

Prologue

As is conventional all other worlds revolved around Jhevek, from the smallest moon, for there are three Iceros, Tiat and Lesh, to the great and burning sun. Very little is known of 'other' worlds, yet the scholars insist that they are there, out there somewhere in the vastness of black space itself, of course there were various maps and charts to prove their existence, but that does little to convince the common man that these other worlds mean anything to him or her.

But this story takes place upon Jhevek, at least that is what it was commonly referred as, the world of Jhevek came into being many eons ago, from where or from whom we have yet to discern, this is the subject of great debate among scholars, but at this time that is not as important as the story before us. The world itself has suffered through the ages from various wars and cataclysms, but it has survived, and thrived until the present time.

During the last great cataclysm that shook the world and caused great destruction upon the land and to the seas, the very gods themselves disappeared! What became of them, no one knows for sure. But since that time all the clerics and priests have all but disappeared also, for what do you need a priest or cleric for if they cannot commune with their god? Oh of course there are charlatans out there still, pretenders only, for no one has heard from the elder gods for almost five-hundred years.

So in light of this situation there has been a rise in the worship of nature and the land itself. Scattered across the world are pockets of druids and such who proclaim that by worshipping nature itself that will bring back the elder gods. But most scholars scoff at this idea, saying that it is founded in lies and half truths. Yet they are still attracting many to their cause, leaving the ways of the cities and villages behind to live off the land in the wilderness.

In addition to this there have arisen many magic users, mages, sorcerers, and others who can use their minds to shape and mold things to their wills. They rule the lands now in the wake of the disappearance of the gods and the downfall of the clerics and priests. So people flock to them in time of need as they draw upon the energy of the very world itself the mysterious flux of power that seems to abide in all living things. They guard their secrets well and only allow a chosen few to enter their ranks.

There are numerous and diverse races scattered throughout the world, from the stoic dwarves and their various clans, to the charming and genial elves, to the gruesome goblins and their kind. There are also the humans, whom seem to be spreading and multiplying quicker than most, and of course there are the minotaurs, who prefer to keep to themselves due to fear and prejudices', but as of late have gotten more and more involved with the affairs of the other races, yet their kind seems to be becoming more and more uncommon. There are other lesser races, such as the lizard men and the giants, but the predominate races of men, elves, minotaurs, dwarves, and goblins were the crucial ones who built kingdoms and great cities across the known world.

The year is 493 KR, or King's Reckoning, the 493rd year of the reign of Kings in the Kingdom of Lijissa, one of the largest, if not the most dominate kingdom in the world of Jhevek, most all the inhabitants of the known world used the King's Reckoning as the recognized form of time measurement due to the influence this kingdom has upon the world, and because some of the wilder races simply don't care, thus it has been for the past four-hundred and ninety-three years.

We should now look at the known world, known as far as the scholars and learned men of Lijissa are concerned. It is widely held that there are five main continents scattered across Jhevek, from the mysterious frigid northern land of Hempora or the Frozen North as most call it, to the eastern great land mass known as Trirakkal, of course where the Kingdom lies is part of the continent of Jhavari, and to the west is the continent of Utensonia. There is little known of this area, for not only is it cut off from the rest of the world by vast oceans of water, but also the vast ocean of sand known as the Desert of Despair and the towering mountain chain called the Skag Mountains. What lives in this land are only heard in legends and tall tales shared around the camp fires of adventurers and travelers or by parents trying to scare their children around the home fires late at night. Also before we forget, in the far south is the land known as Cyzad, where the dragons rule the sky. An interesting place indeed, but all this has to be told at another time.

Our story begins in the Kingdom of Lijissa, in the reign of the elven King Lonthonis Brightwater, who had a very beautiful daughter named Lunansa. King Lonthonis was the fifth king in a lineage of kings who had reigned in Lijissa since the time of King's Reckoning. He was

at this time a widower, having lost his wife, Queen Taleth in the last war. Lunansa was now his only heir, for he and his wife had no other children. She was the pride of his life and the jewel of the kingdom, for all the people loved her and would do almost anything for her. But there was another war brewing on the horizon, the goblins and their allies, the dark dwarves, were massing along the border of his great kingdom and the King was worried. It seemed as if this war was inevitable, for it looked as if the forces aligned against his kingdom were going to cross the border as they had not more than ten years earlier, unless he could find a way to prevent it. Nevertheless for now he knew no way for that to happen, and then his only daughter came up missing! And thus the story begins...

Chapter 1

Breathing hard, for he was moving rather quickly down the trail, Vekao slowed to a stop. He wasn't feeling very well, his back ached, his head hurt and yet he knew that he still had to keep pushing forward. It was another long day to the coast, and he'd been on the road for over a week now in his desperate attempt to reach his friend in the port city of Koth.

His friend Lizzy, her real name was Lissidrinne Moonglade, was in deep trouble and she was counting on him to come and bail her out, again! So he found himself trudging along this trail, heading towards Koth, what lay before him, was yet to be determined, what trouble she was in, was yet to be known.

The port city of Koth was part of the Lijissa Empire. It was a rather large city and an old city, having been founded hundreds of years ago, before the Great Cataclysm. It was a busy port, which attracted a lot of merchant ships, full of exotic cargos from distant lands, cargos such as spices and ivory, or perhaps in some cases even slaves! Trade was very brisk, but at times risky, with a lot of competition between rival merchants and of course the occasional pirate.

Vekao continued along the trail now, but at a slightly slower pace, for he wasn't as young as he used to be. Vekao was a minotaur from the island of Minopis, off the coast of Lijissa. His full name was Vekao Untter, he had left the island a long time ago to strike out on his own, but that was another story. It has been a very long time now since he has seen his homeland and he was beginning to wonder if he ever would again. Physically Vekao stood over seven feet tall and

was massively built, as most of his kind, and one of his horns had been broken in half during his youth. His body was covered in scars that he had earned from his many travels and adventures over the past few years, yet for a minotaur he was considered good looking. He was strong, stronger than most of his kind really, and he knew how to use the battleaxe strapped to his broad back, he knew how to use it very well, which most of his adversaries had discovered the hard way. He was a merchant by trade, but hadn't practiced his profession in over a dozen years. In the past couple of years he had been on a quest, a mission so to speak, to discover why his old friend Davkas had disappeared.

You see Davkas was Lizzy's father and had been missing now for a good long time, longer than was normal anyway, since he was constantly sent on scouting missions for his King. He wasn't sure when and he wasn't sure how, but he was determined to find him, whether he was dead or alive, Davkas that is. So he continued to push himself, continued to look for clues wherever they might lead him, all he knew for now was that he had disappeared somewhere in the Skag mountains.. But for now Lizzy was in trouble and had sent him a message to come and come quickly. So he struck out from the town he called his home to find Lizzy and see what he could do to help her out of the jam she had gotten herself in.

Lizzy was a thief, something that Vekao didn't really approve of, but this was her trade so to speak and she normally worked alone because she didn't really trust other people. She was young though and always getting involved in areas that were too dangerous, even for one as skilled as she was. This time was one of those! She had apparently stolen something very valuable from a wealthy merchant in Koth and now she had agents of this merchant, Zhuerelm,

who were hot on her trail. She had sent a message for Vekao to come quickly and he had responded by dropping everything to come. He felt as if Lizzy was like his own and felt responsible for her well-being now that Davkas had turned up missing.

He paused along the trail he had been traveling when he didn't hear the usual forest sounds any longer, for it had become quiet, too quiet. "*Strange*" he thought, so he pulled his battleaxe off of his back and started paying closer attention as he crept cautiously down the trail. Soon he thought that he heard something over to his right, so he paused and listened...

"Well, well, well what do we have here? A minotaur and a big one at that? Have you lost your way cow-head?" said a strange gruff voice just off the trail.

Vekao turned his full attention towards the voice and that's when he heard the grunt from behind him and twisted to the side, just in time, before the spear that had been thrown at his back impaled itself into the tree next to him. Instantly Vekao rose to his full height and charged straight towards the voice, with his battleaxe leading the way! He wasn't going to let them box him in without a fight, so he pushed his way through the brush and came face-to-face with a squat, ugly man, with tattoo's on his face and neck . He was holding a sword out in front of him, but seemed to be surprised that Vekao was there in front of him, and he gave a little yelp, and jumped back a couple of feet.

"Hold minotaur! Surrender while you still draw breath!" said the ugly man to him and waved his sword around, trying to appear threatening, but failed miserably to impress Vekao.

Vekao stopped and stared at him for a second, noticed that the sword was somewhat rusty, and decided that he was being attacked by some common highwaymen. “I will neither surrender, nor hold stranger! You need to explain to me why your friend back there tried to skewer me with that spear!” Vekao snarled at him and gestured behind his left shoulder, for that was where he began to see and hear movement in the bushes behind him along the trail.

Vekao knew that he didn't have the luxury of time, so not waiting for a reply he faked a rush at the man in front of him, causing him to stumble back a step or two, and then whirled around, with quickness uncommon to one his size, and rushed straight at the second man that had emerged from the bushes. The man was big, not as big as Vekao of course, but big none the less. He must have stood well over six feet, with huge muscular arms and a massive, barrel of a chest. His face was scarred, and he had a patch over his left eye, his remaining eye was fixed on Vekao in hatred!

Vekao raised his battleaxe and began his dance, at least he liked to think of it as a dance, yet in reality it was very serious work, and he had trained hard all his life to learn it. He parried a quick slash by the man as he brought a long sword to bear on Vekao and he countered with a backwards chop with his battleaxe. The robber jumped back and stumbled over some roots on the ground, Vekao didn't hesitate as he ended the thief's life there in the forest, next to the tree where the spear still hung embedded in its trunk.

Pulling his battleaxe free, Vekao quickly turned around to get his bearings on the first man and didn't see him anywhere. Being the cowardly bandit that he was, the first man had run off when he saw that the battle wasn't going to go their way. So Vekao took the time to clean the blood off of his battleaxe and repositioned it again on his back, watching the surrounding woods all the while, then again began his long journey towards the daughter of his friend.

"Well I hope I can avoid any more distractions." He thought to himself as he ran down the trail. *"All this fighting has wasted too much of my time."*

He soon came to a stream and decided to fill his water skins and rest for a moment beside the stream. He didn't want to stay there long though, since he knew that the robbers could have friends nearby and could be coming back at any moment. So after a few minutes just to refresh himself he got up and continued his trek towards the coast.

Shortly Vekao came to a fork in the trail, one leading towards the mountains along the coast, while the other branched downwards to the shore. So he took the one leading to the shore, since that was where Koth was located and so he was off again. He was intrigued by the variety of plant life as he trudged along the trail, and knew most their uses. He studied it with interest, not having seen some of the different species. There were all kinds, as well as some varieties that he recognized from his travels during the war. Some of the ones he saw he knew were good for healing; some were used to make you sleep, while another had more serious properties.

Time passed, as he quickened his pace, trying to make up for lost time spent battling the robbers. He needed to find a place to make camp for the night, before it got too dark, so he began scanning the countryside around him for a suitable place. One that would provide the kind of shelter he needed and so he continued along the trail, with his long strides causing the miles to be eaten up swiftly.

He soon found something to his liking and steered himself over to the spot, just about hundred yards or so off the trail, in a thicket of trees. He didn't take long to gather some firewood and setup a camp site. Soon he had a roaring fire going and he had his bedroll out and was getting ready to eat some hardtack and cheese. Of course he was wishing that he had something better, but that was all that was left and soon he would be forced to hunt for his meals, yet tonight he had no time for that.

After his brief meal which he washed down with some fresh water from the stream, he began to stoke up the fire a bit as he was getting ready to lie down for the night. That's when he saw them...they were huge silhouettes in the night sky, barely discernable in the light of the three moons. What they were he didn't really know, but they were flying straight towards his camp fire it seemed! Quickly he doused the fire, kicking dirt, and dumping some of his water on it. He then dived over to the side and took cover behind some trees off to his right.

He soon could hear the flapping of their massive wings. Two...no three of the flying beasts! He was cautious as he peered around the tree he was crouching behind, and yet he still

could not determine what they were. But, soon his worse fears were realized as they seemed to pivot in the air towards his little camp!

The fur on his arms and the nape of his neck stood up on end. Time seemed to stand still and the air seemed thicker, if that was possible. Closer they came, closer, and then...they were gone! Just like that, they flew right over where he was crouched down, and continued on towards the coastline ahead. Vekao blew out the air in his lungs, for he was embarrassed to realize he had been holding his breathe. He slowly stood up and looked out over the horizon in the light of the three moons to see if he could spot the things circling back, but no, they were gone. He could no longer hear the flapping of their wings.

After a few minutes he began to relax a little and stopped pacing around the camp, he started a smaller fire and rolled himself up in his blanket, determined to get some sleep this night! He lay fidgeting in his bedroll, trying to figure out what he had seen, in all his travels he just couldn't place the things! It wasn't that long before he found himself fast asleep...

Waking, feeling refreshed in the morning, Vekao was happy to see his fire still held a spark. He quickly surveyed his surroundings, and determined there was no one or no thing else in the vicinity; so he got his fire blazing again. Soon he had his tin cup out and was heating some water in it to make some tea. Vekao loved his tea in the morning hours, for he had packed a few of the roots from his home for the trip and this morning was no exception. After drinking some tea and eating a little more of the rations he had packed for himself, he was up putting the fire

out. He grabbed his belongings, slung them on his broad back and was off down the trail again heading for his rendezvous with Lizzy in Koth.

Vekao found that he was humming an old seafaring tune and was in a pretty good mood, all things considered for him. He quickly made his way down the trail as it led closer and closer to Koth. He thought back to the mysterious flying creatures from last night and was mulling over in his head just exactly what he thought they were.

“Couldn’t be dragons” he thought. *“They just didn’t seem big enough. But they were big enough to make me dive behind that tree and cower like a child!”* Vekao thought angrily to himself. *“What could they be then?”*

He continued to ponder this question, over and over in his mind, as he traveled down the trail, but he really couldn’t put his finger on what he had seen in the night. Soon he was beginning to see other people walking along the trail ahead of him, some in small carts coming in his direction, others with bows hanging across their backs apparently out early to get some hunting in. Soon the trail couldn’t be called a trail any longer, but was a full fledged road, a road leading straight to the walled city of Koth.

The farmers and others that were passing by him along the road were staring at him. He tried not to stare back, for he knew that it wasn’t everyday that they saw a minotaur, especially a minotaur of his stature. His people came from across the Great Sea of the East, from a land many miles from where he walked today. Yet many minotaurs had been used as mercenaries in the

recent war, it was just that the majority of them had returned home, Vekao wasn't one of them, he had decided to stay and make this land his home, of course it was times like these that he regretted his decision.

As he walked he reflected on his friendship with Davkas. Imagine an elf and a minotaur becoming good friends! But it had happened during the war; both Davkas and he were on the side of King Lonthonis Brightwater during the War of the King, almost ten years ago now. They had joined up separately and yet ended up fighting in the same battle. Davkas was a scout, employed by the King to go before his troops and scout out enemy positions, a very dangerous, yet exciting profession. During this time he became good friends with the King and spent some time at the court of the King.

Vekao was hired as a mercenary soldier at the time, and he was soon placed in charge of a squadron of minotaurs who had joined around the same time. Vekao fought in many different battles during the war and it was during one of these battles that he met Davkas and Davkas's daughter Lissidrinne or Lizzy as they now called her. Vekao had saved Davkas's life when the goblins had burst through their line and were forcing a retreat. Davkas had fallen when an arrow pierced his leg, and the goblins were running up the gorge just when Vekao had spotted him and scooped him up with one hand and thrown him over his shoulder. They had been good friends ever since Davkas had taken him back with him; to the city of Castitrona, and it was during this time that Davkas introduced him to his family, including his daughter Lizzy. And now Davkas's daughter was in trouble, with Davkas still missing and Vekao the only one able to offer aid.

Soon Vekao found himself at the gate to the city. It was open now being that it was early morning. The activity around the gate was very busy it seemed to him, merchants were coming and going hawking their wares, while farmers came to sell their crops, beggars where there also, also it seemed that there were all kinds of races from humans and elves, why even an occasional dwarf and now of course a minotaur. There were guards posted who kept an eye on Vekao as he strode within the walls of the city. Vekao grunted at them as he passed and nodded, there was a young guard who was staring a little too much and for him Vekao gave a big wink. The guard closed his mouth and turned away, being a little embarrassed.

“Always wise to be on their good side” he thought.

He soon found himself heading up one of the main streets, looking for an inn that Lizzy had indicated on the note that was delivered to him. He was to met her at an inn named the ‘Rusty Wheel’ he was sure about the name of the place, but wasn’t sure about the location, so he asked for directions and was soon on his way there, and his meeting with Lizzy, he hoped!

Chapter 2

She crept along the outside of the manor, keeping to the shadows and trying to calm her breathing. The night was still young, but the moons were hidden behind the clouds, which made it a perfect night to do what she was attempting to do. She was in the merchant district, more commonly called The Point, of the city of Koth and she was thrilled, so thrilled that she almost blundering straight into the guard! She caught herself at the last minute and paused in the deep shadows of the home of the wealthy merchant, Zhuerelm. The guard walked on past the spot, not noticing the young elven female there, Lizzy was her name, she had come to Koth a few months prior to make her name in the world and to show her father Davkas that she could survive on her own. Of course things didn't work out exactly as she planned and here she was now creeping along in the shadows, about to break into the rich merchant's home to see what she could find.

Prior to this Lizzy had been living down by the docks and was attempting to make a living by working in and around the fishermen. But it wasn't working out too well so she soon found herself hooked up with a man named Snake...

Living in Koth was not an easy thing for Lizzy, she was young and newly out on her own, after leaving her father a few weeks ago. Of course Lizzy wasn't her real name it was Lissidrinne, yet all her family and friends called her Lizzy for short. Lizzy was an elf, her full name being Lissidrinne Moonglade, she had long pale blonde hair and deep blue eyes, she caught the attention of many a male wherever she happened to be. She had been here in Koth, a

busy port city, most of that time, yet she still didn't feel like she belonged. She missed her old home in Castitrona with her father and all her old friends from that great city. Her father, thinking about him brought back the angry words they had exchanged when she left, over two months ago now...

"Lizzy I just don't understand why you wouldn't want to train with me and become a scout, like myself, for King Brightwater?" Davkas, her father, said to her as Lizzy was walking out the door to their cottage.

"Father" Lizzy began with a exasperated look on her face "I've explained this over and over again, I do not want to be a *scout*" she emphasized the word scout as she continued her speech, "I need to see the world, while I'm still young, I'm not ready to just settle down and run errands for the King!"

Davkas was taken aback; he paused at the doorway as he absorbed the extent of Lizzy's explanation, it wasn't the first time he had heard it of course, yet it still bothered him greatly, for he was a scout in the King's employ, and was often assigned tasks by the King, so her words hurt him deeply, yet he chose not to say anything to Lizzy about it now for he figured it wouldn't help the situation.

"But where will you go?" Davkas asked his daughter with a bit of trepidation in his voice.

“I’m not sure yet, but I plan to take the south road and follow it around the coast. Perhaps I’ll settle in Koth!” Lizzy replied back to her father, knowing full well he wouldn’t like the idea she was going to Koth of all places.

“Koth! Why that place, it is home to a mixture of pirates and other scum!” her father shot back at her, instantly regretting the comment as it came rushing out.

Yet Lizzy wasn’t listening, not really listening anyway, she continued on and soon went out to the barn and started to saddle her horse. She had already taken a few things from her room and packed them in her saddle bags, along with some food from their pantry. She carried her sword which her father had shown her how to use, and the special chain mail shirt her father had given her on her eighteenth birthday. So she felt she had everything she needed to explore the world. Her father had followed her to the barn and waved goodbye as she trotted her horse down the road, the look on his face made her heart ache, yet she was determined to do what she thought was best for her.

So now here she was in Koth, living in a slightly run-down inn and trying to make her way in the world. Of course if her father really knew how she was making her way he would be even more upset, for you see Lizzy was a thief by trade. She stole things, and she found out that she was very good at it, so she continued in this line of work.

It had all started one day while she was sitting in an old tavern down by the docks, someplace her father would had shuddered to think of his young, beautiful daughter was at. She

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