

## Chapter 1

East of the Stone Spine, in the province of Parhealia, the elves of the Linaali woods had begun to face severe hardship under the rule of the human King Hollare. Their goods became harder to sell, their portions of farm land became smaller, and the king's absolute disdain was the only treatment the Linaali elves came to know. Hollare's hatred of the elves was born of blame for the death of his mother. The once Queen had been cursed to death by the twisted magics of a falling demonic cult. The presence of this malicious cult plagued Parhelia for half a century, summoning vile creatures to lay waste where they walked. The Queen's hand in the destruction of the cult sealed her doom, and despite the great power the elves have over life and nature, their magic wasn't enough to stop the curse from taking its toll. With the cult shattered, a young Hollare began to build resentment towards the elves because of their failure instead. His father continued to rule for many years after, and his fair treatment towards the Linaali only furthered Hollare's confusion and hatred. The once King also came to pass, but not of tragedy, simply time itself. Hollare inherited the throne, and with it, the power to finally act on his obsessive hatred of the elves.

The King's protection from the wild beasts and bandits of Parhealia slowly vanished, and any real power the Linaali Lords once had became meaningless in Hollare's court. Despite civil attempts to break Linaali off from Parhealia, Hollare stalled and cut off the trade routes. He continued by building a blockade and halting all travel through the Spine Gate into the elven province of Silnai. The Spine Gate is the only pass through

the mountains into Silnai. The elven fabrics so once highly prized vanish from all but the least honest markets. In an attempt to start a coup to free themselves from the grasp of King Hollare, the Linaali elves only found themselves facing war with the King's armies. The fields that had once been shared farms between elven and human kind had become the grounds of war. With each weakened push the Linaali elves could muster, Hollare pushed back harder. As time went on it became the dry season and cold was not far around the corner. King Hollare was nearly assassinated in a last ditch effort, and he responded by setting the Linaali Woods aflame. As with refugees of past and present, the Linaali elves became stripped of their home, their identity, and even aspects of their culture. Many of the elves stayed within the now charred woods hoping to salvage the lives they led there, but with the winter months rapidly approaching, a considerable group also fled to find shelter. While the war is over in the sense that the Linaali elves cannot significantly fight back, Hollare's persecution continues to be relentless and more often than not, bloody.

A sizable group has taken up shelter at a conquered human fort, which Hollare's army all but abandoned as a difficult location to man and restock. These elves are without food, the shelter is deprived and declining by the week, and no word from the loyal Linaali Lords. Luckily, Lorinaium, the elven name for this lake, is the same body of water that made this a difficult spot for Hollare to control is easily accessible. Mëoi, a fairly young elven woman who had worked as guard and hunter among the Linaali town of Nyillor before and during the war time has remained strong and been singled out to be a

voice of direction in this difficult time. She knows many but not all of the people around her, having been of aid to most of them for several decades. This connection and foundation of trust has helped her in the directing of the refugees while she works to secure a more long term plan for her people. Her father Astaire, had been one of the prestigious Tree Shapers prior to the war, and lends his aid as weaving vines and other plant life into as best shelter he can before the cold sets in. Mëoi had rescued a child, Elymia, from the fires that devastated their home, and now has her under her wing. Elymia has managed to retain her childhood radiance despite the horrors of the war, and has been a spark of warmth for many of the elven refugees. Unfortunately, reports reveal that the blockade on the Eastern side of the Gate of the Spine is still in effect, still barring them from any aid the elves of Silnai could potentially offer...

## Chapter 2

Mëoi looks over what the small hunting party had managed to bring back, it wasn't as much as last week. She has taken on many new tasks and roles as a rising leader of her people. Even in the past few days many of the refugees have begun to come to her asking for direction. As winter is very near on the horizon, she expected things to get more difficult, but not this fast. "Should I move to work with the farming team?" Her father, Astaire, asked, noting her expression.

"No, I need you to keep the shelter strong. I don't think we're going to be able to grow enough in too much time anyways." Mëoi started, "I'm thinking of..."

“I grew a radish!” A voice shouted.

Bursting into the makeshift kitchen, Elymia raised a little vegetable proudly in her hands. Its shape is a bit off, but it’s a radish nonetheless. She dropped her pose and carried it over to a barrel only partially full of vegetables, making sure to carefully place it on top of all the others. “Well, I did have some help growing it,” She said sitting down. “That is wonderful, I’ll make sure it gets used in the soup tonight! I’ve got to check on some people, Elymia, do you want to come along?” Mëoi asks, “Popa, can you check on the eastern wing, see how that shelter is holding up?”

“Exhilarating!” Astaire mocks jokingly as he makes his way towards the door.

Mëoi and Elymia walk out and through what once was the courtyard of the old fort. Some extra housing has been shaped from the small trees, however most of the area is used to grow what little vegetables they can manage. They speed the process of growing to a mere week through specialized magic, though it can only work so far and for so long. Elymia waves at almost everyone she makes eye contact with, and nearly runs into a wall so distracted. “Where are we going? Do I know these people? What do they do?” Elymia questions.

“Some yes, we are going to check in with Shal and Levia, and a woman named Nia. Do you remember Shal and Levia?”

Elymia nods in response, “They are the scouts that brought me back my doll, right?”

“Good,” Mëoi continues. “I asked them to go and look around the edge of the Linaali to see if anyone else was hiding out there, how much was left, any supplies, that sort of thing. I don’t know Nia, but they have asked to meet with me.”

The both of them reach a tower along the northern rampart, and head inside. Levia, who was resting, gets up and begins to greet Mëoi upon hearing the door open. Shal is across the round room going through his pack, but waves a hello over his shoulder. In the only chair this tower houses, a strange hooded woman sits hunched over looking at her clasped hands. “Mëoi, it’s great to see you, and you too little Elymia,” Levia begins. “The run was about as uneventful as it could get, well until we found her.” She says, indicating to the woman in the chair, who’s attention had also turned to Mëoi.

“We can give you a run down of all the minor details later,” Shal says walking over. “Nia here gave us quite the surprise, though, she was using the most beaten up boat I have ever witnessed float across the Lorinaium. Though I should let you speak for yourself, tell her what you told us.”

“Well, it is an honor to meet you Mëoi, your friends speak highly of you,” she says standing up. “I.. I was looking for shelter on the other side of the lake. I didn’t have anyone with me, but still not as easy a task as it had seemed. While I was resting one night, I thought I started to hear voices. They were distant, but drawing near. I hid among some bushes, and I could see a regiment of the King’s army. I could hear them talking, they were searching for some... something they lost, from the sounds of it. But they also spoke of new orders, to circle around the southern end of the lake and retake

a fort from 'Elvish Bandits.' The way they spoke only filled me with dread and fear. Once I knew I had a chance, I got out of there. I found a small boat near the eastern shore, hidden between the brush and rocks. As Shal here mentioned, it was not in the greatest of shape, but it managed to carry me across. I saw the two of them walking down along the shore line, and now I'm here. I hope I can be of help, these are dangerous times."

The five of them stand in silence for a moment, until Elymia speaks up. "We aren't bandits! Almost everyone here is a farmer!"

"You are right Elymia, the King and his armies are delusional with a hatred I don't understand, and there is nothing I can do to fix that. But we can work to protect ourselves, we know they are coming thanks to Nia. That is more than we could have asked for," Mëoi responds. "Now, can you go find Astaire for me? There is a lot we need to go over. We are facing a grave situation."

"We are not in any state to defend ourselves, I can barely grow enough cover for everyone's heads," Astaire says once the news is repeated to him, he collapses into the chair and buries his forehead in his hands.

"No you misunderstand, I recognize that no one is in any capacity ready and able to fight, nor would I want them too. What we have to do is protect ourselves, stop them from even getting this far. The road up from the south end of the lake has to go through a mountain pass, see here," Mëoi begins pointing at the location on a map. "Shal you mentioned that from when you investigated the situation at the Spine Gate, how easy would it be to bypass that?"

“Well... It was far enough up the route that if we could block it, they would have to turn around. Hmm. By the time they get back down, winter will have begun for sure.” Shal starts, “Though the lake might begin to freeze over, and depending on how much, they could simply use that to just go around on the ice...”

“With their metal armor on? On fresh ice? They’d be mad to try that or... wait. Forcing them onto the ice might actually work in our favor. We should be able to thicken the ice a fair bit with enough water magic. Lead them right into a trap, and crack open the whole lake under them.” Mëoi ponders out loud, thinking about the technicality of pulling off such a trap.

“I think it might be a little more complicated than just that, Mëoi,” Astaire begins,

“However this is starting to sound like a feasible plan. It would require a lot of convincing to pull people away from here, but it’s not like you haven’t done that before. They are beginning to see you as a leader, they will hear you.”

“Nia, if you could best estimate, where do you think you were along the eastern shore? It would help me estimate better how many days we have to plan and act,” asks Shal.

“I remember that little island being to my right as I pushed off from shore,” She answers, pointing at a spot half way up the eastern coast of the Lorinaium.

“So we have about a week at most to prepare,” Shal calculated.

They debated all throughout the night, even into the early hours of the morning as Mëoi led them to a final plan.

### **Chapter 3**

Mëoi pokes a stick at the campfire, hoping to keep it burning even in the now settled cold. Levia and Shal had returned just the night before, having successfully blockaded the mountain pass. Elymia drops an armful of sticks next to the dwindled stack of wood, and sits down near the fire. “So they’ll be here soon, huh?” Elymia asks, stretching to warm her hands.

“Definitely, I spotted the regiment heading towards the pass yesterday from that perch my popa set up for me in the pines. We have two days at best. Shal is going to be going back to check how things are at the fort, I told him you are going to go back as well.”

Mëoi responds.

“What! But I’ve done so much to help! I even got you more sticks! Let me stay, please!”

Elymia begins to protest. “I can watch from your perch, or, or I uh, I could keep the fire going!”

“Your help has been great, Elymia, and even with the clear-cut plan we have, it’s still a dangerous situation.” Mëoi begins, “Levia will have lookout covered, and Nia will keep your fire burning too. I can’t risk having you here when the King’s army reaches us, okay?”

Elymia sighs and begins to get ready to go. Mëoi gives the fire one last shove, and goes off in search of Levia and Nia.

She finds the two of them at the edge of the ice, discussing the frozen lake. Astaire is out on the ice, kneeled down and pouring a blue aura of magic across the surface.



“How’s everything looking? He still looks quite busy, much more than I thought we’d be. Nia, you sure I can’t convince you to head back to the fort, too?” Mëoi questions.

“About an hour ago, the sheet shattered a bit, He said that he will have it fully repaired and solid by the morning.” Levia responds.

“As for me, I’m certain I want to stay. I need to make sure they never hurt a soul again,” adds Nia.

“Again?” Levia notes, “What do you mean by ‘again’? Is there something you didn’t tell us? What happened when you first saw them?”

“I... well... I assume they’ve hurt people before right? I was just hiding from them, I thought... that if they found me they would most likely kill me.” Nia stammers in response.

Levia grabs a hold of her by the arms. Mëoi goes to stop her, though Levia simply asks,

“Who are you?”

She shakes her, “What aren’t you telling us?”

Mëoi steps in, and moves them apart before an inclination of a new problem could begin. She then asks, “If there is something else to your story that you haven’t shared yet, could you please?”

Nia takes another step back, sighs, and begins to look down her feet. “I.. yeah. In truth, I was going to tell everyone the second this was over. I said I thought they might be searching for something that night, remember? They definitely were, they were looking for me. My name is Nia, that was never untrue. I... I’m the King’s daughter. I could not stand idly by while my father sought revenge for a cause that is so transparently unjust.

I have done as best I can to help protect your people, but it became clear I could do nothing from behind walls. So I ran, and I have made as many of my father's campaigns as useless as possible. I wanted to expose this to you after, as I have watched it create distrust faster than a true arrow. I apologize for hiding this."

Mëoi steps back to process this revelation, but Levia asks, "Is this really a trap for them? Is this a-

"Levia," Mëoi interrupts, "If she intended us harm she would have given us bad information. We spotted them yesterday going to the mountain pass, she was not lying about the regiment's direction."

She turns from Levia to Nia, who is still looking towards the ground. "You have not given me a reason to distrust you, but is there anything else you haven't said? What is in it for you to help elven refugees? We are looking to survive without a home we had grown to know and love, what is your motivation?"

Nia, looks up to face Mëoi and responds, "In the moments since you found me to be not just another lost soul, the both of you have become understandably much more concerned about the safety of your people. In these mere seconds, you have proved a compassion that my people have been convinced of as a weakness. Yet here I am seeing it as the foundation of why you are able to survive, why you are willing to put yourselves at the edge of a lake based on the words of a stranger. My motivation is to bring that compassion back to my home, as my forsaken father has my people living in fear instead."

“It would seem I need some catching up,” Astaire says, returning from the ice. “You can tell me while I recover my strength.”

As the sun rises the following morning, each has begun to finalize their preparations. Levia has herself up in the makeshift perch, lending her watchful eyes. Nia and Mëoi stack stones and boulders to work as arrow cover along the shore, while Astaire is putting the finishing touches into his icy path. Levia appears rapidly from the small cluster of pines, running with wide-eyed and deeply concerned. “We are out of time! I thought we had another day before they got back from the mountain pass, but they’re going out onto the ice!”

Mëoi looks out to the ice, Astaire still spreading magic across the surface. “Popa!” She shouts to him, echoing across the thick sheet. He looks up from his task to see the three of them at the shore line. He doesn’t hesitate to make a break towards the shore.

*Thhnk.* An arrow strikes the ice where he just left. Astaire looks back at the spot, loses his footing and collapses onto the frozen surface. *Thhnk.* He pushes himself forward, reclaiming his footing. The King’s soldiers now visible on the ice, flinging arrows through the air. “Popa! Don’t look back!” Mëoi shouts to Astaire. *Thhnk, thhnk.* Astaire resumes running, “I’m almost there Mëoi, don’t yo-” *Thp.* He falls to his stomach, an arrow lays embedded in his back. Mëoi watches in a stunned silence as he pushes himself up to his knees, and places a bare hand on the ice. After a second of silence, a loud, deep creaking sound belows from across the surface. White faults begin to crackle and

extend from where Astaire sits. As he pours his magic into the ice, another arrow places itself in his back. He looks up at Mëoi, and falls to his side.

“No...” She mutters, and looks to see that the soldiers have begun to run towards them, drawing swords instead.

She pushes herself from behind cover, and runs out onto the ice to where her father lays, the regiment having halved the distance and drawing closer.

Astaire coughs as she drops next to him. “You can do this... just breath... you... can.” he gets out as he exhales one last time. Mëoi reaches out to the same spot he had, closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.

She hears the soldiers running along the ice, each footstep melding into an echoing stampede. Voices, shouting from both in front and behind her, indistinguishable. For a second, the sounds stop, before a groan booms out through the frozen lake. Mëoi opens her eyes, watching a blue energy swirl down her arm into the sheet of ice.

Suddenly and violently, with a loud crack, the ice shatters, erupting into the air. Jets of water push horse sized chunks of ice into the sky. The King’s soldiers, flung upwards as well, flailing as they find themselves falling towards the surface of the water. A cold mist hangs in the air, as the shattered ice rains down across water.

Mëoi stares out across the water, until she feels a hand placed on her shoulder. She looks to see Levia next to her, Nia by the lakeside. She gets to her feet, shaking. She begins to reach down towards Astaire, but is stopped by Levia. “Go get warm, rest. I will take care to move him.”

Mëoi makes her way off what little remains of the ice. Nia reaches out, and supports her as they walk towards the small camp. “Mëoi, I.. I am both so sorry and grateful for you and...” Nia trails off, “I am so sorry.”

## CHAPTER 4

Elymira fidgets with her doll as they stand in the courtyard. Nia stands next to the girl, along with Shal and Levia. Many others are gathered around, singing of praise and passing. Mëoi is at the center, and pats down the dirt around a pine sapling, Astaire, buried below. “My popa, Astaire, worked to make sure we are all safe. You all have come to look at me for direction with the loss of the Linaali woods, when the Lords disappeared along with it. For me, when I wasn’t sure in my own direction, he was who I could go to make sure I was doing the right thing.” Mëoi pauses. “We will stay strong during these cold months, we may not have the Linaali to shelter us, but we have each other. We will endure this, I promise.”

The day continued with singing, many condolences, and as big of a meal as the stockpile could afford. Everyone ate well, and discussion began. “Mëoi,” began one older woman, “You have worked to give us direction and protection with so much uncertainty, you have been in all ways but title, been a leader to us all.” She turns to the others, each disheveled individual’s eyes glowing brightly in the lantern lighting, and asks. “Shall we fix that?”

A chorus of endorsement filled the courtyard, dozens of voices raising their support for Mëoi. At the end of the night it was decided, home or not, winter or summer, Mëoi would

assume the mantle of a Linaali Lord, and lead them through this hardship and into a yet uncertain future. As allowed by her birthright, Nia extends her hand and clasps Mëoi's wrists, raising them high for all to see as she recites a proclamation, ascending her to Lordship. Mëoi turns to her after this is over, "When we have settled, and you have your place, we will undo the damage that has separated our peoples. Tyranny will not have its place in Parhealia."

"When the time comes, I will need your guidance and expertise to lead with compassion and inclusion. The time to overthrow my father and his fear mongering rule will be soon upon us. That battle is for yet another day."

Nia was convinced to stay, at least through the cold months. Many of the elves found her tale to be inspiring, and the hope that more will take a stand against the King.

Mëoi was ready for winter, it would be difficult, but she worked to turn this fort into a home, and she wasn't about to lose another.