

# SOUL BORN ORIGINS: OPAL

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A PREQUEL TALE

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The alarm was sounded, a series of horns trumpeted by the young squires throughout the town of Weiden's Rise. Opal heard the signal loud and clear despite the time: middle-night. It was very late to be astir, but she did not sleep well. Opal would lay awake this time every night; she had ever since she left home. At seventeen summer cycles she was not too young to know what stole away her sleep: it was guilt, a deep remorse for abandoning her father. She still cared for him dearly, but he could not fill the chasm in her heart.

Exiting her tiny room within the town healer's home, a space not much larger than the single cot she rested upon, she shuffled to the front door. The sounds of vital orders being relayed through town should have been enough to satisfy her curiosity, but Opal wanted more; she always wanted more.

Also roused by the mounting clamor outside their home were the medicinal healer and his wife, both in midlife. The couple could have posed as Opal's parents but did not; they treated her as an equal. Nodding to her as he walked to the door, the senior healer greeted Opal a good morning in jest. Opal smiled in return. She liked these people; Ghaton and Janus, they were kind and caring. Either would have given their last coin to her if she asked, yet it had not always been this way.

When first she came to Weiden's Rise, almost two years ago, they took her in as nothing more than a lowly assistant. She was compensated for her work with a room and a daily hot meal. Strict and impatient at times, Ghaton tasked her with many chores that she

often felt were trivial. He would have her stack shelves of jars, organize the ingredients to healing balms, clean the blood from the tables; Opal knew she was capable of more, but he would not listen to her protests.

That changed one night, fourteen months ago, when the captain of the guard was brought to Ghaton with a badly broken leg. The man had been thrown from his horse and subsequently trampled, a horrible accident to befall anyone. His name was Sadok; she would never forget him because as severe as his wounds were, he did not cry out in pain as so many others before him had. He gritted his teeth and repeatedly asked for his wife and child.

While looking over Ghaton's shoulder that night Opal's world dissolved away and was replaced by a new one. Instead of seeing the man called Sadok lying upon the healer's table, she saw her father. He was younger, as she remembered him when she was but a sapling. His hair was red then, just like hers; she recalled how she would stare into its waves from his arms, like the setting sun it radiated with warmth. Around his neck was a twined necklace with his wedding band tied to the end. Her father had worn his ring like that ever since the day his wife, her mother, disappeared, taken away from him, he said, by brigands.

Like Sadok, her father cared for his family above all else. Opal shed a tear and shook her head; she never should have left him. Overflowing with emotion, Opal wanted nothing more than this poor man to be healed so he could be happily reunited with his family. As she focused on that thought, her hands began to tingle. It had been so long since her magical powers openly presented themselves to her she could not even recall it. Red lights, like dim candle flames, burned from her fingertips, slowly engulfing her hands up to her wrists. She did not fear the power. Why should she? To her it did not feel unnatural. Pushing past Ghaton, she laid her magical hands on the wounded man's leg. The sensation she felt was unlike anything she had ever known. For that moment she felt as if she was physically connected to Sadok, their two bodies becoming one. Suddenly she knew his

pain, and when it gripped her she was able to expel it and replace it with the exhilarating sensation of pride and pleasure brewing within her chest.

The glow from Opal's hands spread out across Sadok's bare leg where the bone jutted through the flesh. Slowly, the wound began to stir. The broken femur shifted and, bit-by-bit, slid under the skin, knitting itself back together. Opal closed her eyes, and when she reopened them, the tear in the man's flesh was gone. A shudder of weakness climbed up her spine from her legs and when it reached her head she passed out, crumpling down upon the now-healed soldier like a rag doll dropped to the floor.

She awoke later in the safety of her bed, hushed voices the only sound to be heard. Focusing carefully, Opal listened to every word being spoken.

"So few mages walk the lands. How is it possible one so strong has shared our home for so long?" Janus kept her voice low.

"In all my travels I have never met a wielder of such immense power," Sadok added. "Nothing remains of my wound except the stain of blood on my pants."

"If the citizenry knew a sorceress lived here—" Ghaton alluded to something bad but was interrupted by Sadok.

"This must be handled with the utmost care."

"What should we do then?" Janus whispered. "We can't chase her away. Imagine how much good she could do."

"Perhaps her secret should remain our burden," Sadok's voice shifted to that of an officer commanding his troops. "For the time being, no one speaks of what transpired here. No one lets slip a single word about Opal or her powers outside this home. Understood?"

"Of course," Janus replied.

"Agreed," Ghaton responded without another thought of it.

Relieved that there was no trouble to be had, Opal relaxed back onto her cot. No one would discover her secret now; yet the more she thought on it, the more she realized that in order to remain safe, she could not take credit for the miracles her abilities provided. Retrieving the dagger she kept in her boot, Opal stared at its polished shininess. How similar her situation was to this weapon, Opal realized. *This conundrum was akin to a double edged blade, as it cut equally deep on either side.*

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“What’s all the commotion, my love?” Janus whispered from their bedroom as Ghaton exited it, a four-pronged candlestick in her left hand.

“A dispatch is forming,” Ghaton stated. “More rogues, no doubt.”

“I thought I heard guards relaying something about us,” Opal revealed.

“If there are wounded you can be sure they will come—” Ghaton started to say until a solid knock on the door interrupted him.

When Ghaton opened the door, he was surprised to find so many soldiers outside waiting for him. Opal counted them as her employer greeted the group—twenty armed and heavily armored men. She could feel the energy of their excitement, a crackle of static in the air; these men were well ready for combat.

Listening with a keen ear, Opal heard what occurred as told by the one man lucky enough to escape and come to Weiden’s Rise in search of help. The trader, a skinny man with long legs, said he made a coward’s decision and ran at first sight of danger. Covered in sweat and dirt he repeated his story again.

“Our supply wagons were attacked on the road just outside of your borders. Joa’Ta sent four of its finest soldiers along with my caravan for protection, but even those men of skill were quickly cut down. I heard them dying! I ran.” He shook his head from side to side. “Gods almighty, I ran.”

Weiden's Rise's night guards, a group of men known throughout the kingdom to be rowdy thrill seekers, formed a squad twenty men strong but would not depart before beseeching the aid of the healer.

"There will be no time to return the wounded to your tables, healer. You must ride with us."

"What of the raiders?"

"Once I was clear, I turned, hid in the trees," the panicked man spoke. "I saw eight, light armor. Such a gutless ambush... I'm sure they have cleared out all of the wealth they could carry by now."

"Probably fled to their camp weighted down with loot—easy prey for twenty of Weiden's finest. Right, men?"

"Strength to Weiden's Rise!" the men cheered.

"You'll be safe, healer. I personally guarantee it."

After looking back at his wife to find her approval, Ghaton agreed to join them.

"I'm coming too," Opal called out from the shadows of the healer's cabin.

"Good," answered the ranking soldier. "Bring your assistant, healer. Her arms will free up those of one of my men. We leave shortly. Make haste."

After shutting the door the senior healer addressed Opal's willingness to go. He was concerned by one thing and one thing only.

"Promise me, Opal, if you are to use your magic tonight, do so with the greatest subterfuge. Out in public, in front of these fanatics of all people, you do not want to be discovered."

"I understand."

"Do you?"

“Yes!”

Opal raised her voice, snapping at her boss and mentor. She did not mean to and could hardly believe she would do so. After apologizing she gathered her packs and then rushed back to her room to change.

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The night guard was led by Captain Alkurik. His face decorated with scars, he was no stranger to Opal and Ghaton. He and his men often found themselves injured after weekend-long competitions. Fist fighting, tree climbing, games of pain endurance, it mattered not the side effects: broken bones, bloodied lips, black eyes. All that mattered to these men was the thrill of the moment.

Captain Alkurik had commanded his men to travel light tonight. Instead of wearing the heavy, plate-metal armor standard for the night guard, he ordered them to change into their thick leathers. Rogues, he announced to the group, were nothing but untrained children. They were lifelong soldiers, skilled combatants, blessed warriors in the Gods' eyes. Opal considered the words of his speech as she approached the gates where he stood. In her year of service, she had seen many of these men wounded, but never seriously. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps the Gods favored these men over others.

“Ready?” he asked Ghaton.

“Yes. Let us hurry.”

Mounting up, they sped off, out of Weiden's Rise atop horses meant only for the cavalry. Alkurik bribed the stable boy with a handful of coins, promising to have them back before daylight. It was not the first time he had borrowed these war steeds. Strong and fast, the horses made short work of the distance to the ambush site.

The road where the surprise attack was set was tightly squeezed between two rows of tall pine trees an obvious spot, perfectly draped in shadows and so thick with trees that an easy getaway could be made. From a hundred paces away, the glow of the golden

moonlight falling from the heavens revealed the destruction delivered upon the supply wagons; from fifty paces the bodies strewn about the grass and pebbles became evident.

“Slowly!” the captain ordered, raising his open hand as a signal to his troops.

“Such barbarism! These people, they look—” a lieutenant started to say.

“Hush!” The captain would not allow him to finish his assumption. “Spread out. Team one, follow the road; look for tracks; call out if you find any survivors.”

“Yes sir!”

“Team two, break into two squads; I want each to take a side of the road. Clear it fifty paces into the forest then backtrack.”

“Sir!”

Captain Alkurik paused a moment, watching his men snap to. His look of concern transformed to a smirk. Something funny had crossed his mind.

“Larus, stay here with me and the healers. Arm your crossbow.”

“Of course, sir.”

Hopping down from her horse Opal walked directly to the captain. His smile captivated her; she needed to know what was so amusing in this moment of wretchedness. As she drew closer she heard her mentor curse: none of these people were alive; they had all been slaughtered.

“What’s so funny?” Opal asked.

“Oh, sorry, was I laughing?”

“No, but you wear a smile while surrounded by slain men and women.”

“I mean no disrespect, I just thought—”

“Gods no!” Ghaton elevated his voice, nearly screaming in shock.

“Larus, torch!”

The captain and his man Larus rushed to Ghaton who had been kneeling over a body until just a moment ago when he tumbled back onto his seat. Of the three bodies he had quickly examined, this one, a girl not much older than Opal, had a wound he found most unsettling. Her leg was severed below the knee however not cleanly like the swipe of a sword or axe would leave; it was torn, gnawed off.

“What is it, man?”

“This woman.” Ghaton pointed to her stomach. “She died of a sword wound to the belly, but here look at her leg.”

“Bitten off,” the captain guessed correctly.

“Yes, and I wager in one bite.”

Opal listened to Ghaton’s words, yet at the same time her eyes locked onto another body laying face first in the dirt alongside the pebbles of the road. This man, dressed in a patchwork of light leather, armor looked to Opal to be one of the rogues, not a soldier of the Joa’Ta army or a traveling tradesman. Fallen into the shrubbery head first, all that could be seen was his waist down to his boots, but his feet were missing. Just like the woman who Ghaton and the captain stood over, this man’s limbs appeared to have been chewed off. Suddenly it dawned on her.

“Wait, I think the ambushers...” Opal could not believe her own words. “...were ambushed!”

“What?”

“Look!”

Opal pointed to the rogue-armor clad body, but before the captain turned to look it was suddenly jerked into the barberry bushes. Startled to the extent of jumping back, she screamed in fright.

“What? What’s wrong?” Captain Alkurik responded instantly to her yelp.

“The body, it’s gone!” she said through panting breaths. “It was pulled into the barberry bushes!”

“Pulled? Into the bushes?”

It dawned on him as he spoke; the enemy was closer than he expected. Taking another look at his surroundings he saw it now. The bodies of both rogue and soldier could be seen. This young girl was right; the ambushers were ambushed.

“Larus, signal the others to return,” the captain whispered.

“Why?”

“Just do it, damn you!”

Hissing sounds emerged from all sides; the enemy was there and to the surprise of all, not human. Larus waved his torch while blowing a wooden whistle he carried on his belt. No sooner did the whistle leave his pursed lips than the night sky filled with screams.

The voice of one of his men howling in pain-laced fear emerged from the darkness of the tree line and struck him like an arrow to the chest. Captain Alkurik’s heart dropped. This was not supposed to happen, he told himself; his squad was to meet a bunch of hapless thugs, not—not this.

“No!” another voice cried out from the dark path ahead. “No! No!”

The captain pointed his sword off in the direction of the road; he could hear combat unlike that of which he was familiar with. Although he could not see them, he could tell his men were terrified by their mysterious foe. For the people left standing on the road, there was a growing sense of doom in the air.

Stumbling from the shadows of the tree line to the captain’s right was one of his men, a friend for many years by the name of Andreas. Wobbling with each step the man

grasped his left shoulder. Approaching from behind the captain and Larus, Ghaton illuminated the man with his torch.

“By the Gods!” Ghaton screeched.

Opal finally moved. She had been frozen with fright, staring down upon the bush she had seen the body vanish into. She had heard the commotion around her and wanted to move, to run even, but her body would not heed her commands until now.

Looking up at the mumbling soldier as he moved closer to the group she could tell something was wrong the moment before the torchlight fully revealed it. Grasped tight in his right hand was the stump of his left arm, torn off below the triceps, blood seeping from the wound through his clenched fingers.

“What happened to you?” Ghaton asked the question on their collective minds.

“Ambushed. Li-li-lizard men,” the wounded man mumbled.

“How is this possible?” Larus shook his head in denial. “There are no—“

“Do you not hear the hissing... the hissing?”

“There’s been no report of lizard men in the area,” Larus told his captain.

The wounded man tumbled down to his knees, clearly delirious with pain. As sickened as she was by the wound, Opal could not stand by any longer; she needed to act.

“Isn’t this report enough?”

Frustrated with everyone’s lack of action, Opal broke her promise to her mentor and herself, and summoned her healing magic. When her hands erupted into two balls of burning red firelight the two soldiers gasped in disbelief.

“You, you’re a mage?” Larus could not believe the turns this night was taking. “How did you? Where did you... What is that?”

“Never mind all that, Larus!” the captain ordered his friend, shaking the chaos from him with both hands upon his shoulders. “Call a retreat. Summon the men back; we must go now!”

Ghaton pinned the man’s shoulders to the pebble road, doing his best to hold him still for Opal as she cast a healing spell that would stop the bleeding and seal his wounds. Concentrating on his arm she ran her hand over the stump, the glow of her power warm against his skin.

“The hurt... it recedes,” the soldier whispered, opening his once pain-closed eyes.

“You’re going to be fine.”

Opal nodded to Ghaton; it was okay to release the man.

“It tingles.” He smiled at Opal as he sat back up.

“That tingle you feel, it’s your missing arm.” Turning her gaze to her mentor she finished her thought. “I-I’m not sure, but I think it might grow back.”

“That’s impossible.” Ghaton looked her square in the eye as he announced his shock. “You don’t have command of such power, do you?”

Opal shook her head in uncertainty. She did not know how to answer; she knew so little of her powers. As she began to speak again Larus sounded the retreat by blowing a hollowed out ram’s horn. The loudness of the alarm drowned out her words and made her grimace with discomfort.

“Mount up! As soon as we can, we double-time it back to the castle.” Captain Alkurik’s voice was full of dread. “No one wins a fight against lizard men at night. It’s suicide.”

While still looking over her shoulder at the barberry bush she saw the body disappear into, Opal aided Ghaton with the injured soldier. Once she had him upon his

horse, she shifted her gaze to the path where the sounds of the squad rushing back were like the rumble of a coming thunderstorm.

“There they are, thank the Gods!”

“Hand me your torch, Larus.” the captain’s voice was monotone.

The moment the torch was in his possession he tossed it into the path where the men were running. The firelight opened the shadows. Carrying the severed limbs and decapitated heads of Weiden’s Rise’s men were a dozen or more lizard men. Clanking the blood covered shields and helmets against their primitive stone weapons as they ran, they not only masked their hissing but also made it sound like the accelerated march of human soldiers approaching.

Having only seen drawings of the beasts which humans called lizard men because of their hard scaly skin, Opal could not believe how accurate the rumors were; they truly had the head of an alligator over a hunched bipedal body. Placed atop and to each side of a long snout were two of the most evil eyes she had ever seen, soulless and hungry.

Suddenly the bushes and trees alongside the road to Joa’Ta came alive. Yellow eyes pierced the night; dull-green, scaly skin shimmered under the moonlight. Although panic had torn the scream from her mouth Opal choked loudly, trying to speak. Spinning around like a court dancer on her tiptoes, she tried to count the enemy. There must have been close to fifty surrounding them on all sides.

“This is my fate, to be ensnared by a lizard man trap?” the captain said under his breath.

“Not me! I refuse to be eaten like some sort of woodland rabbit.”

Larus reared his horse, aiming it at the group of lizard men on the path before them. Riding directly, his horse pierced the first wave of enemy only to be halted by the next.

“No!”

Opal's voice finally returned as she saw Larus pulled down from his horse. Larus got precisely what he did not wish for. His body was torn into pieces by the razor sharp teeth-filled mouths of three lizard men.

"Mount your horse, Opal!" Ghaton commanded.

"Yes, quickly! Try and escape while they feed! I will do my best to hold them off you!" the captain told them before raising his sword above his head and screaming a battle shout.

Opal stepped her right foot up into the saddle, but before she could lift herself, her boot slipped and she slid down to the ground. She could hear the lizard men's footsteps all around her as Ghaton screamed for her to hurry. She wondered why now, why stumble now, yet this was not her normal clumsiness that made her fall. Opal could feel a buildup of magical energy rising up from her feet. She had never experienced her powers swell like this; normally, they seemed to originate from her core. This peculiar sensation was different and much, much stronger. Suddenly the energy inside her surged and she found herself standing fully upright, her arms out. The magical force had filled her so much so that she felt as if she would burst. Every point of her body tingled, from the tips of her fingers and toes to the point of her nose and the ends of her nipples.

Looking to Ghaton for answers she could see his mouth move however could not hear the words he spoke. Hissing—not the sound but the force of breath through a closed mouth touched her skin. She knew in her heart that any moment she would be struck down, two dozen or more teeth would pierce her flesh. It was too late.

Opal did not remember screaming, yet did remember thinking her father's name as the flood of magical energy overflowed, breaking loose of her body in a wave, shooting out in every direction. Her eyes open, she watched the fiery-orange, vaporous energy strike Ghaton's horse, knocking him several feet up and away, off into the tree line across from her. Simultaneously, she heard the sound of her arcane fire striking the lizard men behind her. Spinning around once more, Opal watched the spell she released as it traveled away

from her in an expanding circle. She gasped in awe. The fire burned everything it came in contact with. One by one the ambushing monsters were struck down, her magical flames charring the skin off every advancing lizard man until their once green, shiny scales were nothing other than dull grey ash.

“What have I done?”

Captain Alkurik’s horse lay roasted in the middle of the pebble road, right where she had seen it last. The captain himself, still upon the steed, was almost unrecognizable, his leather armor and skin equally blackened. His sword, still in hand, was above his head; he had not yet even swung it down upon his enemy.

Suddenly the trees on either side of the road ignited like candles, with a crackle and puff of smoke. Her spell kept going, entirely undiminished; it burned everything.

“No!” Opal screamed. She wanted it to stop.

A thunderclap filled her ears a moment before the rain fell upon her warm cheek. As the shower fell steadier, she heard moaning echo in her ears. *Do lizard men sound as such when injured?* She wondered, until she heard her name called.

“Ghaton!” she rushed to where she had seen him, thrown from his horse.

Laying on his back, his body as black as the trees and soil surrounding it, the man mumbled through heat melted lips, a sight that made her want to both vomit and cry.

“Oh no, no, no,” she whispered, falling to her knees beside him.

“What... did you do?” It took all his effort to form the words.

“I—“

“She did what she had to, to survive.”

A man’s voice, from behind her. A new smell of smoke, not like that of the burnt wood or flesh, overcame her senses, filled her nose. This smoke smelled like magic.

“Who are you?”

Opal addressed the elderly man who stood, cleanly dressed in fancy robes, a carved ornamental wooden staff in hand. She could not imagine he had been anywhere nearby as this destruction unfolded, as he did not bear a scratch, not even a smudge of ash.

“I am Malek, Sorcerer of the High Council of Mages.” The old man introduced himself with a tiny bow.

Quickly dismissing him she looked back at her mentor, who was gasping for air, although with shallow breaths.

“High Council? I told you all before I’m not interested in training with—”

“Oh yes, I know of your rejection, but that was before your powers, well... before you did this.” He motioned around himself.

“I didn’t—”

“Did you know there were survivors out there, down the road? Soldier’s from your kingdom, wounded, yet trying their best to escape the lizard men.”

Malek had her full attention now.

“Survivors?”

“Yes, men with families and you killed them all.”

“What? No!”

“Your powers destroyed them all: you’re soldiers, the lizard men, the deer and squirrel in the forest. All dead and why, my dear? Because you, dear fledgling, do not have the proper training.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“Yes, yes, yes, that’s what they all say. What do you think your mentor’s wife will say when you return home to tell her you killed the man she loved?”

Opal turned her gaze back to Ghaton; he was no longer breathing, his eyes, turned up into his skull.

“I say once more: join the High Council of Mages and allow us to train you.”

This arrogant old man was right. She had destroyed her last chance at a normal life. The guards would hold a formal investigation; Janus herself would have dozens of questions. There was no way to explain what happened here to the people of Weiden’s Rise without taking some accountability. It might have been heartbreaking, but everyone knew, including herself, that you can’t trust a mage.

“Yes, I will join you.”

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