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Nightmare

Sarno Forest – Northern Duenin

Twenty-One Years Later

Dan’Kell, 23rd Ignis, 1021

Thunder vibrated the ground with ominous rumbles. Sterling narrowed her eyes against the wind blowing through the storm-ravaged land. The sky was a roiling cauldron, filled with dark, angry clouds turning and tumbling on top of themselves. From her vantage point, Sterling could see across the long valley. Waves of grey sheets of rain slowly marched through the countryside, seeming to eat away at the very earth. The heavy drops pelted the ground where the land sloped and dipped. The water was already beginning to rise in the small streams that slithered across the valley’s green skin.

Another silver fork of light streaked down from the seething cauldron. Sterling watched helplessly from her patch of dry ground as the lightning struck the tree that had stood sentinel in the center of the valley. The ancient tree bark was peeled instantly, leaving behind only a charred remnant of its once great self. The rocks that had protected and supported the tree for ages were now blackened and shattered bits of debris that no longer offered resistance to the storm's anger.

The rains were coming down from the snowcapped mountains that were framed on the not too distant horizon. The fierce storm was carrying the ice and snow from the mountain's peak

The steep walls of the valley rose to surround her. The oddly familiar isolation of this place was overwhelming. Sterling felt so alone and helpless in the lowlands, which seemed to be transforming into a desolate prison.

Heading quickly toward her, the storm was now threatening to overtake her small patch of dry ground. The wind tore at her hair, fiercely driving the freezing rain as it irritatingly hit her face. A sliver of ice struck her cheek. Surprised, she put her hand up to the small bloody cut.

Suddenly, Sterling felt the odd sensation that a presence was with her... watching her. She scanned the surrounding area but could see no one. An intense pricking arose on the back of her neck that felt like a thousand pins were being driven into her skin. She rubbed the spot but received no relief. "Who's there?" she asked lightly, her words all but defeated by the storm's fury as they were quickly carried away on the wind.

Turning in a circle, she became aware of her current predicament. The storm had surrounded her. There was no avenue for escape; the paths, the roads, and even the small game trails leading from this prison were disappearing one by one beneath the rising waters. A sense of panic and genuine fear began to bleed deep into her being. Her skin prickled with it. Without warning, the prickling intensified until she thought she would pass out from the pain., and from the ethereal void of her mind came a voice. Booming... commanding. The words seemed to vibrate through her, sending waves of nausea to the pit of her stomach, "*Othail ghee Elementals!*" and as quickly as the words were spoken, the pain and nausea were gone.

Sterling watched in helpless terror as the storm clouds seemed to draw closer. The sky lit up, and bolts of lightning shot from the storm, striking the ground near where she stood. Sterling jumped back, but before her feet could hit the ground, a second bolt shot from the rolling clouds and struck Sterling, throwing her into the rising waters of a nearby stream. Pain coursed through her body, and unable to move, she began to sink beneath the murky surface. She tried to scream but had no breath to speak.

Sterling jolted awake, gasping for breath. It took her a moment to realize that she was still in her own bed, safe in the tiny cottage she shared with her uncle. Sweat drenched her nightshirt. Her skin was clammy, and her heart raced with an irregular beat. The dream had started as the same dream that she'd had since she could remember. Oddly, this time it was different. In the past, the lightning had only struck the ground around her, but this time the lethal bolts had hit her, sending her to drown in the murky floodwaters.

Sterling shuddered as an unusual feeling of dread washed over her. She contemplated the significance of the change in her dream. Despite having slept all night, she was exhausted from the effects of the nightmare. She tried forcing herself to get some added rest, and she leaned back and covered her head with the threadbare blanket. She closed her eyes and tried to go back to sleep, but it never came. Her mind was too full of the dread that surrounded her. The sound of twittering birds in the predawn light kept her company in her dark cocoon. A yawn forced stale

oxygen into her burning lungs. She tried once again to relax her body, but no matter how hard she tried, she could not go back to sleep. The fear of having the dream again, and hearing those unfamiliar words, *Othail gee Elementals*, was in the back of her mind. Ever since the nightmares had started plaguing her nights, she'd listened to those same words repeated, but their meaning still eluded her. Sterling threw the covers off and stood, allowing fresh air to finally reach her lungs.

Sterling moved the curtain back from the window and found the sun struggling to push the night's darkness aside. There was still some time before the sun was full up. She poured fresh water into the basin and splashed the cold liquid into her face. She followed the same routine every morning, the water refreshing the body, and readying the muscles for work. This morning the water seemed much colder than usual. The iciness of her dream came back to her thoughts momentarily. She pushed it aside as she scrubbed the last dredges of sleep from her eyes, and felt much better for it. Continuing her normal routine, she pulled on the leather pants that her uncle hated. He thought them unfit for a girl, but she'd protested the dreaded skirts that the women in Shee wore, claiming they were too cumbersome.

She wore a chemise under the cotton shirt, and then a leather vest. The specially made vest laced on the sides and had a sewn hood. She pulled the hood over her head, concealing her eyes from possible onlookers. Satisfied she was complete, Sterling made her way quietly down the hall so as not to wake her uncle.

In the small kitchen, she raided the larder and found dried meat and a hunk of stale bread, perfect for an early morning breakfast. She put the chunk of bread between her teeth, so she could grab a lambskin of ale. Her boots were held under her right arm, the meat in one hand, and the lambskin in the other. It took her three attempts to open the door. When she did finally get it open, it banged against the cottage wall, making an awful racket. She paused, motionless for just a moment to make sure she had not woken her uncle. When no sounds were emitted from his room, she hooked the door with her foot and pulled it shut. She turned to make her way across the yard and nearly walked into a leather-clad wall. Sterling was so startled she dropped everything she'd gathered, including the bread that she had held clenched between her teeth.

"Whoa, careful lass."

"Damn, my breakfast is ruined," Sterling replied with a mixture of surprise and dismay.

“Watch that tongue, girl.” She knew why the old man didn't wake when she was clanging around the kitchen like a bull in a glasshouse. His imposing frame stood there, frowning gently down at her. Though he did not abide curses from women, he held no reservations from his own, and so she had picked up on his bad habit.

“What are you doing up so early?” Sterling asked instead of apologizing.

Her uncle hefted two chickens over his shoulder, grunting out a simple, “I wanted to get a jump on the chores.” Sterling knew he was lying, and he knew she knew. She followed his hand as he massaged the withering muscle of his thigh. Her eyes jumped back up to stare into his.

“It's getting worse, isn't it?” she asked tentatively.

He avoided her question by asking his own. “What are you doing up so early? You're usually snoring like a soldier this time of the morning.”

“I do not snore,” she protested. “I guess I just wanted to get a jump on the chores,” she threw his evasive comment back at him. They both knew the other was lying, and they both knew the reason why. They'd played this game many times in the past.

“Well, get to them then. I've collected the eggs, so you can milk the cows.” She suddenly glared up at Hemi. He knew she hated milking the cows. She wound up with more milk on her clothes than she did in the bucket. “After that, I need you to collect some pheasants for tonight's supper. Mother Anwell's requested them for her guests this evening,” he continued to order, completely ignoring her icy stare.

“Let me just get my boots on,” Sterling mumbled as her teeth ripped off a small mouthful of beef.

“Ale, meat, and bread are no breakfast for a young lady.” Hemi groused, shaking his head.

She handed the fare up to him, so she could pull her boots on. “What difference does it make? It's all going to the same place.”

“I should have sent you off to school like Mother Anwell had suggested,” he grumbled back at her. Sighing, he set the chickens down and moved to the cottage door. Holding the door open, he threw his head into the kitchen. “Get back in there, and I'll fix you a proper breakfast.” Sterling didn't argue with him. Hemi's breakfasts were filling, and lasted until lunch. She leaped up, still hopping on one foot as she squeezed into her boot, following him into the small kitchen.

“You know it would have been a waste of time if you’d sent me off to that silly finishing school,” Sterling said as she sat at the small table and watched as he pulled out the fixings for breakfast.

“You had the dream again.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah,” Sterling's dread came back the second she acknowledged her uncle's statement. She didn't go into detail; after all, she'd told this story more times than both cared to remember. She could see the worry in his eyes when she told him of the lightning. The smell of bacon slowly curling over itself on the iron cast stove caused Sterling’s stomach to growl. “What’s taking so long?” she protested.

“Keep your drawers on,” he said lightly as he went about pulling off the biscuits, eggs, and small bowl of spiced gravy.

The plate of steaming food delighted Sterling. Her cold breakfast paled in comparison to Hemi’s. He sat across from her. “Aren’t you going to eat?” she asked around a mouth full of egg.

“I ate when I woke.”

“You probably had the same thing I was going to eat.” His silence told her she guessed right. “Here, have some,” she said as she took a portion of the breakfast and piled it on a clean plate, “besides, you gave me too much.” Sterling made quick work of the food and wiped her mouth with the napkin Hemi handed her, instead of wiping her sleeve across her mouth.

“You eat like a soldier,” he lightly teased.

“I’ve had a great teacher,” she shot back, letting out a very unladylike belch followed by a coy smile. “Now, I’m off to my chores.”

“Sterling,” Hemi stopped her, “there’s no need for you to hide behind that hood.”

“I know.” She avoided his eyes, not wanting to see the concern in them.

“Don’t forget to feed the horses,” Hemi shot at her as she raced across the yard. She waved that she heard him and entered the musty barn.

The smell of hay filled her nostrils when Sterling threw the barn doors open. She loved the barn, and its aromas, a comfort to her since when she had sheltered herself among the stacks of hay as a child. When visitors had come to the orphanage, she’d hidden away, afraid they would look upon her in disdain. So often, she had been teased about her appearance. Her olive skin and odd-colored eyes had led people to call her any number of names. She had taken to wearing a hood whenever she left the house to avoid the hateful words. The girls at the

orphanage were no less cruel. A few had befriended her, but when they were adopted, she would be alone once again. Sterling remembered on one occasion she'd grown tired of the mean girls and had punched one of them in the nose. She had her backside tanned by Hemi's belt, and it was then she'd sown the hood onto her vest, so no one could see her shame. Hemi had claimed Sterling had inherited her eyes from her Devian mother. It was a gift that she would gladly give back to the woman she had never known. When asked, Hemi had skirted the topic of her mother saying only she was a Devian and shared the same silver eyes as Sterling. When she pestered him for more details, he'd change the subject. She didn't really know what it meant to be a Devian, other than having silver eyes, and to be hunted by the Severon.

Sterling had also found refuge among the bales of hay when one of the violent storms bombarded the land with its wrath. She'd been afraid of lightning for as long as she could remember. She would hide in the haystacks hoping to mute out the rumble of the thunder and the flashes that tore open the skies. Her fear had only intensified when the nightmares had started. She rarely left the safety of the cottage when the skies filled with ominous dark clouds. Mother Anwell had prayed over her many times as she lay huddled and shaking from the fear. Over the years, her fears had waned, but she still was not comfortable outside during a storm.

She shook away the daydream as the low mooing of the cows reminded her why she was here in the first place. She lit the lantern that hung outside the stalls. The small flame illuminated the black and white body of her nemesis, Barda. The cow's head swung around lazily to see who was disturbing her meal. Sterling didn't think cows could glare, but she swore that this one had a hatred for her that was unnatural in the otherwise docile creatures. Sterling placed an empty bucket under the cow and sat down on the low stool. Cautiously, she started to draw milk. The sound of the thick liquid rhythmically hitting the bottom of the bucket filled the cavernous barn.

The only other sounds were those of the birds that fluttered from beam to beam in the high places of the curved ceiling, and the sound of Barda forever chewing. Sterling's mind began to drift, to relax. Without warning, Barda shifted her weight toward Sterling, causing the stream of milk to miss the bucket and soak Sterling's boot. She cursed and pushed the back flank away as she sighed, "I don't know what you have against me, you old heifer." Sterling continued to milk; only this time, she kept her shoulder pressed into Barda's side, so she would not try the stunt again.

Sterling felt proud of herself, the bucket was three-quarters of the way full, and she was still relatively dry. Perhaps she'd get out of milking the cow without having to change her clothes before finishing her other chores. It seemed, however, that her overconfidence was her downfall. Barda shifted away from Sterling, and with all her weight pushing into the cow's side, there was nothing to stop Sterling from falling face-first into the bucket of milk. With a sputter and more than a few choice bits of language, Sterling managed to stand, wiping the thick liquid away from her eyes and mouth as it seeped slowly down her shirt. "Y-You..." Sterling was so angry she picked up the empty bucket and threw it across the room where it hit the wall with a loud clang. Needles began to tingle at the base of her skull as she sputtered, "*I'm going to kill you!*" The only response was the light, almost taunting 'moo' that rolled out from Barda's throat. Like a challenger accepting a duel.

Hemi was outside feeding the pigs when he heard the bucket hit the wall, followed by the loud stream of curses that would have turned a hardened soldier red with embarrassment. Sterling came bolting out of the barn. The door was two times her size, but her anger gave her the strength of three men. He watched as she marched across the yard. The hood had fallen back, and her hair was dripping with milk, shirt plastered to her skin. He swore he could see steam rising as she marched across the yard, looking like a drowned rat., and even though there would be no milk for tonight's supper, he couldn't help but laugh at the sight of the poor girl.

His laughing caught her attention, and she stopped midway from the barn to the house. She glared at him and pointed a finger back at the barn, "You think that's funny, do ya? I'm going to *kill* that cow, and serve *her* for dinner!" Her words made Hemi laugh all the harder. With a look that could stop a man just by its power alone, Sterling finally threw her hands up in resignation and continued back to the cottage to change clothes. He knew she hated milking the cow, but he thought it good for her to have a challenger that wouldn't back down. She was used to people being intimidated by the fierce anger that showed in her eyes when she felt threatened. Hemi knew it would take her a while to wash the milk off and redress, so he was surprised when the cottage door slammed open a minute later. Sterling emerged with a cleaver clutched in her tight fist.

"Sterling? What are you doing?" He yelled the question as he started on a course to intercept her.

She did not take her eyes off the barn, “I told you. I’m going to kill that demon cow and serve her for dinner.” She was much faster than him, and she knew it. Yet even though he could only limp his way across the yard, he was still surprisingly agile. He managed to catch up with her just as she was about to enter the darkness of the barn. “Easy, easy girl, give me that blade.” Despite the limp, he was still heavy with experience and muscle that belied a different life he had led. He could pry the dagger from her clenched fist as easy as a man would be to split a piece of warm bread apart.

“I hate that cow!” she spat at Barda.

“Cool your temper, girl. Killing her is not going to solve anything. You need to figure out a way to solve this problem with your head, not a damn knife. You can’t kill everything that makes you mad. Now clean this mess up, and go change your clothes, we have deliveries to make in Shee.”

She glared up at him with those silver eyes. The anger that he saw in their steel depths was frightening. He’d seen and felt that anger once before, and the results were nearly fatal. He knew if he backed down, the anger would overtake her, and he’d have a hell of a time getting her back. In as quiet and commanding a voice that he could muster, he stared at her and calmly said, “Mind what I say, lass.” He didn’t back down, and he could see the anger slowly dissipate. Her shoulders slumped when she realized she couldn’t kill Barda.

“Fine, but don’t be surprised when one day you find her missing, and a nice juicy steak on your dinner plate.” As she marched off toward the cottage, his hand went to the withered muscle of his right leg.

Yes, he knew all too well what her anger could do. But he was thankful that she was unaware of what she’d done so many years ago.

He’d promised Khort he’d protect Sterling, and so far, he’d succeeded. This quiet, isolated orphanage had been the perfect place to raise her. With Mother Anwell’s assistance, he’d raised Sterling in a land that was hostile toward those of her kind, but this far north, the citizens were more concerned with surviving the winters than the color of one’s eyes.

It had not been easy raising Khort’s daughter... she was the image of her father. She had strength beyond what was expected, and a temper that could raze the flesh with a mere look. What he had not expected were the girl’s blackouts and fainting. It had frightened him the first time it’d happened. It had been during one of those episodes that she’d attacked him with the

relentless goal of killing him. He'd managed to get her under control, and thankfully she had quickly returned to her usual self. Sterling was unaware of her actions when she blacked out, and he'd sworn Mother Anwell to secrecy.

Hemi left the barn and started toward the main house, and his thoughts turned to telling Sterling of her parents. She would be turning twenty-one soon, and it was time she knew the truth of her heritage, the fact that he was not her uncle. It was time she went home.

2

The Hunter

The cicadas were singing again.

Commander Remus Engram noted as he and his men made the long journey along the Riuukan Pass toward the highlands of Northern Duenin. How he hated Northern Duenin. The weather was unpredictable – snowing one moment, and violent storms the next. He never understood how the peasants survived up here in the foothills of the Izanami Mountains. They were uneducated farmers and merchants that lacked any sense to move away from this harsh environment. *Maybe it makes them think they're hardy, and stout folk to survive in the ice and snow*, he mused. But to him, it only made him cold., and he detested the cold.

Thankfully, once his mission was over, he could return to Sionaad. To warmer and more inviting climes. But, more importantly, to his family., and for a time, before his liege called him once more to tarry forth his will, he would enjoy the dry clear nights with his wife as he listened to the cicadas' melody before they disappeared once more.

But his mind must be in the now and present, for the mission at hand. The Orom had sent him on this trek to the far north after hearing rumors of a Devian seen in the trade city of Shee. Like any man, he was curious. Why hadn't the Orom sent one of the lesser ranked soldiers? This task was beneath his position. In fact, it was far too showy. A smaller unit would draw less attention and draw far fewer comments that would tip off their potential target. It made him wonder, but never question. If the Orom demanded him to march a small army, then that is what he would do. Regardless of whether it made sense, logically, or tactically.

By mid-day, he and his men had made their way to the city, in this drab, and lifeless looking hamlet with its drab and lifeless looking people. Immediately, he began asking the various merchants whose booths lined the streets if they'd seen anyone with silver eyes around the city. Most had shaken their heads, but a few had pointed toward the pub at the end of the street. *Typical*, Engram sighed. "Not a coin to spare for taxes, but they always manage to drown their woes in ale." Engram sneered slightly and pushed open the door into the Scarlet Bull.

The pub was crowded with merchants and farmers filling the many tables and booths throughout the main hall. The room was also filled with smoke and the smell of stale ale and sweat. It was enough to make a lesser man sick., and, judging by the looks of more than a few of his recruit's faces, it looked like they were about to be.

“Spread out,” he ordered the men that had accompanied him from Sionaad. The raucous laughter and chatter went quiet as his men took up position throughout the room. He scanned the commons examining the occupants – weathered, and cold, worn farmers, and merchants stared back at him. It was no secret the Northerners detested the Severon. Even though the cleansing of foreign blood had taken place over fifty years ago, many Northerners still remembered the war the Orom had waged against those who had invited the Na’Durians, and Leyenese into their homes. Even if the King would not push out the vile foreigners, the Orom would.

The dining room returned to its everyday bustle as he turned from the room and approached the bar. The barkeep appeared nervous, avoiding eye contact. “Ale for you, milord?”

Ignoring the man’s question, Engram said, “A Devian has been seen in this area.”

The barkeep tensed at the statement. “Haven’t seen one.” His eyes darted past Engram's shoulder, and then quickly back.

Engram turned to where the barkeep’s eyes had shifted and scanned the area. His eyes stopped on a girl in the back of the pub. A hood was pulled low over her face. She was sitting next to an older man in a darkened booth. They were in deep conversation, oblivious to the happenings of the pub. He moved away from the bar toward the booth, sidestepping a waitress and drunken patrons along the way. He was almost on them when he noticed the pendant resting between her breasts. He sucked in a breath when he realized what she wore around her neck. Could it be what they had been searching for? Could a Shard have been hiding like this in plain sight? The Orom would be very pleased with him if he returned to Sionaad with a Shard of Abaddon. Engram continued toward the girl but paused again when she looked up, and the hint of silver glimmered beneath the woolen hood. *She was a Devian?* Could his luck indeed be this great?

He silently motioned for his men to be ready. They could not let this gem escape. He put his hand on the hilt of his sword and continued toward the back of the dining room. They were unaware of him; things could not be any more perfect. With this prize, the Orom would genuinely give him praise and promotion. He’d been scouring the country for these damn Shards,

and here sat *not only a Shard but a Devian!* He couldn't help the smile of triumph that crossed his lips.

He slowly began to unsheathe his sword and took another step toward the back of the dining room. Ten more steps and he could leave this awful place. He had his sword out of the sheath when suddenly two drunken patrons started yelling. An overfed lout shoved the other drunkard into Engram, throwing him off balance, and into one of his men. Engram's sword was knocked from his grip and skittered across the rough planks.

“Commander!”

He shoved the two drunkards off him and angrily took back his sword from his subordinate. He turned around to the booth, but the girl, along with the man, had vanished.

“Damn it! Spread out, and find them! Find that girl!”

Engram sheathed his sword and stepped outside into the bright sun. There was no sight of them among the bustle of Shee. Were they tipped off? They hadn't shown any indication that they'd seen him, and the other Severon, but perhaps they had, and escaped right at the last possible moment when he'd been distracted by the two drunkards. He turned back to the dining room and found two men passed out in the back corner opposite where the girl and man had been. “Wake up!” When neither responded, Engram kicked the smaller of the two men, “I said, wake up!”

“Hey! What did you kick me for?” The man rubbed his face and looked up at Engram, his face went deathly white when he realized it was a Severon Commander standing over him. “Oh, begging your pardon, milord,” he said as he stood and brushed off the dirt from his filthy trousers.

Engram stepped closer to the man and whispered in his ear. “Pay attention to what I have to say, I will not ask twice. There was a woman sitting at that booth,” Engram pointed to the booth just across from where he stood, “she had silver eyes. What do you know about her?”

“You lookin' for Sterling?” There was a puzzled look on the man's face, “Yeah, she shows up here with her uncle on occasion. They deliver vegetables and such to sell here in Shee, but that's all I know. I swear.”

Engram was losing patience with this backwoods farmer, “Where is their stall?”

The drunkard slurred and tried to cower even more, “As far I know, they don't have one. They deliver to the pubs in and around Shee.”

Engram pushed the man into the wall and drew his dagger. Pressing the blade into the man's tanned neck, he snarled a threat. "You know more than you are saying. Tell me what I want to know."

The drunkard was on the verge of tears. "I-I don't know any-anything else, milord. I swear," he stammered and blubbered out. The man had broken out in a sweat, and his face was red with fear. He was grasping at straws, trying to deflect Engram's anger. With a quick gasp, inspiration finally struck him. "The-the barkeep might know more! They-they deliver here as well."

"Commander." Engram released the man and turned. Scout Phayo had returned from tracking. "We lost them in the crowd Commander. We followed them all the way to the marketplace, and they just disappeared."

Phayo was his best tracker, probably the best in all the Northern Arm. Interestingly, in how they had managed to lose him so completely, and so... fast. Fleeting thoughts made their way through his mind. *Had they seen him?* Did this squabble hide their trail? From the best tracker in his unit? No, even though the girl had looked up, she never actually glanced his way. One last thought found focus in his mind, and that was the Shard around her neck. *Damn it.* He had to find that girl. She was too important to his career. He pushed the farmer away and turned his back to Phayo. He had to think. The farmer had said they delivered vegetables to the pubs around Shee, including this one.

A snarl touched his lips as he looked at the barkeep. He would have the information one way or the other. "Get the horses ready. We'll know where they are soon enough," he said to Phayo as he started toward the bar.

"Commander!" Engram paused when Kerl, one of his other trackers, came to a halt beside him. "We heard back from our informant. A merchant has been found smuggling girls out of Duenin and into Leyene. His last known whereabouts were on the merchant road that connects Shee, and New Alden." Engram nodded and dismissed Kerl.

Engram slid quietly into a seat directly in front of the bartender. Slipping a hand down at his side, he drew forth his dagger and laid it gently on the bar top in front of him. Resting his elbows on the counter, he gestured to the barkeep. "Tell me what I want to know, and maybe I'll leave you with just enough fingers to wipe yourself with..."