

Chapter One

Twenty-three years ago ...

SCREAMS OF PAIN AND fear tore through the Low Woods, only to be quickly silenced by mad slaughter and the sound of metal cleaving against flesh. A woman was begging for mercy from the rogues killing her and her companions, only for her cries for mercy to be immediately silenced by the sound of a sword cutting through flesh.

And a baby was crying, crying in fear, and it kept crying long after the last of the rogues had left ...

The young hermit known as Tiram suddenly awoke. He looked around at his surroundings, at the tall and ancient trees on every side, but he saw and heard nothing except for the chirps of the birds in the trees above. He yawned and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, wondering if he had simply had a very vivid dream. He almost always did whenever he spent the night in the Woods away from his cabin. Although Tiram did not know for sure, he had always believed that there was something about the Low Woods that made his dreams more vivid than they normally were.

Tiram glanced at the sword at his side. The blade—a magical sword called Gildshine—was still where he had left it on the dewy grass the night before, untouched by any hands. Still, he picked up his weapon and lay it in his lap, listening again for any sounds in the Low Woods that should not be there. There had been something about that dream that had not been quite right, but he did not know for sure what—

Then Tiram heard it. A baby, crying somewhere in the distance, but close enough that he knew that it was not a dream or some kind of strange animal noise. It sounded exactly like the crying baby in his dream.

But more alarmingly, he smelled smoke, too.

Rising to his feet, Tiram took a quick swig of honey beer from his flask to awaken his senses before taking off through the thick trees and undergrowth of the Low Woods. If there was an abandoned baby nearby and a fire, then Tiram had to act fast. He thought of himself as the protector of the Low Woods and part of being the Low Woods' protector was putting out any fires that started, whether by other humans or by nature.

A few minutes later, Tiram burst through the trees onto a pathway that cut through the Low Woods and stopped at the gruesome sight that lay before him.

Six corpses—mostly men, with one elderly woman among them—lay scattered around the path. An overturned cart lay just off the path, with its canvas burned off and one of its wheels missing. The smoke was coming from the burned cart and one of the corpses, a man who looked like he had been burned alive. The men wore the armor of the Knights of Lamaira, but Tiram did not understand what five Knights of Lamaira and an elderly woman were doing out here in the middle of nowhere, far away from the capital city of Tain, although he could guess at the identities of their killers.

Probably the Marauding Blades, Tiram thought. Vicious bandits, they are. They even make other bandits look peaceful.

But Tiram could still hear the baby crying. It sounded like it was coming from the dead elderly woman, so Tiram ran over to her corpse and bent over it once he reached her.

The woman was lying on her stomach, but Tiram noticed that her arms were folded underneath her like she was protecting something. Although Tiram hated touching corpses, he nonetheless grabbed the old woman's body and turned it over, revealing a baby boy swaddled in fine velvet blankets. Aside from the tiny burn on his forehead, the baby boy appeared uninjured, but he was still crying his lungs out anyway.

Tiram, having had some experience with babies before, immediately scooped up the baby boy in his arms and started to rock him back and forth, all the while saying, "It's okay, it's okay. There's no need to cry. You're safe now."

Much to his surprise, the baby actually did stop crying. He looked up at Tiram with big dark eyes, eyes that did not look quite human to Tiram, but he was unable to explain what was different about them.

"There," said Tiram, smiling despite himself. "See? You're safe now. And lucky, now that I think about it. Somehow you survived when these big strong Knights did not. I wonder how that happened?"

Then Tiram heard a moan and looked down at the old woman. She had elaborately done curls and gold jewelry woven through her hair, making her look like royalty. Most of the jewelry had been ripped out of her hair—no doubt by the bandits that had done this awful thing—and her face was beaten in several places and her nose was clearly broken.

But she had moaned, which meant she was still alive, so Tiram leaned over her, still keeping the baby safe in his arms, and said, "Are you still alive? Miss?"

The old woman opened her eyes. They were gray and cloudy, yet she looked straight at Tiram like her vision was fine. She reached up with one weak, burned hand and said, in a weak voice, "Please ... protect the young *shelmai* ..."

Tiram had no idea what 'shelmai' meant, but the old woman seemed to be referring to the baby. So he said, "I can help you. I have a cabin a few miles from here with food, water, and medical supplies and—"

"No ..." the old woman croaked. "Don't bother ... my time has come ..."

"What do you mean?" said Tiram. He glanced around at the dead Knights lying around them. "Are you dying? Why were you and five Knights out here all by yourselves in the middle of nowhere?"

The old woman coughed. "His majesty ... King Riuno ... is dead ..."

"The King of Lamaira?" said Tiram, unable to believe his ears. "What? How?"

"It ... does not matter," said the old woman. She hacked and wheezed. "Please ... just protect the *shelmai* ... he must survive ..."

The old woman's words trailed off and her eyes became lifeless. She stopped moving, stopped breathing. She was dead.

Tiram stood up and looked at the baby boy in his arms. The baby, the *shelmai*, as the old woman had called him, was sleeping soundly within his arms now, as if he sensed that he was going to be safe now.

Tiram still had no idea who the old woman was or what was so special about the baby boy, but he did understand that King Riuno was dead. He didn't know how or why, but he doubted that the old

woman would have wasted the last moments of her life telling him a lie.

And if the King is dead, then Lamaira will not survive long without him, Tiram thought grimly.

Tiram shook his head. The fate of the Kingdom was not important at the moment. Right now, he needed to focus on getting this baby to safety and searching the corpses of the woman and the Knights for any clues as to their identities or purpose for coming here. Then Tiram would take whatever the bandits had left, bury the bodies, and worry about the future in the morning.

So Tiram turned and walked back into the trees of the Low Woods, intending to take the baby, the *shelmai*, to his cabin. And the baby slept softly in his arms all the while.