Use it."

The outlaw was almost to the exit before she finished her sentence.

Rain turned to the priests, moving slowly, her hands held out.

The priest, hovering over the others, pointed a sword at Rain. "I see what you can do without a weapon, warrior. I ask that you go no further."

"I am not here for a fight."

"If that is so, then I thank you for your aid, but I cannot call you 'friend'."

"I am here to help."

The woman on the floor was bleeding from her shoulder. One eye was bruised so it could not open. "Tima, it's all right. She is a friend."

Rain dropped her hands. "Matron Mother, I assume."

"Yes, warrior. Your arrival is well timed."

The two priests eased their guard, tending to the Matron Mother.

Rain knelt by the priest. The Matron Mother called her "friend," but she could not remember ever meeting a Sister of the Eternal Light, nor any female priest. "Do we know each other?"

"No. Not exactly. But we share a common friend."

"Common?"

"Cratha Nalinskat."

Rain remembered the name from her time with Arastor. "Yes, the Lady—"

"The librarian from Fallfell," the Matron Mother shot back.

Rain only nodded.

The priest stood with the help of her sisters, "I am Janal Burningblade, Matron Mother of the Sisters of the Eternal Light." She made a half-bow wincing in pain. "It would be an honor if you stay the night with us."

More screams came from outside.

"The townsfolk?"

"My sisters will see to the rabble. Please join us for a meal."

"Matron Mother, your wounds. You are in no shape to—"

"It's all right, Tima. I only need prayer."

Rain motioned behind her. "I have a friend outside on your doorstep…"

Janal nodded. "Yes, we will see to her as well."

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Though it pained Rain to do so, she stayed in the chapel with the Matron Mother and Tima. Her muscles stayed tense, listening to the battle outside the church walls. *A warrior without war is as useful as a dull blade.* Another of father's sayings.

Later the screams outside subsided. The clang of metal and hooves then followed. *It appears the Sisters are capable*, Rain thought.

Rain was shown to a small room while the Matron Mother prayed and healed.

The warrior had spent many days and nights in small rooms—inns, dungeons, even a jail cell or two but never a cloister.

The cubby was sparse even by Rain's standards. A washbasin sat on a small table. Clean priest robes lay on a bed that was too small for Rain's needs.

After washing, she changed into the priest robes. It was the only clothing she had that was not stained with the blood of others.

I left my pack on the stairs.

As if by divine cue, a woman, young, only a teen, opened the door, setting Rain's pack on the floor.

I wonder if that was a coincidence…

Rain sat on the floor next to her pack, preferring the hard stone to the down-filled bed. She emptied the contents. The Dwarves of the Ruby Mountain had insisted on packing it for her.

Along with Rain's items, it contained various parchments with notes of thank you's and "Bless the gods." A few small pieces of

jewelry, each Dwarven made and most likely valuable. Rain had no use for the items. She did not wear jewelry. No warrior would.

At the bottom of the pack was a raven's feather from Arastor, and a small leather bag.

Rain opened the pouch pouring out three rings. One was made of obsidian, one of wood and one of iron.

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Cratha slid the box across the counter. "It's the only piece I have."

The woman on the other side, cloaked in a red robe and hood so as only to show strands of blonde hair, placed her hand on the box, "I am sure it will be enough."

"It will bind your magic?"

"My powers do not come from a book."

"But magic is magic."

"No, Lady Nalinskat. It is not."

Cratha merely bowed her head. "You can find the source?"

The red-robed woman tucked the box inside her garments. "I *will* find the source."

"Then I wish you luck."

The woman smiled as she stepped toward the door, the tattoos on her face flashed silver then faded to a dull black. "There is no such creature as luck."

"Aislinne," the tension in Cratha's voice spilled out, "will you reconsider my offer?"

The red-robed woman said nothing more but slipped out the door like a wisp of vapor rising from morning dew.

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"Found them in my pack." Rain tossed the small leather bag on the dining table. "You know what they are."

Janal opened the bag, pouring the three rings onto the table. "Three rings?"

"You know what they're for?"

Janal twisted her lips to the side, a habit she started as a child. "I do not."

"But you know about Cratha."

"I do. But what do these have to do with her?"

Rain was confused, "How can you know Cratha's—"

Janal made a motion for the warrior to stop.

"I mean, how can you know. And not know these?"

The Matron Mother raised her hands, palms facing the other. Priests seated themselves. "Sisters, give us a moment."

After the last priest had closed the doors behind her, Janal spoke, "I know little about the work of Cratha Nalinskat. It was only recently that I found out she is head of the organization."

"The League?"

"The Iron League. That is what she called it." Janal poured another glass of wine.

"But you knew me. So, you know about Arastor and the Ruby Mountain."

"Cratha told me when I assisted her escape from Fallfell. She told me you work for her."

"In a way." Rain refused the priest's offer of wine. "I was with Arastor, who worked for Cratha. I had just returned this day to find Fallfell destroyed."

"Destroyed?" Janal put her hands together like she was praying, "Not yet. But I fear that is where this town is headed. We must put our efforts into rebuilding Fallfell."

Our efforts? Rain knew little of cities, having spent most of her childhood in the isolated hovel that is Hollowrock. She understood nothing about the politics and skills needed to rebuild a town, not to

mention the financial cost. "Maybe the Knights of the Rose can help."

"Knights?" Janal said the words with a bitter taste. "Those men… They have no morals. Only looking out for themselves."

Rain did not respond. Whatever was in the Matron Mother's past, she appeared to hate men as much as Rain. "There must be someone that can help the city."

"Doubtful."

"I've met a jaded priest."

Janal leaned back in her chair. "Perhaps. I have seen many things in my years. Not all of them fortunate." The Matron Mother took a deep breath. "I imagine you are not from one of the big cities."

"I am not."

"You have not had a hand in running a large community."

Rain shook her head.

"For good or ill, I have such experience. And it is not by hammer and nail that a town is formed."

"Government?"

Janal smiled. "Politics, actually."

Rain was not accustomed to such a deep conversation and began to feel overwhelmed. "Is that the same?"

"No, warrior. Government and politics are not the same."

Rain knew to end the conversation. She was getting into waters too deep for her. She went back to her meal.

Janal sensed the woman warrior was uncomfortable with the conversation and took it upon herself to lighten things.

"From where do you come?"

"Hollowrock."

"Hollowrock. That's not a place I have visited."

"No one has."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a backwater town near the Fire Mountains. No one goes there."

"There must be trade. You must have visitors."

"Trade? I guess." Rain released her fork. This was a subject the warrior could understand. "The only visitors I've seen are bounty hunters."

"What is Hollowrock like?"

A handful of words flashed into Rain's brain. None of them was appropriate for the Matron Mother.

"It's…" Rain struggled to find a decent description of the place. "It's not a nice place. Filled with people who don't belong anywhere else. It's a good place to hide."

Janal listened to the warrior's description. It reminded her of another town, one that sounded akin to Hollowrock. "Tradehaven."

"What?"

"I apologize, warrior. I flared the thought of a friend. One I miss dearly."

"Cratha?"

"Yes."

"I would like to tell Lady Cratha what happened in the Ruby Mountain and return the rings to her. Do you know where she has gone?"

"There is a price on her head. She escaped after a try on her life."

"Where?"

Janal, Matron Mother, grasped Rain's hand. She did not speak a word, only looked deep into the warrior's eyes.

Rain made no motion to back away. Staring into the priest's deep-set blue eyes, she thought she saw her father. Then the eyes looked like calm waters, then a raging torrent. Rain became lost in the deep blue.

"I see more than a single heart in your soul, warrior," said Janal.

Rain shook off the mesmerizing eyes. "You see heart, souls. What?"

"Forgive me for being so cryptic. I mean, you are not entirely… one…"

"Race?"

"A less delicate way to phrase it, but, yes, you have a split lineage."

"And that's a problem?"

"For you? But not for me. I see in your heart I can trust you."

Janal squeezed Rain's hand again. "She is in Tradehaven. You will find her with a man named Luli."

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"We found nothing at the master's mill."

Garn leaned back on his sofa bed, taking a small sip of wine. "Nothing?"

"No, your worship. Not a trace of the scum. It's as if the reformers were never there."

Garn Runechild, Archbishop to the great city of Beormaen, the community known far and wide as "sky city," arched his neck until he heard a pop in his shoulder. "Tension is such an evil thing. Don't you think?"

The man standing before the ruler of Beormaen was Vagoll Fogdam, a tall thin, sniveling, cowardly man who spent every waking day attached to the Archbishop's butt, hoping that in the future he would command of the city. "The informant swore to the gods they were there."

"Swore to the gods. I detest such words."

"His words, sire, not mine."

Garn eased himself off the sofa. It took a while, for he was neither a small man nor one in the best of shape. In truth the man was one pheasant leg away from being unable to walk under his own power.

The joke on the streets was that the city would crash to the ground because it could not support the man's weight.

The priests that cared for the Archbishop mentioned the need to lose weight and cut back on his wine.

For their concern, the archbishop had each one thrown off the highest tower to the ground one thousand feet below the floating city.

The walk to the window left Garn breathless, yet he managed to spit out the words. "Hang him from the steeple."

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Rain slid her two katanas over her shoulder. "I am grateful for your help."

The Matron Mother clasped the woman's face in her hands. "I had a vision last night. You were traveling unknown roads."

Rain was fond of the Matron Mother. In only one day, she had captivated Rain with her grace, dignity, and strength. But it often frustrated the warrior that she spoke in such terms.

"I have seen many roads."

"I mean, you are not familiar with where you are going, the cities you will see, and the laws that keep them alive."

Rain smiled. "I say you speak true. But I have a need for only one law." The warrior remembered another of her father's sayings.

So many laws made by men. You need only follow nature's law. The law of survival.

"It would be of great comfort to me if you let one of the Sisters travel with you."

"I will be careful."

"Someone who knows the laws of the land."

Arastor would know, thought Rain, *though I doubt I will ever see him again.*

"No. It's all right. I travel faster alone."

Rain took one piece of the Dwarven jewelry from a pocket, laying it in Janal's hand. "Thank you for your help."

The Matron Mother looked at the bracelet, wrought silver with an elegant gold inlay. Six large rubies encircled the piece. "Dwarven craft. Worth more than a year's pay."

The Matron Mother handed the piece back to Rain. "I am sorry, warrior, we cannot accept payment."

Rain refused to take it. "Payment? No. It's for rebuilding." Rain smiled, closing the door behind her.