

SOUL BORN

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PROLOGUE

The snapping of an old dry stick echoed in the ears of the young elven woman as she fled through the dark forest, her pale violet eyes like those of a predatory bird: searching and endlessly scanning her surroundings. In this chase she, Tala, was the prey.

Two days ago, by sheer misfortune, she crossed paths with a hunting party of her people's greatest rivals—lizard men. The alligator-headed, reptilian lizard men were on the brink of extinction after many years of bloody conflict with the elves, making them all the more dangerous when encountered.

Running for the second day straight, Tala had exhausted all of her people's tricks to escape pursuit. The lizard men were closing in on her.

So tired she was seeing things behind every tree, she recklessly ran through the forest, no longer attempting to cover her tracks. She had lost everything: her belongings, her friends, and her family. It seemed fitting that

on this day she would lose her life, too. Dry mouthed and thirsty, she ran in the direction of a lake, having spotted the glitter of moonlight reflecting off its surface between the trees.

She knew the lizard men were close, she could smell them—the scent of decaying flora coated their scales. Nevertheless she stopped, kneeling by the lake to drink. After gulping down three big mouthfuls she froze, spilling a handful of water down her chin to her chest. She remained motionless, afraid to breathe, afraid that even the passing of air through her wet lips would alert her hunters.

Through the willow trees encircling the small lake her keen hearing caught a hissing sound coming from the opposite shore. Tala had never heard a lizard man speak, but her tribal elders recounted their language as a collection of hissing sounds—not unlike a snake with tongue-clicks added for emphases.

Standing up slowly, she backed away from the water, one foot at a time. Abruptly the bushes spread open, and out lumbered one of the hunters. His back hunched as he moved. The young woman could see his dorsal spikes flare up, a sign that he was about to attack.

She whirled around to sprint away from her assailant, but came face-to-face with two more lizard men who had crept up behind her in utmost silence.

Her shriek of terror was cut short when something small and round impacted the back of her head. Reaching up, she pawed through her yellow-green hair until she found a wet spot. Drawing her hand around to her face her vision began to blur as it read the tragic story upon her crimson fingertips.

Unable to control her legs, she fell to the soft ground near the edge of the lake, blearily staring up into the deep black sky as the lizard men

approached her. She could hear them speak, hissing and clicking at each other in a rhythm that she could tell was filled with joy. *Why wouldn't they celebrate, Tala thought, they finally caught their dinner.*

Out of the corner of her watering eye she saw the three-clawed toes and dewclaw of one of the lizard men settle into the earth beside her head. In desperation she wrapped her arm around the beast-man's scaly leg, attempting to knock him backwards, but her efforts only earned her a jarring blow to the side of her head. The impact of the lizard man's wooden staff left a salty taste in her mouth, and the sensation that the world was spinning, weightless and cold.

Few lived to tell the tale of the lizard men's feeding ritual, but one elf in her tribe had, Alrdor. The elder called Alrdor spun a tale not unlike the one she was living now, which was how she knew her enemies were about to eat her alive.

The young woman squeezed her eyes shut, knowing that even if she had opened them she would not have seen much more than a blur. She was powerless before her attackers, and too badly hurt to fight, but that did not mean she was willing to watch herself be eaten.

The edge of a stone blade cut lightly into her hip, causing her body to tense up with what little strength she had left. It was coming—the lizard men were stripping her of her clothes just as Alrdor described in his horrifying tale. Sensing her skirt being torn from her hips made Tala feel even more defenseless. The thought of one of the lizard men sinking his teeth into the meat of her thigh sent a wave of terror through her body up, from her feet to her throat where it escaped in a scratchy scream.

A cold, clawed hand brushed against her face, shoving something dry into her mouth to silence her. Gagging, the young woman knew the taste in her mouth was that of leather, no doubt a scrap from her own skirt.

Six needle-like claws pierced her blouse digging ever so lightly into her skin before dragging themselves across each of her breasts, tearing away the last bits of her attire. The same fear that sealed her eyes with a godlike force now opened them. Blurry and dark, she could not see much of anything until she focused on her own image in the highly reflective surface of a lizard man's chest scales. Hypnotized by the reflection, she watched her naked body vibrate with panic.

Something warm and sticky struck her leg, but before she could look down she felt something else smack against her chest and move across her breast. The movement crossed into her field of vision where she was met with the sight of a long, thin pink tongue attached to her body, trailing saliva.

She tried to struggle, but felt two great weights pinning her arms down like heavy sand bags. There was nothing more she could do.

Her eyelids fluttered as she fell into a swoon, but then an ominously stern voice cut through the darkness. "Leave the girl alone, lizard men of the Gar-hut-tu tribe. The elf will not be your meal this evening."

She heard the lizard men hiss as at least two of them moved away from her to confront the owner of this voice. She wondered if one of her former tribesmen had come to save her.

"Leave now, and seek your sustenance elsewhere. This is your final warning." The voice, which the half-conscious elf now identified as female, spoke loud and clear.

Feeling the weight lift from her arms Tala sat up, opening her eyes slowly, fearful of what she might see. For a moment, all she saw was the darkness of night painted over the trees and bushes near the path—then all shapes and colors washed away in the most brilliant flash of pure white light she had ever seen. Unafraid, the young woman accepted the flash as proof she was dead, transformed into a spirit. But that thought quickly faded as her eyes cleared, and she witnessed one of the lizard men stumble back into view. Moving in almost slow motion the creature hissed in agony as his body slowly crumbled like dry soil and blew away in the wind.

Turning her head around against the formidable pain spiking in her neck, the elf laid eyes on the owner of the powerful voice.

“Tala Silver Wolf. I have been waiting for you.”

CHAPTER I

COMMENCEMENT

He was much heavier than he looked, but then again unconscious bodies always were misleading. Opal was learning as she went—this was a lesson her aching muscles would remind her of for days to come. She would have called upon her magic to carry him, but a powerful spell would be required to finally put her plan into motion.

Laying his head down to rest in the mossy forest grass, Opal took one last long look at her project. Karn was the man of her dreams and she could not wait to love him and to be loved by him. *This will work*, she told herself for the thousandth time, *this will work*.

Wispy light, like thin pink mist, formed around his and her heads. She was the key that unlocked the jumbled mess inside his mind. Without her, he would be useless to the others, she made sure of it; she had to or risk her own well-being.

The magical energy that filled Opal's young body had its limits, but she had not yet reached them. At times, she felt so powerful she thought she could move the world—this was not one of those times. She had taxed her body heavily over the past two days with little sleep or nourishment to replenish herself. It was not the magic that ebbed, it was her body. She needed rest desperately.

A sour sensation in her stomach made her want to retch as the spell came to a conclusion. Karn would wake up when the sun was directly above the tree tops, there was just enough time for a quick meal and a short slumber.

Staggering off towards her cabin Opal heard a voice emerge from behind her.

“Mage, you have taken your last breath!” Like a howling animal, the man's voice tore the peaceful quiet from the forest around her.

Charging with sword held high, the old man, clearly born of elf blood by his tall pointed ears and angular brow, continued to scream. As to where he had hid or where he had come from, Opal had no idea. All she could think of was that all her work was about to be cut short by the rusty blade of a long sword.

Ducking his initial swing, she called for a defensive spell, one that would coat her body in a magical shield, but no sooner had the spell begun to form when it vanished. Opal felt faint, and without the ability to concentrate all of her power was worthless.

“Your kind has set ruin to our world. Today I will cleanse this forest with your blood!”

With her hands and feet in the grass, Opal scrambled for cover behind a tree like a panicked animal. As her head spun, she could hear the words of the High Council echo inside her mind. She would not allow them the satisfaction of being right. Not now, not ever.

At risk of succumbing to the blackness that tugged at her feet and ankles like quicksand, Opal stood her ground against her assailant. The old man seemed as fatigued as she was, breathing heavily and sweating profusely, but in his eyes was an energy she had never seen before. This man was going to kill her or die trying.

Lunging forward he should have run her through with his sword, but Opal had created a small portal in front of her body, one large enough to protect her from chest to groin. When his sword and arm entered the crackling violet vortex she snapped the portal shut, transporting the metal and flesh to a location in the southern sea.

The force of his lunge made him fall into her, slamming the stump of his bleeding arm into her belly. The impact knocked her backwards over a rotting tree root that jutted from the ground almost half a foot. She did not remember falling as everything had gone dark.

When Opal opened her eyes she did not know how much time had passed. *What had happened?* She remembered a fight but to which the conclusion was unclear. Rolling to the side she saw that her beige dress was covered in blood. Before searching for its origin she cast her eyes towards Karn. He was still asleep, so her plan had not yet been spoiled. Kneeling slowly, her eyes found the elven man lying motionless behind her. His arm

was missing, a wound that should have killed him, but had not. The old man was still breathing, his chest rising and falling in rapid succession.

Opal visually examined the man for other weapons, but he had none. In fact, the man had nothing else apart from his sword and rags for clothes. *Who was he*, she wondered. Her curiosity came to a quick end when she saw his eyes flutter, as if they were working to open.

Looking about her surroundings, Opal found a jagged rock, no larger than her fist. Snatching it up, she squeezed it so tight in her hand that she felt its corners dig into her flesh. With a swing similar to pounding bread she smashed the man's nose, and then bashed in his teeth. Over and over she slammed the rock into the man's face, until her arm was coated to the elbow in gore. When there was nothing left but grass and mud beneath her rock filled fist, she stopped and inhaled her first breath in she did not know how long.

It was over, and it was soon to begin. She would have to remove the body first, and then get herself cleaned up. After tossing the rock to the side she grabbed the man by his ankles and thought to herself: *lifeless bodies are so much heavier than they look.*