

# PROLOGUE

Long ago a sorcerer ruled all the land between the Socan Mountains and a tiny town in the south called Prestel. The land prospered under Forgein, but all was not well. Forgein was a dark and evil man.

The sorcerer demanded a huge tribute to be sent to his temple in the Socan Mountains. There he sat, pouring all of his strength into a polished blue stone. He put the stone on a necklace and always wore it around his neck. Forgein even sacrificed his wife to strengthen his magic.

When Forgein had focused his charm until he thought it held enough power, he attempted an infamous magic. Forgein and twelve of his greatest disciples gathered in the Socan Mountains.

There they built an altar and sacrificed the daughter of the Elven King.

By doing so, the thirteen mages hoped to open a gateway to another world, where they would bring back hordes of demons to conquer ours. Forgein's attempt to control all did not work. Instead, the first wave of demons through the gateway slaughtered the sorcerer and all of his followers.

Many foul creatures emerged from the dark land. Griffions, dragons, goblins, gnomes and many more evil monsters thronged into the light.

Since then, the good races - men, elves, and dwarves - have had to struggle to survive in their new wild land. Someday the balance of the world will be righted, The things that lurk in the night will be banished from us. Until then, all we can do is hope the day comes soon, and curse Forgein and his lust for power.

# 1

“Alexandria, come in for lunch!” her grandma called from inside the farmhouse. Alex took one look at the colorful leaves of fall, jumped down from the tree, and ran from the tree in front toward the house. As she got through the door, her grandpa picked her up and gave her a warm hug.

“Happy Birthday Alex,” he said as he put her back down on the floor.

Alex went into the kitchen and sat at the table. Her grandma plopped a tantalizing slab of salted pork on her plate. Alex knew this was a rare occasion because her grandma would only serve this expensive food on holidays and birthdays. Alex cut off a juicy piece and bit into it.

Alex was so excited about the meal that she half-forgot about the present that her grandma had promised her.

Alex knew she would get the charm that her grandma always wore. She could remember exactly how her grandpa found it working in the coal mines, up in the Socan Mountains. They ate their meal in silence, as they always did.

After they finished, her grandpa said “Thanks for the meal, Meredith”, patting his stomach.

“Cleophus, go to the barn and get some eggs for dinner”, Meredith said to her husband. Cleophus stood up and limped out the back. After he left, Alex’s grandma started talking again.

“Alexandria come here. I have something to give to you.”

Alex knew exactly what her grandma was about to give to her, so she ran over to her grandma, nearly knocking over a chair. As Alex stood in front of her grandma, she lifted the beautiful charm off her neck and handed it to Alex.

As Alex took the charm out of her grandma’s hands there was a knock at the front door.

*Who could it be*, Alex thought; her grandpa was in the back. Her grandma got up from her chair and slowly went to the door.

Alex heard the latch lift, and tiptoed into the hallway to see who it was. What she saw was shocking. It appeared to be a man, but its skin was an ugly red.

“Run!” her grandmother shouted, and Alex did.

Out the back door and down through her grandparents yard into the forest, Alex kept running deeper into the woods. Before trees completely blocked her view she saw the farmhouse catch fire, and then it was out of sight.

She kept running through the woods, not really knowing where she was going. After about five minutes she stopped to catch her breath. Alex sat down on a log and turned back, only to see a mob of villagers racing through the forest. There were at least fifty, maybe more, and they were lead by the same demon from her grandparents’ farm. Alex leapt off the log and dashed in the opposite direction of the mob.

Soon Alex broke from the cover of the trees into a field. She had not been running for long since she stopped to rest, but it seemed like forever. There was no place for her to go. The mob had already burned her grandparents’ farm. They didn’t seem to notice that they were being driven by a demon.

Looking back, Alex saw the mob emerge from the forest and draw to within a few yards of her. It looked even more vast than before. The demon at its head was the perfect picture of evil, dressed in black and red, with skulls adorning his armor. He rode upon a wolf, which to everyone else seemed like an ordinary horse.

Watching the crowd, she never saw the rock. As Alex fell, the rusted latch on her charm broke. Then she slipped into blackness and knew no more of what happened next.

# 2

Alex awoke with a headache and her ankle was sore. Aside from that she felt fine. It was night and she could see no stars. She had almost no hope of getting home. Alex decided to turn her attention to something she could take care of. She walked over to the bushes to relieve herself. She was not prepared for the grotesque sight next to the bush. It was the body of a man still warm, torn limb from limb. It stared back at her with lifeless eyes. Then darkness overcame Alex once more.

Alex sat up with a scream as she saw a man staring down at her. She jumped up only to fall again on her bad ankle; it had gotten worse. Alex took a long look at the man. He was tall, dark haired, dark skinned, and well built. But his most apparent characteristic was the long scar on his right cheek.

“Who are you?” Alex questioned, noting his broadsword in its sheath on his hip. “Who are you?” she asked again, a little less scared.

“I’m Marcus D’Angelo, storyteller,” he said. “This is my apprentice, Joesove Jitney.”

A young, brown-haired boy about Alex’s age stepped out from behind Marcus’ horse. Alex noticed that he was about her size, also he was very scrawny, even scrawnier than she.

Alex, looking down at Marcus’ sword, was about to ask why he carried it if he was a storyteller, but remembered that her grandma had said it was dangerous to travel alone without protection. Instead she asked “Where’s that dead body that was next to me?” looking around herself.

“We needed something for our fire,” Marcus said. Alex couldn’t tell if he was being serious or if it was a sick joke.

“We must get moving if we are to reach Emond City on time.” Marcus said. “Maybe you should join us. It’s unsafe for someone like you to me traveling alone.”

“But I have to go back to my grandparents’ house,” said Alex.

“There is nothing left. We passed by on the way here. Now stand up if you are coming. Is there anything you need?”

Alex wondered how Marcus knew which house was hers, but didn't ask. Instead she stood up and said “I'm hungry. I have not eaten since yesterday at lunch.”

After a brief meal of cornbread and fresh berries found nearby, the small group headed west toward Emond City.

“Before we can go to the city we must cross the Forgein river,” Marcus explained. “The only bridge is in Red Marsh, so when we get there stay close to me.” Marcus began to hum a song that Alex had never heard.

The grassy hills seemed endless. At one point Joesove asked what her charm was. It was the first time he had spoken to her since they met. Oddly, his voice was soothing.

“It was passed down from my grandma to me on my birthday. My grandpa had found it in the mine and gave it to her. I don't really know what it does.”

“Oh,” replied Joesove.

They had been walking for about two days. Late in the second day, after another meal of cornbread and some kind of berries, she saw an elderly man being harassed by what looked like very small children.

“Marcus, what are those little kids doing to that man?”

“For one thing, they're not kids, they're gnomes. And another thing is you don't need to bother yourself with unnecessary troubles,” Marcus said, walking away.

Alex thought for a second and said “Then why did you help me?”

With that she ran over to help the elderly man. Marcus started after her, but Joesove stopped him. Alex ran down the hill toward the man, and as she went she grabbed a rock off the ground. When she was within ten feet of the gnomes she saw there were four of them, and each was about a foot and a half tall. Alex started yelling and shaking her arms. One of them looked but just turned back to the old man.

Then Alex hefted the large rock into her right hand, and chucked it right at one of the gnomes little heads. The gnome was instantly knocked to the ground. The rest of the gnomes decided it wasn't worth the fight, and ran off. Alex walked over to the man and helped him off his knees.

“Thank you! Thank you so much!” the old man blabbered out. “You don’t know how much this means to me. Those gnomes... the little buggers... were trying to take me sacred cross. I’m a priest, and it means so much to me. The name’s Father Tuck. What’s yer name?”

“I’m Alex. Glad to help, Father,” Alex said, trying to figure out if to leave.

“Well, I must be on my way. Got to get back to the church,” he said, dusting himself off. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a bag of money. “Take this for helping me, lass.”

With that he gave her the money and walked off. Alex, with her money, ran to catch up with Marcus and Joesove. When she caught up with them, they said nothing to her. Alex thought about saying something first but decided against. They were mad, and she couldn’t change it.

After about two hours of silent walking they came upon a very high hill. The hill was very difficult to climb and Alex was on her hands and knees for the most part. But when they reached the top Alex saw a drastic change in the mind-numbing landscape of barren plains.

There was flowing water instead of grassy plains, and on the closest side of what looked like a river she saw the village of Prestel. Beyond the river was what must have been Red Marsh, the next part of her journey.