

Prologue

She woke up panting, the vision of her own death still burning in her eyes, her counterpart's eyes blazing into hers, burning hatred and burning hands until she died screaming and writhing...

Mariel sat up.

Her room, her own room, in the temple of Ehlonna, yes, she remembered. But she remembered too how she had left her room in the inn of Little Hollow, and how she had gone to make amends and found only death at the hands of another cleric, Sir Jean dying by her side.

Dressing hurriedly in her robes, long and grey, with her collar buttoned up and her blonde hair in a ponytail away from her face, she looked at her body, surprised it was slender and tall. She remembered it to be so, but also to be shorter and fatter, with a round belly perfect for bearing children, and a quarterstaff, her quarterstaff that talked back...

She broke off the thought abruptly, and left the quarterstaff in the corner of her small room. In the hall, she looked around. The main chamber of the temple opened up to the sky, enormous trees towering above the followers of Ehlonna, where they could take off their shoes and feel the earth between their toes.

Mariel rushed in, forgetting even to step out of the slippers she always wore in the temple, except in the main chamber, and walked hurriedly to Sermon, high priest of Ehlonna.

He was just done watering the flowerbeds, which indicated her that she had slept late indeed, and he turned as she approached.

"Mariel, you are late. And still wearing your shoes, I see. What is the matter, for you do not ever look so rushed when you are in here."

"Father, I would speak to you in private. I have been given a dream, and it disturbed me greatly."

Sermon laid his arm around her shoulders, and Mariel could feel she was settling down a little bit. Her breathing slowed, and her heartbeat finally returned to normal. They walked to a small room where the elves could meditate and pray alone, instead of with others in the great chamber, and Sermon closed the door with some effort, since it was hardly used.

"It is quite unlike you to come running, in haste, with your shoes still on!" His voice sounded concerned, but the phrase was put as a jest and a challenge.

"I know, and I would not do so normally, but I have dreamed."

"That is uncommon for an elf, even if you are a cleric of Ehlonna. Reverie is blissfully silent when compared to the sleep of humans, and dreams are rare."

Slowly, Mariel allowed herself to remember the dream in full, or as much as would come back to her. Most of the details were lost, but a few things were as clear as daylight to her.

"There was an epic battle, when a demon prince who wanted to be a god fought with us. We didn't do so bad either, until he started to use magic, oh the fire! We didn't stand a chance, and then when we died I saw a visage of Ehlonna, and she sent me back, saying my task was not done yet."

Sermon nodded quietly, urging her to go on.

"I was in a room, in Little Hollow, and I knew that my job was to stop the demon prince from becoming a god. Ehlonna had told me that she could not interfere herself, for when gods walk the earth, an epic battle would be fought that no mere mortal could survive. She and the other gods had sent us, a party of adventurers, to stop Tirazil; just like the other side, all evil gods, had sent our counterparts to stop us. The dream, or vision, ended with me and my companions, dying one by one at the hands of that demon;" Mariel started to sob; "and I woke up with this feeling of being lost, having forsaken and failed Ehlonna completely."

Sermon tsked, and took Mariel's sobbing face in his hands.

"You have not failed her, child, indeed you have been chosen! If this is a true vision, your chance to prove your worth in this epic battle is still to come. The demon has not yet risen to become a god, but when he does, you are to be there. That is what this vision tells you. Ehlonna is truly with you, Mariel, and you must prepare at once. You spoke of your friends, people who stood with you in this fight against evil?"

"You don't understand, it was so real. I have lived a complete lifetime in this vision, from being a child to dying at the hands of..." she broke off.

"All the more reason to prepare yourself. All the more reason to find these friends from your vision, and persuade them to help you stop this demon from rising again as a god. Have you not been taught that an elf alone is but alone, but when he combines his strength with others, they rise to be more than the sum of their deeds? Think of the things you can do and the things you can change! You are not just any elf, but you have been serving Ehlonna all of your life. I can see why She would choose you to stop this demon prince. And I tell you, the day you see the potential you have in you, it will startle you and strengthen you. If you want, you can become more than just the sum of your powers too."

Mariel nodded, though she didn't completely understand what Sermon meant just yet.

"Now go," Sermon motioned towards the grand chamber, "walk beneath the ancient trees with me, and we will pray to Ehlonna together, so that it may strengthen you for your journey to come."