

# Prologue

**B**efore written history, before dark stories, before human memory, there was Nature. And in Nature, there is Magick.

Certain creatures were attuned to The Ways of Magick. Their bodies became as their spirits were: warped and twisted by the power they wield, beauty and grace by the goodness of their heart, strength and courage by all they had seen.

The Ways of Light and Dark were balanced. All continued in peace, until the rise of mankind. The moods of man were erratic and The Ways suffered. Mankind ignored the counsel of those who knew, and continued on their path of selfish abandon. Some practitioners were elevated to gods over man, causing battles among man's tribes and civil war among the magick beings. As man's presence grew, their mood changed again and those they had elevated they now shunned and hunted.

The guardians of The Ways were forced into hiding. They slipped from the touch of daily life to the realm of legend, myth and stories. Not forgotten, but worse, ignored. Left to their own devices, they determined to save Nature on their own terms, no longer considerate of man's will.

A Council was created to enforce Nature's order, to counter man's interference. Theirs was a world of mystery, secrecy, and sorcery. The ancient realm of the divine and the profane. Lost through the ages, it touches the modern world only on the edge of dreams and dementia. Divided power for the survival of all. One member of each magick tribe to sit in representation, one voice to be heard from each of the shadows, one strength to rebuild the foundations of the world.

# Chapter 1



Miranda walked through the meadow as though she'd been there all her days. She followed the rut of the carts' wheels, feeling the uneven ground through her sturdy boots. Her skirts swished around her ankles, catching occasionally on the tall grasses growing beside the path. She looked up at the sun, smiling as it warmed her face. She felt light and free; an unfamiliar feeling but she didn't know why it seemed so foreign.

Cresting the last rise, she looked down on the little village. The second harvest was in and the celebration seemed underway. From her vantage, she watched women preparing stews in large cauldrons near the center of town, while men moved tables around so that the entire village could fellowship together. Children ran around with dogs trailing behind, and Dalriada Castle rose in the background, silent and protective of the scene below.

Miranda hurried down the path to join the festivities. She had to pass through a small stretch of woods before reaching the gates of the village, and when she emerged, the idyllic scene was now an assault to her senses.

The village was on fire. Through the acrid smoke, Miranda could only make out the massive shapes of the demon horde laying waste to everything in their path. The screams of the villagers pierced her eardrums and the smell of blood and burning flesh nearly made her gag. Without conscious thought, her blade was in her hand and she began to turn the tide.

Over the chaos, the sound of a trumpet announced that troops would soon arrive from Dalriada Castle. All she had to do was hold them at bay until then.

A massive hulk stepped in front of her. Her blade sang as it passed through the shape as effortlessly as smoke and two distinct thuds hit the ground. Her attention was already turned to another enemy who would not fall so easily.

As always, her body responded with practiced efficiency and latent instinct. Blow after blow was blocked in quick succession until his guard fell and her opening appeared. One quick thrust and her blade emerged through the back of the beast.

Even over the noise of the plundering of the village, Miranda heard the approach of another demon. With a swift and sure motion, she pulled her blade out of her victim and blocked a blow aimed for her head. A blind swing removed the head, then, switching hands with a speed that would have finally impressed her teachers, she ran through a vile creature at her right.

She cast barely a glance at her handiwork as the eruption into fire of a nearby home drew her attention up. A young boy emerged from the house, howling in his terror. Before she could take a step toward him, a crossbow bolt entered his chest, pinning him to the burning wall of his home.

She turned her outrage toward the shooter. Her anger unchecked was more of a danger to her than to anyone else, as was proven by how carelessly her first blow was blocked. A snarl crossed his lips as he returned her blow, drawing first blood across her left arm. The snarl faded as none of the following blows made contact with anything but her sword.

Miranda chided her foolish stupidity, pulling her wounded arm against her chest and crossing her sword with his by only the strength of her right arm. Normally enough to win any fight, she could not keep her attention from the boy. The fire that consumed the house collapsed the wall where he was pinned and he disappeared under the burning rubble.

A searing pain in her side made Miranda cry out. She moved her hand away from the wound to see fresh red blood. She turned to see her attacker's face, but the smoke encircled his head in a way that shielded his face.

"A message from my master," cried the beast as the blade made contact with Miranda's throat.

Miranda sat bolt upright, gasping with her hand at her throat. She held her hand in front of her face and the dim light from the street showed her the blood was not there. She got out of bed and wandered into the bathroom, flipping on the light.

Her long dark hair, devoid of gray, redefined bed-head with its tangled waves. She held it back as she splashed cold water on her face and looked up. How she had grown tired of the unchanging face in the mirror. Not quite unchanging as the past two weeks of these recurring nightmares were putting care lines on her face. A task eight hundred thirty-nine years of life and toil had been unable to accomplish.

Miranda splashed more water on her face and made her way downstairs. She waved her hand at the television and The Weather Channel illuminated her loft. She flipped on the lights in her kitchen and snagged a glass from her bar shelf.

She grabbed the handle on her freezer door and stopped, looking for a moment as the eerie glow from the television defined her shadow against the brushed aluminum finish. It would figure that her shadow would be the most solid looking thing about her.

She threw a couple of ice cubes in the glass and poured about two shots of scotch over them. Even immortality did not nullify the bracing effects of scotch. She hoped the full effect would help her push the dream to the back of her mind. In the meantime, she walked across the room and picked up a light throw from the back of her couch. Draping it over her shoulders, she carried her drink out onto the balcony.

The air was more bracing than the drink. Miranda looked at her watch. Three-thirty. Avoiding going to bed early hadn't helped her sleep; she still ran this nightmare gamut in less than thirty minutes. She looked out over the lights of downtown Denver, lower downtown to be precise. A low mist hung over the streetlights, giving an appropriately macabre quality to a night two weeks before Halloween.

The home she made for herself in this converted loft was as much of a home as she had ever had in her long life: the tactile strength she felt from the bricks and beams, the hope and energy she felt when she saw the lights of her beloved LoDo. Her home for

seven years now, it was this view that sold her on the space. It was high enough for a clear view of the mountains and still low enough to feel a part of the community where she lived. Ever the outsider in both magical and human society, she took whatever comfort mere proximity could provide.

She crossed her arms, shivering. She had to go inside and at least try to rest. No morning came earlier than Monday morning.