

# Prelude: Escape

The roof burst into flames as the flaming arrows impacted it. The elven woman rushed around the room in sheer panic. She quickly donned her chain mail vest and draped a cloak over her shoulders. The elf ran to the corner of the room and retrieved her short sword and bow. She strapped them on with incredible speed and headed for the door. The door was in flames, *no matter*, thought the elf, as she grabbed a nearby vase, poured the water on her cloak, and slammed through the thatch-work door just as the roof collapsed behind her.

The woman glanced down the street to see hordes of orcs pouring into the village. Most of her kin had responded as she had and were, even now, rushing out to meet their attackers. Elven blades met with orkish cudgels. The elves were far too agile for the slower swinging orcs, but where one orc was felled, another appeared in its place. The sheer number of orcs was overwhelming. The orcs, with their larger builds and heavier swings, defeated any parry the elves attempted. One by one, the elves of the village perished under the mighty force of the orc horde.

The elven woman, seeing the defeat, took off down the street to her right with speed that only an elf could possess. Soon she recognized the telltale twang of bows as a hundred arrows took to the sky. Instinctively she dove into a nearby alley. Only a heartbeat later did the ground where she previously stood become engulfed with flaming arrows. The elf darted in and out of the alleyways and soon came upon the forest's edge. She ran into the forest with all-purpose to warn the other elves of the attack and to save her child from certain destruction.



On a small hill not far away from the village stood Orinek, the orc king. Orinek was a beast of a creature. Standing at over six foot ten, he was quite large for an orc. With large arms and legs as thick as a tree trunk, he intimidated even hill giants with his appearance. On his scarred, flattened face was a scowl that would make a dwarf shudder.

Orinek gazed at the sight that lay before him. It was near midnight so he couldn't see much except what was lit by the burning buildings. The elven village stood between two great forests, both on the east and west sides. To the south, was the hill upon which Orinek stood, and to the north was a crystal blue river coming from the east and wrapping to the north cutting through the forest.

Orinek was quite pleased with how the night was proceeding. He was walking down the hill a little ways when a lone elf burst through a fiery house. He heard his men cry out

and let free a volley of arrows, but the elf was too quick for them and darted off down an alley.

Orinek called out to one of his chieftains in the guttural language of his people. The orc chieftain quickly obeyed his master's command.

"The elf that fled in the midst of the attack—make sure she doesn't get away. I want her dead, but I must have her child alive" he commanded with graceful language.

"As you wish King Orinek," he replied in the more natural broken speech, "I will send a group to hunt her down, she will not escape."

Orinek nodded and dismissed him with a wave. The orc chieftain fled from Orinek with all speed fearing the consequences if he hadn't. Orinek heard him yell out to his nearest squad and sent them running off toward the forest where the elf woman was seen entering.

A group as large as twenty orcs would be heard long before they were seen Orinek knew. He would not risk his entire operation on a few battle-crazed minions. His plans were most delicate and he could not entrust them to these few. Orinek walked back up the hill to where his army had set up camp. He trudged past three or four tents to the entrance of a larger tent. He pushed open the flap and approached the figure standing near the back cleaning his sword.

"Noldor, I have a task for you." Orinek said to the figure. Noldor was the champion fighter, the best fighter in the clan, except Orinek of course, but he was only half-orc, no one knew what the other half was because it wasn't apparent by his appearance and he rarely spoke. He was of average height reaching just over six feet. His frame was smaller compared to

that of his king's. Noldor's body bore much more resemblance to a human, whereas most orcs are burly creatures, he was smaller with a moderate build. None came to judge him too quickly though, for all those that did were now dead. His endurance, speed and efficiency with a blade more than made up for the lower weight than that of a full blood.

Noldor snorted and shot an inquisitive glare toward his king.

"I want you to track down an elven woman—kill her whatever the cost." Orinek commanded him.

Noldor hoisted his large sword from the table and cut the air in front of him with emphatic acknowledgement of his objectives. He sheathed his mighty sword and trudged out of the tent with Orinek.

"You will find her in the forest to the east of the village," Orinek said as he pointed. "She shouldn't have gone far. If you find the child, do *not* harm. Bring him to me, I have...plans for him." A conniving smile crossed his face and he waved Noldor on his way.

Noldor nodded and bolted down the hill toward the forest and disappeared from Orinek's view as he entered the tree line. Orinek, quite confident in his champion's abilities, turned back to the situation at hand with the village.

It had taken nearly eighty orcs to conquer a village of twenty elves. The orc king had expected worse though, so he was satisfied with the outcome. He still had over four hundred orcs at his command, and that was plenty for the immediate task. He walked up to his nearest chieftain, who was busily ordering around his men.

"Have you found the child yet?" Orinek inquired.

“No we’s haven’t master.” the commander answered, “Me thinks the woman has’s him.”

“Find him at all costs. Decimate the village. Leave no table unturned, no closet unopened.” Orinek told his commander in an angry burst and trudged back up the hill to make preparations for his special guest.



The elven woman dodged in and around the trees with deadly precision. She could hear the rapid pursuit of the orcs on her tail. She dared not turn from her course and fight them; too much depended on her warning the others. Despite her elven speed, the darkness was having an effect on her. The rustling of leaves and snapping of limbs was getting closer.

She entered into a small open field and had no cover of trees to shadow her movements, before her lay a small meadow with high grass waving in the wind. She darted across its expanse hoping to outdistance her pursuers in a dead run. She was about half way across when she met face to face with the cold ground as she tripped into a hidden tree that had fallen. She regained her footing and continued ignoring her throbbing body.

She was just about to enter the opposite tree line when she heard a click and felt a complimenting pain searing through her shoulder. She turned her head to see a crossbow bolt protruding from her shoulder. She reached back and broke off the shaft, not having time to fully remove the bolt and tend the wound. The elf woman turned to find her pursuers too close for comfort. She lifted her hands and uttered a command

word. Instantly, two orbs of fire the size of apples appeared floating above her hands. She sent them soaring into the orc throngs.

The lead orc dove to the side, but the unfortunate ones behind him didn't see it coming until it was too late. Three orc bodies lay charred and lifeless on the ground. The remaining seventeen were thrown to the ground from the surge of energy. The elf reached down and ripped a handful of dirt from the ground. She whispered another command word and whipped the dirt across the field. As the dirt landed, it burst into flames burning the dry grass of the field and transforming it into an impenetrable wall. Pain coursed through the woman's shoulder, but she simply shrugged it off and continued on her way.



Four of the elven village's high priestesses and its eldest wizard were assembled in a small clearing. The full moon was nearing its zenith and the ceremony of the rune casting would begin. The lone heir of the Nasheib line, an elven child named Elanesse, was to be emblazoned with the rune of fire. The Nasheib elves were an ancient line of magic wielders whose body allowed magic to course through the veins like blood. Through the power of the runes embedded in their bodies, they could cast spells at will. The line had all but dissipated over the last few months as a result of war and the three lone survivors were the child, his mother and another. The art of embellishing a rune into a living soul was nearly an extinct practice and it required a full-blooded Nasheib to

work. The blood had to be the right type and the soul of the elf had to be pure. Runes were usually emblazoned at a young age for this reason, if the heart wasn't pure, the attempting caster found himself very much dead. The village of the Nasheib elves was the only remaining group of elves still in active practice.

The five elves gathered, with the child, around a small fire pit. The wizard took the child in his arms and laid him on his lap beside the fire. The four women took up song and dance. The song started softly and grew louder as they went. A soothing sound harmonized with the nature around them and drew power from it. The dance was that of a child at play, and quickened in pace with the surge of power. The sweet tune entered the Nasheib child's ears and he entered into a deep sleep. The song continued and the fire began to dance wildly, balls of light and sparks floated up into the sky and circled above the fire like a hawk over its prey.

The wizard took out an ornamental dagger with a jeweled handle. There was a ruby in the hilt: it lay pale and lifeless. The wizard dipped the blade of the dagger into the fire. He then took up a soft melancholy chant. With his free hand, he reached into a small leather pouch pulling forth a handful of a dust-like substance. Pulling the heated blade out of the fire, he tossed the dust onto it and it flared to life turning from red to white and then back again. The elf reached for the child's right hand and began to call on the power of the flame. The ruby in the dagger began to pulse and glow with an immense light. He made a swift stroke with the tip of the dagger leaving a garish line on the child's forearm, but the child did not stir from his sleep. The old elf carefully finished

the rune leaving a symbol of fire carved in the child's skin. The energy floating above the fire swirled in a downward spiral filling the black symbol until it glowed a bright red. The wizard then began to reach for his healing salves to nurse the burn.

Then quite suddenly another elf came bursting into the clearing. "The village is under attack!" she exclaimed, nearly out of breath.

The four dancing elves suddenly stopped, turning their attention toward the woman. As soon as they stopped, the child came back to consciousness and he howled in pain from the yet unattended burns of the rune in his forearm.

"Orcs have ambushed the village," she said catching her breath. "We were quickly overtaken." She turned her head back to the way she had come. "There are at least fifteen more orcs behind me, maybe more," she explained.

"We need to get out of here," the woman exasperated. "Is the ceremony complete?"

The wizard nodded and handed her the child

"The child's safety is most important, get him out of here. We'll fend off the orcs. Meet us at forest's edge, across the river, two miles north of the village and we'll finish the rune casting then."

The elf woman nodded and took off to the east to make a round about path back to the village.



The four elves formed a defensive formation around the wizard. The two in the rear readied their bows and the two



in the front brought their swords up to bear. The wizard set up defensive wards to block against any physical attack, and then prepared spells for the coming battle.

They didn't have to wait long until the sounds of the orcs drew closer and then the first orcs came into the clearing. The lead orc gave out a command, and the orcs let out a cheer and rushed forward into battle.

The rear elves let fly and had two more arrows knocked and ready by the time the first found their targets. The first arrow took the front orc in the throat and if it had survived, its life was taken from it by the trampling of its comrades. The second arrow took an orc in the eye, going right to the brain and it fell with a thud. The elves released their second arrows with abandon seeing as the orcs were too close to miss and then took up their swords as well.

The orc throng met head to head with the front elves. The first orc lifted its sword and swung with all its might at the waist of the elf in front of it. To its amazement, its sword didn't find hold in the elf's skin, but reflected off as if it had struck rock. The elf smiled at the clueless orc and slit its throat with one fluid movement. She thrust the dead body into the path of another orc and ran past it plunging her sword into its back as she passed.

The orc leader found a stump away from the area of battle and stood up on it. It began to give commands and warnings to its fellow orcs. They regrouped and came on with more ferocity. One of the elves' magical shields had dissipated and she took a quick cut across the shoulder. The wizard, seeing this turn of events, took out his wand and aimed it toward the wayward leader hoping to disband the orcs. A burst

of bright light appeared suddenly and a lightning bolt went sailing into the orc. Its singed body flew into the air, was impaled by a tree limb, and then hung limply.

The orcs memory of magic was all too fresh in their minds and they broke ranks. Those fortunate enough to be in the rear quickly escaped and ran to the south. The ones engaged in battle fell to the cool tips of elven steel.

The elves finished their kills and then began to nurture their wounds. Only one had taken a serious cut. The elf woman's comrade ripped off a piece of her shirt and tied it tightly around the wound to prevent excessive bleeding.

"We must move quickly to the arranged location," the wizard said. "The attack seems too well timed with the ceremony to be a mere coincidence. I sense that something larger is at work here."



The elf woman clung to her child as she ran with all her might. Her steps were a little wobbly with the added weight and she progressed slower for fear of dropping him. She weaved in and out of the trees, her gaze straight ahead.

Then she was lying flat on her back, a searing pain in her forehead. She quickly gained her footing, still holding the child; she saw what had caused her to lose her footing. From behind a tree stepped a gruesome half-orc with the body form of a human and the face of an orc. His sword was extended in her path, the flat of the blade perpendicular to the ground.

The woman set the child down and drew out her sword. She immediately lunged at him, aiming for his gut.

Noldor turned suddenly to the right, for it was Noldor, pulling out of harms way and leaving the woman vulnerable. With his free arm, he drove his elbow into her back, laying her low. She scrambled away, picking up a large stick in the process. The woman set it aflame with a thought and hurled it toward the half-orc.

Noldor batted aside the makeshift projectile, and marched slowly toward the elf woman. Now that she had a better idea for the half-orcs speed, she presented more caution towards him. She ran at him, and then hurled herself high into the air flying right over his head and landing behind him one hand on the ground.

Noldor turned around and reached up to his ear. He brought his hand to bear and looked at his own blood. In her flight, the elf scored a minor hit, one that merely made the half-orc all the angrier. He turned his gaze to where the elf had been and saw that she was gone. He then felt a tiny sting in his back along with a burning sensation, and turned about to the find the elf woman with blood on her—*flaming* sword. Although the woman barely managed to break skin through the thick leather armor that he wore, it was now aflame.

The half-orc ripped his armor off in one fluid movement and through it to the ground in a careless manner. The elf, seeing this, sprinted at him and took to the air again, and then all of the sudden she had stopped in mid-flight. She looked down to find a sword deep in her abdomen. Her face went pale and her eyes went up into her head.

Noldor, flung the sword forward and the elf slid off into the ground. By now, the sound of orc screams was drawing close to Noldor's location. Within a moment, he saw

the remnants of Orinek's band come scrambling toward him. They all halted, falling over each other, as they saw Noldor and smiles crossed their ugly faces as they beheld the dead elf.

Noldor ignored them and stalked over to the place where the woman had laid the child. He grabbed the child by the arm, and carried him over to the prone form of his mother. Elanesse stared into the white eye sockets of his mother, but no tears came to him. When Noldor turned the child, he saw a wall of flames burning in the child's eyes and his mouth was twitching in rage. He stared incredulously at the elf. He tossed the child into the body of his mother and drew his sword.

Noldor approached the boy, sword at the ready. The boy suddenly rose into the air, floating above his mother. The fire in his eyes flared to life. One of the orcs lunged for the child, but was stopped short by a blast of energy. The boy exploded into a ball of flames and sent a wave of fire flowing over all the orcs. The trees began to burn, the charred orc bodies flew and the boy, drained of energy, fell to the ground with a dull thud.



The five elves approached the appointed meeting area two miles north of the village, across the river, to find no one waiting for them.

"Where is she? She should have been here by now," said the old wizard impatiently.

"Give her some time," one of the elves replied. "She had the child to worry about, he must be slowing her down."

“It’s not that she isn’t here that worries me,” the wizard said with hesitation. “I just have a terribly bad feeling like something went wrong.”

At that moment, one of the elves doubled over and cried out in pain. The other four elves ran to her side. One of them helped her up.

“What’s wrong? What happened? Surely that wasn’t from your wound from the fight,” the wizard inquired.

The elf stared at him for many moments fighting back the pain. Finally, she regained her composure enough to talk.

“I felt like my body was thrown into a smithy’s furnace. I also felt as if my very inner being was being torn asunder. I fear the worst for my sister,” the elf managed to say between labored breathes.

The wizard looked at the elf, whose name was Elisetl, with sympathy and considered her words remembering that the Nasheib elves had another curious characteristic—an ultra-symbiotic relationship between twins. This relationship causes one twin to feel the emotions and pains of the other. *But it is not without its setbacks*, he mused considering what he had just witnessed. He thought of the childless Elisetl and her deceased husband and truly sympathized with her for all she had gone through in the past months.

He was roused from his musings when suddenly an area within the forest lit up like daylight. He turned to regard it, heard a thunderous roar like that of a lion and found himself lying on his back staring at the stars.

The elves jumped to their feet and brought their weapons to bear expecting an orc ambush. When they sensed there was no immediate danger, they sheathed their weapons.

“What was that?” asked Elisetl not really expecting an answer.

“This night has been far too strange to formulate any reasonable explanations,” replied the wise wizard anyway. “Let us run with all haste and find out for ourselves. We cannot let the orcs beat us there, for surely they are wondering the same thing.”

They all nodded and as quickly as they had come, they were gone, rushing towards the still glowing portion of the forest. They darted across a shallow part of the river and then ran through the forest with speed challenging a cheetah after its prey. So agile were they that the only sound they made was that of the rushing wind.

The apparent battlefield came quickly into view. The elves surveyed the damage. Orc bodies lay everywhere. The wizard walked over to one of the bodies and turned it over with his foot. The front side of it was burned beyond recognition. He took in a whiff of burned flesh and swooned at the scent. He continued across the area observing the trees that were on fire, and the patterns of bodies. He found what would have been the center to see two prone forms lying on the ground.

“No!” screamed Elisetl as she ran to the body of her sister. She rolled the body over and looked into her sister’s face. She was pale, and her eyes were white as snow.

“No—,” she said more quietly as if in self-denial. “Not like this.”

Elisetl lifted her head from the body of her sister to see the wizard going for the prone form of her nephew.

“He yet lives,” announced the wizard. “Although his breathing is very shallow. It is likely what you see around you is a direct result of the successfulness of the rune casting.”

“How would Elanesse possess such power at such an early age?” wondered Elisetl.

“I would guess that the loss of the boy’s mother pained him as much as yourself and the full fury of his heart was unleashed upon his mother’s murderers,” the wizard answered seeing directly to the heart of the issue.

“We must leave this place at once,” the wizard continued. “It will be swarming with orcs in a matter of moments. Elisetl will you take the child under your care?”

Elisetl stared blankly ahead not seeming to hear the wizard.

“I know you have suffered a great loss here, but there are larger concerns we have to attend to,” the wizard said sympathetically, but still urgently.

“Yes—,” Elisetl said quietly. “I will take him to the Faer’Atal. That is where I grew up. We will be accepted there.”

The wizard nodded, “We will also take the body of your sister to the Faer’Atal for a proper burial.”

He continued addressing the rest of the elves, “We alone know the boy still lives and we alone know the ways of rune casting. It may be best if we went our separate ways and met only if necessary. The boy should take Elisetl’s surname, Taneil. We must hide his heritage from everyone. There are those that seek to see the Nasheib line severed.”

With that, Elisetl took the child in her arms. She hesitated for only a second and then she was gone. The remaining elves picked up the body of the fallen elf and then, they too, went off into the night.



Beneath the clutter of fallen tree limbs and orc bodies, something stirred. As the result of a great shove, the debris flew in every direction and a dark form burst from the pile, sword drawn. As soon as the form perceived no danger, it marched out of the forest with a fiery indignation for elves.



# Chapter 1: Faer'Atal

The young elf backed away gasping for air.

“Come now, that’s not the best you’ve got,”  
proclaimed his teacher.

The elf shook his head and emptied his mind of all thoughts. His grip on his two swords tightened immediately. He pushed back all the aches in his body. Blood oozed from one of his hands as a result of squeezing too hard, but he paid it no mind. His focus was solely on his teacher. He screamed at the top of his lungs and lunged forward. His right hand brought his long sword up high, using it as a distraction. Meanwhile, his left hand brought his short sword in low, looking for an opening. To his disappointment, all he received was the clank of metal on metal.

“Better,” his teacher, Elisetl, observed. “But you’re faster than that Elanesse.”

In response, he offered parry after parry, batting aside any attacks. He continued his furious assault and then suddenly he was flying forward off-balance. Elanesse turned to see a sword flying for his face. He lifted his short sword just in time to deflect the blow. Still off-balance, he had no time to

parry the second sword coming in from the side, so he rolled backward narrowly escaping a haircut.



The sun was already setting by the time they completed their vigorous routine. Its radiance created a reddish purple hue in the evening sky—the painting of Makaira, god of elves. The pair walked down from a mountain overlooking their home, the great Faer’Atal. The Faer’Atal was a legendary forest where none in all the world of Arium would dare venture, except the elves. The elves, so attuned to nature, understood the forest, cherished it in fact, for the forest of Faer’Atal was a living forest. The elves thrived off the mere essence of the magic that resided there.

“You did well today, but you’re still holding back,” Elisetl said, half praising and half scolding him.

Elanesse just recently passed his twentieth year, merely a babe in the eyes of elves whose longevity allowed them to live over 700 winters barring unfortunate circumstances. He stood at a tall six feet and was slender not weighing more than 170 pounds. His golden hair glittered in the light of the setting sun. However, what was most peculiar about Elanesse was his amber colored eyes that glowed as orbs of fire.

He looked at the woman he thought of as his mother with mixed feelings. His skills were moderate in the arts martial, but he much preferred the silent approach, using a bow to defeat his foes, rather than the more direct one-on-one combat. There was another, secret strength that Elanesse liked to utilize on the battlefield, but few knew of it—his magic. It

had not taken Elanesse long after he started his training to find that inner part of himself that was imparted to him a little more than seventeen years prior.

Yes, he thought, he would much rather use his magic, but he could not. His aunt always told him that he was special, and then warned him not to use his magic. She said that it would put him in danger and recounted the tale of the day his mother died. Elanesse didn't understand what the big deal was, though. He hadn't seen a single person come looking for him in all his years in Faer'Atal.

"I'll try harder next time," he said half-heartedly.

"Don't try, do," came the expected response. Always Elisetl pushed him to focus, to empty his mind of any neutral negative thoughts and to fight to win. He handed his swords over to her then and pulled out a more familiar weapon. It looked like a small stick, about as thick as a grown elf's thumb and no more than a forearm in length. As Elanesse gripped it, it extended to just under four feet. He crafted the weapon himself as the initiation of his training on his tenth birthday. It was made of wood from Faer'Atal, and thus endowed with its magic. The owner could extend or contract the staff with but a thought turning a compact stick into a deadly weapon. Even greater was the weapon's versatility and strength, for it could be a staff with the strength of steel, or, if the owner willed, it could bend allowing the elf to insert a bowstring.

Elanesse moved to do just that as the staff, Deception by name, extended to its full height. He picked up the remainder of his gear from a pile on the edge of the field where they had been training. He slipped his quiver of arrows over his head and shoulder. Then he strapped his hunting knife

around his waist and put on a black leather armband on his right arm. This was another precaution from Elisetl to make sure his fire rune stayed hidden from sight. He didn't mind, though, and actually thought it was quite fashionable. He then added a similar style glove on the same hand for protection while shooting his bow.

"I'm going to fetch us some dinner," Elanesse said proudly with a smile beaming from his face as he considered the hunt ahead. He looped the bow over his shoulder, picked up his bag with some other supplies and then took off down path into the forest below. Elisetl could not but help smile too as she considered her nephew, whom she had adopted as her own, bounding off to use the skills he enjoyed the most. She simply wished he would approach combat like he did stealth and magic. Elisetl, probably the finest warrior in all of Faer'Atal, would pass on her skill to Elanesse, she just had to give him a little time.



He ran through the forest as stallion runs on an open field, knowing every turn and root of the place he called his home. At last he reached his favorite hunting spot. A ten-minute run from his home was a gully leading down from a small hill, two sides sloping down—the perfect path for animals, like deer, to walk down the hill. He climbed his favorite tree off to the right of the path with a perfect view of the top of the hill and all the way down.

Unlike most children, for he was still a child as far as elves were concerned, Elanesse was extremely patient. He

could wait for hours for an oblivious deer to come walking down the path, but he only needed a few minutes as the day grew darker. Down walked two doe followed by a buck. He had observed human hunters on the border of Faer'Atal shooting at the bucks and claiming their antlers trophies, but Elanesse had no need for such things. He knew that the most tender and best tasting meat came from the does.

Elanesse gripped his bow with his left hand and reached for an arrow with his right. He knocked it onto Deception, pulled back, and let fly at the lead doe. It dropped where it stood, and the other deer took off continuing down the gully. He quickly knocked a second arrow and shot it off at the second doe. The arrow found flesh as it pounded into its right shoulder, but it did not fall. Before Elanesse could ready a third arrow, the deer had entered the lower tree line and there was nothing he could do.

He slung his bow back over his shoulder, climbed down from his perch, and ran to his first kill. A clean hit; straight through the chest to the heart. He unsheathed his knife and made quick work of the deer, gutting and cleaning it like he had done so many times before. He pulled a rope out his bag and tied the doe's legs together and began to drag it behind him. He found the spot where he had struck the second doe just a few feet away from the first. There was a steady trail of blood leading into the forest. It was getting dark fast, but Elanesse couldn't resist the chase, nor could let the meat go to waste as food for the wolves.

He had spent no more than ten minutes following the trail when he spotted a campfire.

*That's strange, he thought, you don't see too many fires this far away from the village.*

He knew no elf would need a light, nor would they set up camp in this remote location unless they needed help. He decided to check it out. As he got closer, he heard the loud grunts of orcs. Immediately, Elanesse went on guard as he slowly approached the crest of a small hill near the campsite. He lifted his head slightly and peeked over a log. He saw three orcs. A quick glance of the surrounding area revealed that there were no sentries. One of the orcs was sitting off to the side by the fire. The other two were arguing over their dinner: his deer which lie lifeless in between them.

He watched the orcs a little longer. The two that were arguing started getting louder and they began shoving each other. Elanesse figured that this must have been rogue group that wandered a little too far from the mountains and got lost in the forest of Faer'Atal. One of the forest's magical properties was disorientation, preventing any unwelcome creatures from finding the elven village. It also kept anything from leaving the forest by leading them in circles for days.

*They aren't making any attempt to remain hidden, that much is obvious.*

He decided to have a little fun with this group, and get his deer back of course. Just then, the orc sitting by the fire got up and wandered into the forest to relieve itself. The other two, still trying to lay claim on the deer, didn't even see their comrade leave.

He left the first doe behind the log and silently crept around the camp to the other side where the lone orc had gone. He found it by a tree, not even looking around, oblivious to

the danger that approached it. Elanesse drew his knife again and began coming up behind the orc. He placed his hand over its mouth and slit its throat, quickly and silently. He grabbed the body and laid it down quietly then headed back to the camp. By now, the two other orcs had drawn weapons, though not against the elf.

Elanesse decided to take them out with his bow. He put the knife away, slipped the bow off his shoulder and pulled out an arrow. For a moment, he entertained the idea of shooting two arrows at once to see if he could hit them both, but caution prevailed and he stuck with one. He snuck up behind a tree on the other side of the fire where the two orcs were now banging clubs at each other. Had he walked right out into the camp, neither of them would have paid him any attention so intent were they on beating each other to a pulp. The orc to Elanesse's left began running and making a swing at the other when an arrow impacted its temple, dropping it to the ground. The orc shrieked, looking his direction, and then ran towards him, not because he was an elf, but because he took his kill.

The elf wanted to use his magic to dispatch of the third enemy.

*After all, what harm could it do,* he thought.

He swung his arm, palm up, intending to manipulate the already existing flame to scorch the approaching orc. Nothing. He forgot that the rune on his wrist must be uncovered in order to access his magic, an unfortunate side-effect of hiding it. This did not bode well for him, seeing the orc was almost on him now. He could only react as he jumped out of the way, barely avoiding an overhead cudgel swing

from the orc. Elanesse did not like direct battles like this. He was only just beginning to learn to sword fight, he'd never encountered an orc who carried a miniature tree for a weapon before. He didn't even know how to begin to block those massive swings.

Luckily for Elanesse, the orc was put off balance by its missed swing. He quickly tore his glove and armband off, just as the orc came around for another swing. This time the orc swung side to side, forcing Elanesse to awkwardly limbo and fall to the ground narrowly avoiding another beating. But the orc recovered quickly this time, turning its swing into an overhead chop heading straight for the elf at its feet. Elanesse had no time to think, he only reacted as the rune of his wrist glowed red and his hand plunged forward sending a blast of fire directly into the orc's gut hurdling him across the campsite.

Elanesse began breathing heavily and shaking, coming to realize how close he had been to having mashed potatoes for a brain. He stood up, and glanced over at the smoking body of the orc he had just killed. Then he looked down at his hand, and at the rune that was quickly fading back to an empty black. The fireball surprised him, since he hadn't really gotten control of the magic yet. His aunt wouldn't let him use his ability very often, if at all. When he did, it was often without her permission or knowledge.

He picked up his glove and armband. They had now been trampled on by the orc as it was attacking him. Elanesse gave them a quick brush and put them back on. In the scuffle, he had lost his bow too. It had shrunk back to its small compact form and was lying on the ground a few feet away



where he had been standing when he shot the second orc. Finally, he walked over to his prize: his second deer.



Off to the side of the campsite stood a tent that the orcs had set up when they stopped for the night. Had Elanesse been a little more observant after his battle, he would have noticed two little eyes peeking out from behind the door flap. The eyes of a goblin which had witnessed the entire fight, and now trembled and stood horrified by what it had seen.



Elanesse arrived home about forty minutes later. The orc camp was only about twenty-five minutes away, but he milled around their camp a bit longer before leaving. On top of that, he did have two deer to drag along behind him.

The elf city, if it was to be called that, lay at the center of Faer'Atal. The oldest and largest of trees dwelled there, some several thousand years old. Each elf home was crafted into the trunk and outlying branches of the tree. For the most part, dwellings were founded near the roots. Inside each dwelling were access ways allowing the elves to climb out on to the branches above. Most families chose to build a kind of balcony that allowed them a view and an occasional different place to sleep if they desired. The inhabited homes also had, most often than not, a wooden bridge connecting them for ease of travel. Faer'Atal had no guard towers or watch posts, for the magical forest kept intruders away from the village

The elf city of Faer'Atalion was home to roughly one hundred and fifty families and some four hundred elves. The various net workings from tree to tree truly gave the appearance of a vast metropolis. Elanesse and Elisetl's home was on the western edge of the city about two or three trees in from the first inhabited one. He had been off hunting in the west, so it wasn't long before he reached home with his kill.

"What took you so long?" Elisetl called from somewhere in the house as soon as she heard the door open.

"I ran into some...adventure," he hollered back.

Elanesse left the deer off to the side by the door, and dropped his bag and Deception by the fireplace to the left. The walls of the house were the very walls of the tree itself. Almost all of the homes were laid out exactly the same. In order for the tree to remain upright after being hollowed out, a substantial amount of tree had to be left alone. For this reason, all the homes were "U" shaped. The outside walls were a foot and a half thick all the way around and the center of the tree was at least three feet thick and varied depending on the age and size of the tree.

Typical floor plans involved an entryway at one end of the "U," wrapping around with fireplace at the "bottom" and a kitchen/dining room, though small, at the other end. Elanesse's home was furnished with a rug from the fur of a black bear in from of the fireplace, where he placed his belongings. The fireplace was an interesting construction in itself. Lined with stone at the base to protect the tree, the chimney would be cut out to follow the natural growth of the tree and would exit at an already existent hole on the surface

of the trunk. On the second floor were the living quarters, and the third led out to the balcony and bridges.

As Elanesse entered the kitchen, Elisetl came down the stairs. “You’re usually quicker than that. I assumed you’d come home empty-handed and took the liberty of cooking dinner. There’s a bowl of vegetable stew over there on the table. I’ll warm it up for you, and you can tell me about your ‘adventure.’”

They sat down at the small dinner table and enjoyed each other’s company like they’d done so many times over the past few years. Elanesse didn’t really remember his birth mother, and Elisetl is all he had. He considered her his real mother, she considered him her son. Elanesse began to recount his story with great drama, acting out each step of his brief adventure beginning with his hunt, leading on to the chase, and finishing at his encounter with the orcs. As he pantomimed the orc swinging at him with an overhead chop, he almost spilled the rest of his stew. Elanesse did change some details toward the end about how he killed the third orc, knowing that Elisetl would not approve.

“You should have been more careful,” Elisetl chided, “You could have been killed. You should never have exposed yourself like that, at least not until you’ve had some proper instruction on various fighting techniques in one-on-one situations. What you did was dangerous and reckless, but you did show that your abilities are improving and you eliminated some of the enemy.” She held her gaze on the young elf, silently, for a moments longer and then began to clean up, musing about the boy’s potential.

Elanesse took the rebuke in stride, knowing it would have been much worse had he told her the truth about his third kill. All in all, Elanesse was pretty pleased with himself. He felt like he could take on the world.



After cleaning his deer, applying the proper preservatives, and storing it, Elanesse got ready for bed. It had been a long day, and his body was physically tired. As he lie in bed on the second floor of the house, though, his body could not find sleep. He relived his battle over and over again in his mind, filled with excitement. It was his first real experience with his abilities besides hunting and training with Elisetl. He wanted more, and his heart now longed for adventure and excitement.

He held his hand above him, staring at it. He turned it over and considered the fire rune. Elanesse began using it, engulfing his hand in flames, and then turning it off again. The use of it, though, drained energy from the user. Before long, he could not even create a tiny flame above his finger, his body completely exhausted from the days events. Finally, he drifted of to sleep and slept like a baby.

The following morning, he awoke quite a while after dawn, but still long before midday. Each day was like any other day, with the exception of his adventure the day before. Elanesse would get up do all the necessary chores that needed to be done. He and Elisetl would then pack a lunch and head up the mountain to the west of their home to the field they had trained in the previous day. So determined was Elisetl to see

Elanesse become a sword fighter that she drilled him rigorously each and every day from the time the sun reached its zenith in the clouds until it set in the eastern sky.

Days turned into months, and still his training proceeded. Elisetl continued to see improvement in the boy, but she also saw his growing disinterest for the long sword. As much as Elisetl wanted him to be like herself, a master at sword fighting, she also wanted his happiness. They still trained with swords each day, but Elisetl began tweaking his routine, allowing for archery practice, stealth training, and wilderness tracking. His string arm got stronger, his feet quieter, and his mind more quickly identified tracks left by animals, how long ago they were left and the directions they were headed.



“You’re ready,” Elisetl confidently proclaimed, “It is time for you to test your skill completing a real task in very real danger. Your time of shooting at wooden targets, and sneaking up on animals has come to an end.”

Elanesse only stared straight ahead, sweat beading down his face. They had just completed another routine. Their last routine. The completion of his training hadn’t quite sunken in yet.

“What do you suppose I’ll have to do for my Ascension?” Elanesse softly asked, his eyes still focused ahead, though not focused on anything particular at all.

“That is for the elders to decide at the ceremony tomorrow night,” came the older elf’s response, “They always

choose a specialized task based on each elf's individual abilities and skills.”

“Tah'zel and Ariana are also participating in this year's Ascension. You three have been close friends for many winters now. The Ascension will either bind you closer together, or tear you apart. You will have to be prepared to complete your task regardless of the outcome concerning your friends.”

There was silence for many moments as Elanesse continued his meditative ponderings. Tah'zel and Ariana had trained just as hard and rigorous as Elanesse had over the last year. Each of them possessed different skills which made them diverse as a team, though none of them had ever put those skills to actual use in battle, save Elanesse's brief encounter a year prior. Elanesse had stealth and his bow, Tah'zel possessed great strength and carried his trusty sword, and Ariana was quick and relied on her double sided pike which could use whole or separated into two individual weapons.

Elanesse could not wait for the Ascension. He had never forgotten the night he defeated the orcs, and the desire for adventure still yearned within him. At the same time, reality began to strike. He was no longer a child. No longer would he have a comfortable bed to sleep in or a home under the protective watch of Faer'Atal and his aunt, Elisetl. He was becoming an adult, and the thought of independence frightened him. Elisetl left and returned home as he continued to stare into the distance for many more minutes, wondering what the future might hold and where it would lead him.

## Chapter 2: Ascension

Elanesse returned home sometime later. Elisetl asked no questions, for she understood the weight that now lay on the young elf's heart. He went to bed that night, not saying a single word the remainder of the evening.

The morning came bright and early and Elanesse awoke immediately filled with excitement. The solemnity of the night before had washed away from his face, and he was left filled only with adrenaline. The future still seemed daunting to him, but he had vowed to make the very best of it and enjoy himself in the process. He refused to let uncertainty damper the energy of adventure.

"I'm meeting Tah'zel and Ariana this morning," Elanesse told Elisetl as he was coming down the stairs from his room. "We want to spend some time training together before the ceremony tonight."

"Have you completed your chores yet?" Elisetl asked with a tone of priority in her voice.

"No, but we need all the extra time we can get practicing, can't I skip just one day?" came Elanesse's whine.

"Elanesse, chores are part of your training too. How do you expect to succeed in greater tasks when you cannot

even finish the mundane and tedious tasks of life? It's like failing to put on your armor before the battle. If you are too eager for the fight that you cut out the simple things that seemingly waste time, then you are sure to fail. No, you will complete your chores, then you can meet Tah'zel and Ariana for your weapons training."

Elanesse began to argue, but then cut himself short knowing that the wiser, older elf was right again. He set off immediately to the tasks at hand and before the sun had reached its height in the sky, Elanesse was with Tah'zel and Ariana walking through the forest.