

## A Man's Dream

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It is said that after the ephemeral life in the Prime Material Plane, all creatures come to the Concordant Grounds of Neutrality. Here, in the summit of a giant grayish rocky plateau, the Great Spire of Balance—a Sigil atop of a giant white granite tower—keeps the equilibrium in every soul preventing a clash of good and evil forces. After spending some time pondering and waiting the resolution of the Sigil, all souls must take one of the twelve gates that lead to the Upper Lawful Summits of Hope or the Lower Chaotic Pits of Despair, according to their actions in the Prime Plane. This story takes place in one of those planes, the Savage Lands.

The Savage Lands are home for humans, fey people, animals, dire beasts, magical beasts, and savages that roam these fields in a never ending clash for survival. This plane is a vast land infinite in size, full of gnarled thick forests, tall green grass prairies, and lush plains. Ponds and lakes of pristine water dot the landscape along with wonderful waterfalls that flow endlessly into the horizon. The sky, full of dancing glimmering stars is stained with an orange hue due to an everlasting

dawn. A gentle drizzle occurs once a day soaking the entire plane and allowing some sort of time measure.

Now happened that not long ago far in the Realms of Men, —Malmalon the Maimed—the Supreme Archmage of the Crimson Tower of Wizardry in Tarr—a powerful city—called forth an ancient Elven Seer for his aid, for Malmalon, a powerful wizard bound to the Magic Weave and its powers, felt a sudden change in the weave's balance. A change in the magic flow that not went unnoticed, for wizards, conjurers, necromancers, healers, and all those who were closely related to it noticed a wicked disruption far away from the lands of men and elves. It is for this reason that Ilvaros of House Iluvien, a seer of great power came to the City of Tarr to unmask the events behind the disruption of the magic balance by looking through the Veil and into the Realms of the Dead.

And so happened, that one good night during the heaviest hail storm of the season, Ilvaros the uncanny seer arrived to Malmalon's tower to perform his heretic art. High above the ground, atop the last floor of the tower, Ilvaros conjured a magic spell that opened a

door to the Realms of the Dead to be witness of a series of odd events that occurred to Ruam, a fellow half-bred, as for the record of this story is the proper way to call those that blood lines can be traced to both men and elven ancestry.

And so, the vision came in lush green and bright stars in a wondrous distant country of breathtaking forests, and memories of old came in a chaotic way to the Seer's mind as the blurry shape of a man walking aimlessly started to become clearer...

As far as Ruam knew, it was almost impossible for him to know how long he had been in that place since he entered the gate. All he was able to tell was the fact that he had traveled northward until he reached the Moonlight Forest as it was commanded in his blurry dreams. According to his knowledge, the length of his travel was almost two times the distance between the mighty city of Fellbar and the small gorge he used to protect. Now, he found himself there, roaming in those beautiful lands, where the savage and indomitable spirit of nature exhibits its full force.

A man, a woodsman, a wanderer of the woods, a protector for the hopeless traveler, a guardian of the sacred wonders of nature, and a diehard follower of Sylvian—the Forest Queen—a demi goddess told to be the deity of Rangers, Centaurs, Dryads and all the creatures that make their living out from the woods.

For he was a half breed, an offspring between a man of old and a beautiful elven queen. Inheriting the best traits out of his ancestry, he shared not only the curiosity, inventiveness, and ambition of his father but also the refined senses, love for nature, and the taste

for clever humor, songs, and poetry worthy of his elven legacy as well as their natural beauty, finely chiseled features, and a melodic voice tone.

It is hard even for the most cunning seer to tell how long the fellow ranger has been roaming up and down through the land without any sense of direction or the unexpected sequence of events that are about to unfold.

It happened so, that the young man entered the Moonlight Forest, an ancient enchanted thick forest full of trees older than the foundation of the Realms of Men and Elves and rocks from the bosom of the earth itself.

"I have did as you commanded dear Forest Queen, I have stridden my way deep into this enchanted forest looking for you..." prayed the young ranger to be only heard by the ethereal silence of the woods. Even though there was no answer to him after his prayer, he traveled relentlessly through the forest, so old that most of its gnarled trees were covered with moss and cobwebs. He walked faithfully through it long enough to notice the magic entangled in each twig, branch, and leaf that swirled at the pace and rhythm of a gentle winterish breeze that blew from the north. After long enough and one drizzle, Ruam noticed the creaking sound of the oak trees around him that resembled an indistinct chatter between the oldest trees.

Then, as he walked farther into the wilderness, one more drizzle came, so he decided to set camp in a small glade amongst the snarled roots and the muddy ground, where he immediately started a cooking fire to dry his clothes and boots leaning his back in a patch of fragrant lavenderish grass aside the bonfire's warmth. There, while looking

at the shimmering dancing stars up in the sky and the last droplets of water falling from yonder like sparkling gemstones, the echoed giggling of mischievous Fairies and Pixies playing tricks on other animals and beasts of the forest caught his attention, a pleasant way to fall asleep, to fall deeper into his thoughts...

After a while, deep into his unfathomable dreams and thoughts, a voice, a shadowy shape, a sweet muttering coming from nowhere, calling him, pleading for help made him wake up abruptly with that feeling on his chest, that wild throbbing on his heart, pushing him to restart his journey against his own will. Drowsy from his sleep, the fellow half-bred, indeed somehow compelled by the dream and that charming power over his heart that made him move on to reached the edge of the Moonlight Forest and find a passage through jagged peaks of the Star Mountains.

"My journey has started again, pondered on his way looking down the valley, I have given my first steps to behold this majestic landscape before my eyes, the vast Shamrock Dale, stretching as far as the eyes can see" thought the fellow ranger, "indeed an eye catcher" whispered before keeping his track to the mountains.

A beautiful sparkling green pasture contrasting with the unusual scorched clouds, the thunderous roar, and lightning far in the distance atop the Star Mountains, harbingering the arrival of the lone ranger to the valley's mouth.

"Finally! I made it" exclaimed Ruam while standing still, resting his left hand on his sword pommel and having a look to the surrounding land, "it's been long since I started this journey and there still more land to

be walked..." pondered him in an attempt to find more courage while having a second look, but this time to the mountain foot, "I will find the valley's bottom to set camp one last time before looking for the treacherous Tombstone Pass" reasoned without hesitating as he nodded.

After a while heading to the valley's bottom, the skillful adventurer reached the last place where he would set camp, aside a flat slope where the valley started to turn into a barren rocky plateau scarcely inhabited by small bramble bushes. There, using his knowledge in the ways of the forest, he managed to build a small ramshackle hut out of branches and leaves, where he sojourned to rest, quench his thirst, and quell his hunger before departing.

This time the chaotic and loud noise of the blistering thunderstorm set the pace of his sleep, his dream, again... that fading voice... that woman, her ethereal skin, her ghostly eyes, her long dark hair. He had no doubt, she whispered him to come to her, almost like casting a spell on his soul, entangling his heart. This time the feeling on his chest turned into a bursting of thousand stars. He knew that something was wrong...

Once his strength was recovered, mighty Ruam started his journey through the dangerous Tombstone Pass, a narrow crooked pass no wider than 80 feet at the most. Surrounded by sharp cliffs, the pass stretches across and deep into the Star Mountains leading right into the heart of the Sacred Realm of the Nature's Gift. But, something was wrong, atop the high cliffs of the pass, a band of Stone Giants set an ambush, hurling massive rocks, dislodging hefty chunks of dirt and

boulders, causing a massive slide along the mountain side, crashing upon the head of the unsuspecting traveler. But then, in a desperate attempt for survival, the mighty ranger ran toward the mountain wall, where he spotted a crack, a crevasse wide enough to tightly fit his body while the massive landslide fell into the pass. Right after, the band of Giants disappeared into the utter darkness leaving no tracks on the bare rock to be followed.

“Who is leading them?” thought Ruam whilst keeping his attention towards the cliffs, for he knew that the giant kin were not smart enough to set ambushes, “What kind of force is behind this unusual behavior?” reasoned the ranger while trying to move some rocks in front of him, since giants, a brutish race of humanoids, often follow a wiser and smarter giant king that usually do not fight unless they need to.

After this, now bearing a few scratches on his skin, he continued his journey through the rocky maze reaching the shattered pass exit. Before him, his goddess stronghold, a gift from nature itself to the Forest Queen. A Cathedral carved out of The Father of All Trees, a tree so massive that some stories tell that its roots reach so deep into the ground that traverse the Beast Lands linking them to other planes. A tree so tall that its branches can grasp the stars. But this time, something evil defiled and tainted the place.

There were no Centaurs, no Dryads, no Fairies, no chants, nothing at all, the tree itself seemed to be dying, it's magic and it's very living force seemed to be vanishing, turning it into a crumbling dead hollow carcass full of worms, maggots, mold, and slimy creatures. The now cautious ranger

approached the Cathedral entrance wielding his sword ready to strike; his steps were short and slow while entering the main Cathedral Hall, the Hall of the Blazing Fireflies. Finding himself way beyond the main hall and having crossed several archways, deep in the Cathedral where the altar stood, Ruam found something foul besides the Forest Queen's lifeless Avatar.

Izaar the Accursed was the name of the Abyss dweller, a Baron of hell that resembled a man crowned by a pair of ram-like horns and long black hair. Summoned from the deepest pits of hell, standing at least 7 feet tall, and bearing a cold gaze capable to pierce both heart and soul. He was holding the Forest Queen Avatar within his obsidian sharp claws while wielding a ruthless cleaver axe on its other hand. Sharp white fangs stained by blood and guts poked out of his mouth while devouring the Avatar. Its presence was crowned by a pair of giant bat-like wings and a long whip tail.

Although the seemingly defeat of the Forest Queen avatar was enough reason for Ruam to fight the demon despite their numbers, there was a hidden treasure within the halls of the Cathedral, an artifact of great power, the true reason behind Izaar's summoning, the Heartstone, a perversion of old, created by the Gods and hidden from unwanted eyes and scattered along with twelve more gemstones around the twelve gates. Izaar's new possession, undoubtedly, would kindle the Awakening of Hell, granting him great power and disrupting the Magical Weave as a consequence.

“What do we have here? The Forest Queen champion...!” roared the demon while spreading its wings wide,

"You are late fool!" followed Izaar, "I have defeated her avatar and I have feasted on her flesh and bone" gurgled the demon as he stepped in front of the rabble of lesser demons under his command, "I have come to sent you back to the shores of the River of Lost Souls fiend" replied Ruam while stepping closer to the hellish baron, "I am hell's sending, Izaar, and I will be your bane half-bred" answered energetically the demon as he clenched his vicious axe, "You do not belong to this land demon!, On your guard for I will banish you back to the Abyss!" snorted the Ranger whilst laying down his sword in a misleading low guard and searching his neck for something.

In that moment, the foul demon's pitch black eyes bursted in fury turning to crimson, roaring commands in an accursed speech to the lesser fiends to fight the intruder. The crowd of lesser demons immediately started their attack fearing their master's fury approaching quickly from all sides.

Having enough time, the ranger called forth the power over nature granted to him by his Goddess before the rabble of fiends descended upon him, "For the power I command, I call forth on you feral spirit, help me in this time of great need!" as the words were some sort of prayer, the enraged ranger babbled unintelligible words whilst holding within his fist a wolf head necklace, summoning a pair of twin dire wolves.

The Hall was filled with a loud piercing howl as a pair of dire wolves—bearing snow white fur, sharp teeth, and powerful steel claws—appeared from nowhere to tear apart their master's foes.

And so, the brave party clashed against the outsiders, slashing and

cutting through their ranks, spilling their blood, but their numbers were vast and the mighty adventurer quickly grew tired and the harsh battle took its toll on him. Badly wounded, kneeling and leaning on his sword, the man's blurry vision was lost into space, heavily breathing, witnessing how his life was escaping from his body, pouring into the ground. All sort of memories came to him, good and bad alike from his past life. In that moment, high upon the shrine before him, he beheld a beautiful shape, dancing within the utter darkness. It was the immortal spirit of the Forest Queen. He immediately recognized this vision as the final will of his Goddess. In that instant he knew what has to be done...

Drawing upon his remaining power, the brave man, shouting cries to his Goddess charged against the remaining ranks of foul creatures, reaching the infernal Abyss Baron right in the center of the Hall. In a final moment of rage and courage, both the man and the wretched spawn plunged together fusing their blood and energy causing a blast of white light that engulfed the whole cathedral once the light subsided the whole demonic army was gone and the Cathedral restored.

After that, his body turned into a statue of solid stone. Frozen for eternity in his final moments of agony, in his final moments of victory, raising his sword claiming his triumph over evil. Ages have passed since that fierce battle; scholars and diviners alike disagree about the hero's fate, some believed that his spirit wanders the Realm of Dreams, some others that his ghost now haunts the forests, and a handful that his soul is held within the stone statue waiting to be freed.

