



## *The Human Threat*

“The trouble with humans is that they do not know when to quit.”

A stern voice boomed loudly from deeper within the church. A pale flickering light glowed beyond the wide foyer. On his hands and knees, Tavin dragged himself away from the doors and into a corner where shadows covered him like a cloak, embracing him with a cool earthy scent.

“They are impulsive, ill-tempered, violent, and deceitful,” the speaker said.

Tavin shuddered. He couldn't stop his limbs from shaking. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, tasting blood.

“Come on, old-timer, up on your feet.” The new voice sounded friendly, but Tavin knew otherwise. He had no friends here.

A bright light flashed across his face. Tavin cowered, letting his hood fall forward. Hands reached down and grabbed his arms, pulling him up.

“What ‘ave ye found?” a female asked, sharp and full of curiosity.

“... came in late, and the temple guards gave ‘im a rough time for it.”

“They are an immoral species,” the speaker shouted. “If we are not vigilant they can appear out of nowhere, bringing their lies and depravity with them.”

A muffled shout of agreement rang through the inner sanctuary. Tavin was lead forward into a large room tightly packed with hot angry bodies.

“Who have you got there, Tamas?”

“Don't know ‘im. Just some old-timer. Got the wind knocked out of ‘im.”

“Poor thing,” warbled an elderly female. “‘ere love, sit a spell.”

Kind hands helped Tavin down onto a broad stone. He cringed, trying to slow the bleeding by wrapping his arms around his middle.

Cool earth lay beneath his feet. The pale light came from a round silver ball floating above their heads. Fairies borne on translucent

wings and wearing silky robes flittered high among the rafters. A rougher-dressed crowd jostled one another upon the ground.

At the back of the church, a hook-nosed fairy with red butterfly wings paced upon a raised dais of stone.

“History,” the fairy bellowed, “is our witness. When our world fractured in two, the Starbreather wisely stripped the human side of magic.” The fairy leaned forward, his eyes gleaming. “These so-called ‘human mages’ are nothing but an unnatural mistake. They contain all the treacherous qualities of regular humans, but wield power never intended to be theirs. Once, we trusted them. Never again.”

Tavin felt like a leper. On every side, fairies nodded in agreement, clapping and calling out in approval.

“Fear them,” the fairy said. “Fear their sly tongues and eager promises. The word of a human is like hot wind. It scours the fields and scorches the harvest, leaving only emptiness.” He paused. “None of you has seen a human before, but I assure you, they are monstrous.”

The deep clanging of church bells interrupted the fairy’s ugly sermon. The crowd grew still, looking up with expectation. The fairies in the rafters began to titter and jostle one another for a better look.

Tavin risked a look, squinting his eyes against the light of the silver globe. Gradually he made out the silhouette of a wide platform, carried by eight golden-armored guards, floating down from the sky. It carried two fairies, both with golden circlets upon their brows.

The first was tall, his wrinkled hands grasping a gnarled staff.

His sharp features and crooked nose gave him a hard shrewd appearance. His green-eyed gaze looked as if it could cut glass.

The second fairy was shorter, younger, and almost plump. His cheeks and lips were rosy pink and his hair pale blond. He wore shimmering lilac wings. He smiled pleasantly, but as he looked down upon the crowd, Tavin felt his heart skip a beat. The fairy's eyes gleamed red.

The golden guards settled the platform upon the raised dais. The older fairy stamped his staff and the assembly fell silent.

"I have gathered you, gentle-fairies, to speak on a grave matter," he said. "Our suspicions are confirmed. Humans have returned to Etheria."

The crowd gasped. A fairy beside Tavin jumped to his feet in such agitation that he knocked Tavin to the ground. For a dangerous few seconds Tavin's hood fell back, exposing features too rough for a fairy. Tavin yanked the hood over his head and cowed in pain, unable to rise.

"It's true." The younger fairy nodded to the older one and flew into the air. "Human magic has shaken our Gates. Two nights ago Goblintown was attacked."

A few snorts sounded from the crowd. The young fairy raised his arm with a sympathetic smile, his red eyes sweeping the crowd. "There is more," he said. "The swamp guardian that guards these borders is dead, and the swamp is filled with the bloody marks of a man. No mere human could have fought Grubark and survived; we are convinced this is the work of a mage."

An angry rolling mutter passed through the assembly.

The older fairy thumped his staff. "Order!" His voice dropped with heaviness. "In times like these, even our enemies may become friends. The prince has found a witness."

The gathered crowd grew silent. Tavin became aware of a low clicking noise echoing up from somewhere beneath the cathedral floor. He pulled himself through the crowd and onto a pile of stone rubble. Over the heads of the crowd, he could now see a low arched doorway sunken into the ground beneath the dais at the front.

The noise grew louder, accompanied by a rustle and a long scraping sound. A moment later, a tattered shadow crawled out from the darkness of the doorway. Tavin saw an old woman, dressed in rags, her body swinging sideways as her long spider legs dragged her up onto the stage. The speaker on the stage drew back in revulsion. The old king's expression darkened and the crowd shifted uneasily. Only the prince remained unfazed.

"Madame, speak your tale," the prince said.

"Murderer!" a voice cried. "Monster!"

"Peace, my people!" the king ordered. "She has purchased safe passage," he turned to Madame Caveat with a canny gaze. "... for tonight."

Madame Caveat grinned, showing off a mouthful of rotten teeth. "The humans crossed the divide and fought with magic," she pronounced. "I've seen it with my own poor eyes." She unfurled a stumpy black leg. "They did this to me!"

The crowd shifted uneasily.

Madame Caveat was a known fairy killer. If it were anyone but a human mage, he would have received the highest honors for such a deed.

“This proves beyond doubt that human magic is alive and well,” the king said. “The ancient treaty has been broken.” He looked across the crowd. “My people, we have come to the threshold of war.”

Tavin slipped and fell heavily to the ground. Blood pounded in his ears. He tried to rise, but the press of the crowd kept him down. He bled freely now, staining the ground he crawled on.

The king gripped the jeweled sword hilt at his waist. “It is time to make a stand. The human world outnumbers us ten to one. We must act to curb this threat now before it grows too late.”

Tavin made it back to his feet. The king continued to speak over the crowd, but Tavin felt a change in the air. He raised his head slowly, the hair on his arms prickling as if touched by a low electric shock.

The prince watched him, a slight frown upon his face. Tavin pressed against the crowd, hoping to disappear. The prince saw him move. His keen gaze locked onto Tavin like laser points.

A scream cut the air behind Tavin. A fairy near to the pile of stones held up a red palm.

“Blood!” she cried. “It’s human blood!”

The crowd parted like water. Tavin stumbled for cover but tripped and fell against someone, leaving a long crimson smudge against the fairy’s tunic. The blond prince moved quickly, his finger thrust forward. The crowd separated further, stampeding towards the door.

A bright bolt of purple lightning shot out of the prince’s finger

towards Tavin. Tavin swung his staff up. The purple beam slammed into the wooden staff and shattered it into a thousand pieces. The explosion flung Tavin backwards against the wall. He hit the ground and tried to rise but couldn't get his arms or legs to work. He remained where he'd fallen: facedown, a wide stain spreading beneath him.

Golden guards grabbed his arms and hauled him upright. They pulled his hood off.

Those who remained in the cathedral gasped in horror. The world pin-wheeled around Tavin in bright colors and silver shadows. He locked on the old king and the flash of the prince's red eyes. The prince took hold of his head and forced it up. Standing safely back, Madame Caveat screeched with laughter.

"Not a mage, but definitely human," the prince said. "He had help to come this far. Father?"

The old king nodded. "Do what you must, Axim."

The prince let go of Tavin's jaw. "Lock him away."

Tavin's vision tunneled until he could make nothing out but the prince's eyes. Then, like a light switching out, his mind fell into darkness.

