



THE



Hidden

Ring

By Simon  
and  
Seegz

# ***The Hidden Ring***

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## *Chapter One*

### *The Urgon*

Samuel woke up to a thump from downstairs. He quickly scanned his surroundings for signs of immediate danger. The door was still closed, and Rose, his sister, was still asleep. Samuel pushed away his covers and got up. His feet made a small knock on the wooden floorboards. Quietly, making sure not to wake anyone up, he slowly opened the door to the stairwell down to the main room. Someone had lit a candle, which cast a human's shadow upon the open part of the staircase. Samuel was tense as he crept around the wall. It turned out to be Christopher, Samuel's friend from when they were kids. "What the blazes are you doing here?!" Samuel whispered in a hurried tone.

"We need to talk." He replied.

It had been two months since the human army's (known as the Glador) commander, Kiat, set up a temporary fortress just outside the gloomy forest territory of the Urgon, an enemy race of half-demons with glowing eyes, black skin, and blood red horns tilted back behind their heads. Kiat planned an attack on the Urgon to end a war that had been going on for centuries. Many families volunteered to come and cook for the soldiers, and Samuel's mother had agreed, for Samuel's father, William, was in the army.

"The siege has been delayed too long," Christopher told Samuel. "We need to do something without the army. We need to act on our own. Sooner or later, the Urgon will find the fortress and attack. Someone has to do something."

"Yeah, I agree, but are we even able to make a difference?"

"Possibly so. Take a look at this."

## Chapter Two

### A Quest

Christopher brought out a long scroll. He unrolled it (partially, I did say it was long). On it the Ring of Hyal was described.

#### *The Ring of Hyal*

*The Ring of Hyal is an ancient artifact forged at the summit of Mt. Hyal from a gem found there long before. This gem had a mysterious property that would give warning to the holder when danger was nearby. It was later hid away in the Dark Forest.*

It said a lot more than that, but that's the general idea. "So you plan to find this ring and then attack? I mean, how would this help us attack? And how does it warn people?"

"Yes, we can sneak from the Gladior fort tomorrow, and into the Urgan base and it would warn us when guards are coming so we can kill their leader, and I don't know," Christopher said, exasperated.

"So, we're doing this without the Gladior army?"

"Right. We will be swifter if we're fewer," Christopher replied.

"So when do you think we should go?"

"GO WHERE?!" Came an angry voice from the stairwell.

Christopher said, "We're just going to sneak into the night and get this ring and atta--"

Rose came in with her hands on her hips. Samuel glared at Christopher. "He means nowhere," he said.

"I mean nowhere," Christopher said.

"I know what you're planning; you woke me up. I heard through the door, which was slightly open. AND I REFUSE FOR YOU TO GO WITHOUT ME!" Rose exclaimed angrily.

"But it's too dangerous!" Samuel replied.

"Then why are you doing it!?"

"Because I have to for our army!"

Christopher felt quite awkward. "Um... I think you probably shouldn't..."

Rose tried a different strategy. Adapting a sweet pretty tone, she said, "You wouldn't leave your nice, sweet, beautiful, and loving sister at home, *WOULD YOU SAMUEL??!*"

“You’ll get yourself killed out there!!” Samuel replied in equal volume.

“And you won’t!?”

“No!!”

“Well, she is beautiful...”

“Shut up Chris!”

“I know it’s going to be dangerous, but I am trained in archery and can throw a knife better than either of you combined! And, *I refuse for you to go without me!*”

“Fine! Fine! You can come! Sheesh.”

“Okay! Yay!” Rose said so cheerfully that the font changed to match her tone. Christopher took the floor. (Though it proved rather difficult, due to the fact that it was attached to the walls).

“Meet me here at this same time tomorrow. We’ll sneak out, break into the armory, grab weapons, and run out into the Dark Forest in the dead of night,” he directed.

“Can I leave a note for our mother?” Rose asked.

“Of course not! Mom would tell Dad and then he would send out a search party looking for us,” Samuel replied.

“True,” she sighed.

“Right. You’re dismissed.”

## *Chapter Three*

### *Instinctive Reaction*

The next night, Samuel and Rose came downstairs. Christopher was waiting for them. He nodded and they followed him silently out of the wooden hut. As they crept toward the stone building, a voice rang out from above.

“Hey! What do you think you are you doing?” They looked up at the walls. It was a guard on watch duty, holding a torch but never the less squinting at them. Fortunately for the trio, they were not completely in sight.

Samuel wildly tried to think up a plan.

*ThinkfastThinkfastThinkfastThinkfastThinkfast...*

“Same to you!!” he called, “Don’t you recognize one of your own guard? I’m checking the armory!”

“Then who are those two with you?” Samuel nudged Christopher and Rose to get inside the building.

“What two?” he replied.

“There were two with you...” The guard’s voice trailed off when he noticed the absence of Christopher and Rose. He sighed. “Okay! Fine! Go check the stupid armory.”

He needed no second bidding. Samuel quickly ran to join his two companions. Rose looked at him quizzically. “What did you mean when you said ‘Don’t you recognize one of your own guard?’”

Samuel replied, “You know how people say I look like my father?”

Rose thought for a moment, and then a look of understanding fell over her.

“Nice,” Christopher said.

“Thanks, now let’s get our weapons and get out of here.” The three began looking.

About a minute later, Christopher told them, “I got mine.” He held two short swords, which would give him an advantage over opponents with only one weapon.

Samuel considered his options. There were a heck of a lot of them. The armory was *huge* with weapons littered all over the walls. As he walked down the hall, he finally decided on the good

ole' fashioned double-edged sword and steel shield. When he returned, Rose was holding a short bow with a quiver over her shoulder and a long, sharp, hunting knife in her hand. "Ready?" Samuel asked. Rose and Christopher nodded. Then Samuel called out in a deep voice, "Aw, some of the weapons are gone!" The guard ran down from his place on the wall top. Fortunately he did not see Samuel, Rose and Christopher immediately.

They had gotten about five yards before a gruff voice called behind them, "HEY!" Before anyone knew it, there was a arrow in the guard's chest.

"Uh, instinctive reaction..." Rose stammered.

"I think I have an instinctive reaction too! Let's get in the forest!!" Christopher said in an urgent whisper.

They ran down the gravel path and took a turn off the road into the dark foliage next to it.

## Chapter Four

### *What to Do*

A bright sun rose over the fort the next morning. Lillian, Samuel's mother, was rather (or shall we say extremely) annoyed. It was taking her children an unusual amount of time to get dressed and come to breakfast.

"Samuel!! Rose! Breakfast is ready! Well, it was. It's about two degrees Kelvin, now! Get down here!!" She waited for a response, but to no avail. "Oh, come on," she sighed. Lillian stomped up the wooden stairs. She opened the door and... *Dun, Dun, Duuunn...* Samuel and Rose were GONE!

The trio of adventurers were, at that moment, stumbling through the forest, tripping over roots lying on the ground, walking into branches, and falling into ponds.

"Sooo... What's your plan to attack?" Rose asked Christopher, after Christopher had managed to pull himself out of the river.

"Simple! We find their leader and kill him!"

"That doesn't sound so simple, and plus, why do we need the ring?" Samuel asked.

"Yeah and how do we find it?" Rose added.

Christopher replied, "Well, I know it's in the Dark Forest here someplace and we can use it to avoid detection."

"Two things," Samuel said, "The Dark Forest is *really* big and two, we can't avoid detection because we don't know how it warns us. Plus, the way we're getting around the forest, tripping over stuff, it's going to be hard to avoid detection anyway. I'm starting to seriously doubt the wisdom in your plan."

"Look," replied Christopher, "I *do* have this planned out. Here's the plan: Even though I don't know where the ring is, and, if we work together, us three can get around much quicker than a whole group of us. Our journey may not have started out great, but we should be able to turn it around if we work together. So listen to my plan, and you'll understand." So Christopher told them his plan.

Both Samuel and Rose were not perfect with the idea, but it was better than no plan at all. There was a little more chatter between the two boys, until Rose said, "Save your breath for



walking.” The two boys recognized the wisdom in that, so they became silent. After a while of walking through the dense undergrowth, they found a good place to make camp. “I’ll start a fire,” Rose said and she promptly began shaving nice, dry wood with her knife.

“I’ll keep first watch,” Samuel said once the fire was lit, “You two get some sleep.”

Soon, Rose and Christopher were fast asleep.

Meanwhile, at the fort, Lillian was panicking. She frantically ran down the path outside her house. She slammed the door behind her.

Something unusual was going on. There was a huge commotion and a crowd of people in the road. She started pushing through the crowd. She bumped into Christopher’s father, Jakob. “What’s the rush?” he asked, sort of depressed.

“Samuel and Rose are gone!”

“What?! Christopher is too! And over there there’s a guard dead on the street with an arrow in his chest!”

Samuel’s mother gasped. “AN URGON STOLE A BOW AND SHOT A GUARD AND KIDNAPPED SAMUEL AND ROSE AND CHRISTOPHER!”

“Um.... Sure!” he replied.

## *Chapter Five*

### *Who's Arrow?*

Samuel kept a watchful eye on the thick forest. As you may guess, it was getting rather boring. He took out the scroll about the Ring of Hyal, continuing from where he left off.

*Nobody is really sure where the ring went. Legend says that after a while of being in the Dark Forest it was carried and hidden away by the Winds.*

*Some say many humans died looking for it. Others say they never tried. One even says that they didn't know it was taken. Many philosophers say that it is now probably decayed or lost in some way or another.*

A snap of a nearby twig brought Samuel's mind from the scroll. He looked around. All looked normal... but suddenly he spotted a black horn atop a black and red face! He grabbed his sword and shield, and then shook Rose and Christopher into wakefulness. "Shhh!" he whispered urgently. "Be quiet and get your weapons."

The two heard the urgency in his voice and quickly hastened to obey his directions. A sudden arrow came flying out of what seemed like nowhere. Samuel was first to spot the Urgon archer. The Urgon's back was to him as he loaded the next arrow.

Seizing the opportunity, he charged the Urgon's unprotected back - and Samuel fell right into the trap.

Roughly five other Urgon attacked him on either side. Spear points were approximately 2.3469 inches away from skewering him when adrenaline took over. Samuel jumped high, grabbed a low branch and nimbly pulled himself on top of it. Below, chaos reigned. The two waves of charging Urgon, unable to stop themselves, smashed right into each other, startling themselves.

Samuel, however, was still in action. He climbed a bit higher when he found some solid branches. Acting quickly, he chopped them from the trunk, using his sword, which he had managed to save. Once the branches were falling, he jumped on top of the branches, increasing the speed and power of the fall.

The plan worked amazingly well. The limb fell right on top of the confused mass of Urgon warriors, knocking many of them unconscious. Samuel jumped down from the tree. Once he was amongst them, he began to hack at them with his sword, which he had managed to not drop. Most of the Urgon soldiers were already dead when a particularly large Urgon charged at Samuel. He was a good foot taller than Samuel and Samuel was no shorty. The Urgon wielded a mighty mace that would have challenged even Kiat to use. Yet something in the way that the Urgon wielded his weapon told him that this Urgon was well trained with it. Samuel blocked the next blow. Well, sort of. When his mace met Samuel's sword, Samuel's blade cracked in two. Luckily, the recoil from the Urgon's strike had been so big that the mace went spiraling from his grasp.

The Urgon was quick to react and sent a heavy punch to Samuel's head, nearly knocking him out. Who knew that this fantasy fiction book would all come down to a boxing match? Anyway, the Urgon leader had grabbed a fallen Urgon warrior's sword and delivered the blow toward Samuel's heart, thus killing him.

***THE END***

## Okay, just kidding.

At the last moment, an arrow appeared in the Urgan's back. (That better for you?)

While the fall was happening, Christopher reacted. "Start firing arrows at them. I'll go in," he directed. He charged.

There weren't many left to kill, however. Samuel had pretty much slayed them all. Nonetheless, Christopher killed the remainder of them. Period (not one survived. Seriously. There wasn't one to sneak up behind Samuel and almost kill him and then at the last second get dramatically stabbed in the side by Rose). Because of disappearance of the Urgan soldiers, Samuel and Christopher began tending to their wounds with their small, yet existent medicine supply. Rose, not having fought close range at all, was unharmed, so she began collecting the somewhat-intact arrows and put them back in her quiver. After this, the three of them had a small bite of food, (which they found in the forest) and continued on their way.

Meanwhile, back at the fort...

"SILENCE!" An incredibly strong and harsh voice stopped all other sound. Everybody on the street, including Lillian, awaited any further speech. The voice was of Kiat, the leader of the Gladior. "Now tell me what this is all about." Again, a big volcano of noise erupted. "QUIET!" He called once more. "Jakob, what do you say happened?"

Jacob could feel every eye on him. "Well... I'm not really sure. My son Christopher and Lillian's children Rose and Samuel are missing. And a guard had been found with an arrow in his chest. I'm thinking that an Urgan got in, stole a bow to shoot the guard and stole the three children. Why? Maybe for bargaining power, or maybe they're going to set a trap for when we try and rescue them. Of course, I'm not even sure if this all was an Urgan doing or not."

Kiat pondered the situation. After about a minute, he spoke. "Lillian, is this true? I mean, not the word 'this' but the fact that your two children are missing?"

"Yes," she replied quickly to avoid talking in front of everybody.

“And when did you see them last?”

“Last night at dinner.”

“Were any of their things missing?”

“Well... I didn't check.” She turned and ran back toward her house. Kiat waited patiently. After about a minute's silence, she came back. “Their bags are gone along with some extra clothes.”

Then, a random soldier called out, “Some weapons are also gone from the armory!”

“So does this mean that some Urgan warriors wanted some more clothes and some weapons to carry in their new bags?!” another called out sarcastically.

“No! They probably went out to get something *then* got kidnapped.”

“Of course not! They probably went on a crazily dangerous quest in hope to be heroes and are going to get themselves killed, if they're not dead already. I know that age, it's what I did.”

“Then how are you alive now?!”

“Well, I defended myself!”

“Forget it! Christopher has always been sensible! They're most likely on their way back now!”

“To death!”

“Hey! You'd sooner die from a frog than Samuel and Rose would get killed out there! They can defend themselves!”

“QUIET!!!” Kiat screamed for the third time. He took a deep breath before continuing. “Samuel, Rose and Christopher have probably gone out on a quest, though I place my full confidence and faith in Samuel's leadership. I--”

A guard who had been posted on sentry duty came running out onto the street. “The messengers have returned, sir! They have important plans for the attack! Plus, they have learned who the Urgan leader is by the death of one of the scouts!!!”

## Chapter Six

### Sior

Back in the Dark Forest, Samuel was exhausted. Even though his friends kept telling him how awesome he was, Samuel was depressed by the fact that he hadn't got anywhere. They were still in the plain, old forest. And the *Dark Forest* at that. At sunrise Samuel was just about to fall right over. Though he didn't let any of this show, for the sake of his friend's morale. At roughly 7:00, they finally found something interesting. A swamp. The trio passed right by it.

By midday, after they had taken a rest, they found a dense grove of trees. It looked almost as though it could be a home, for because they were so close together their tops almost touched, making it possible for people to live in the top of the trees.

"Wow," Rose said. "This place looks awesome."

"Be careful. Most people that live in this forest are evil. Nasty place the Dark Forest is," Christopher said.

The grove of trees was surprisingly huge. About thirty minutes later, the adventurers were beginning to start wanting to get back to the regular easier-to-walk-through trees. Finally, Samuel called to make camp, even though they were still in the thick grove of trees. He was about to sit down when a wooden pole cracked over his head, knocking him unconscious.

Back at the fort, Kiat was attempting at calming the chaos. "Okay! I'll be right there," said Kiat. "Everyone go back to your regular daily things!!!"

Once they were alone, Kiat told the remaining five scouts, "Okay, explain everything you saw."

"Well," started one scout, "We scouted through the Dark Forest toward the Urgan castle, like you had asked. We stalked around the castle on the edge of the forest, in order to stay hidden. They have one main gate and two side doors. Beyond the walls, there is one tower. Given this information, here is my idea. Create a diversion by charging the main gate and use the catapult on the near by wall. At one of the side doors, there will be a small band trying to get in that way. Then, at the opposite corner of where all

this is happening, there would be a group which would scale the walls, then let the other groups in.”

“And who was their leader?” Kiat questioned.

Another scout replied, “His name is Sior. He is a full demon, all black with two large wings. He killed Icaro by swooping down and digging his claws into his neck! We wounded him, though he still was able to fly back to his castle.”

“And how do you know he is the leader?”

“Because he gave orders to the Urgon sentries to be more watchful and then killed one of them. I don’t think he’s very pleased.”

Kiat got up from his chair. “You did well. All I hope is that Samuel doesn’t happen to meet that fellow.”

Samuel, at that moment was not thinking about the Urgon’s leader. He had something else on his head, namely a large, painful, lump.

His head was one explosion of pain. He tried to move his hands, though they were tied to a thick bough. He looked around. He was in the top of the trees that they had thought could be a home. He was sitting on a wood plank floor. Off of this was a bridge to a different tree. The walls were intricately woven branches, plus a rectangular opening that allowed people to access the bridge. The roof was pretty much the same. In the center of the room was the trunk, which he noticed had a door in it. He guessed that was the way up into the treetop.

He looked through the gap in the wall and across the bridge, into the next tree top-room. Rose was in there, still unconscious. Samuel looked around for Christopher, though he did not see him. Suddenly, A man came from behind the trunk, not far from him. The man wore a jet-black helmet with two horns angling backward from his helmet. He carried two twin single bladed black axes (one strapped across his back and one in hand--they were quite heavy) with a gold gem at the top of each pole, which the axe blades were attached to. He wore a black (I don't see a pattern here--do you?) chainmail shirt and gold (Not actual gold--just metal dyed gold) shin guards. In a belt surrounded by a black cloak he wore a great sword with one edge serrated, plus (for weaponry) he had a shield strapped to his back, over the axes. Samuel was surprised this

massively beast of an ogre-man could still move. Samuel did not doubt he had more weapons. "What is your name? Like the thing they call you? Perhaps a nickname judged on your skill or habits or maybe a middle name or a name easier to say? Maybe even--"

"Samuel," Samuel replied, cutting him off.

"Where do you come from? Who are you alliances with? Like, help, fight with, or simply hang out with? I mean what part of the land do you live/stay? A house to, well, a grove of trees, a palace, a castle, anything! "

Seeing that he looked quite vicious, Samuel remained silent. The man saw this and said, "I'm no Urgan, and I'm actually against them. Uhg! I can't stand them! Anyway, about me acquiring your trust, ask me a question only someone against the Urgan would know."

Samuel thought about it. "Who is the Gladior leader?"

"Easy. Kiat. He and I were good friends before the Urgan came and wounded me almost to death and tossed me in the forest. Of course, I had been unconscious and didn't know my way back to the castle so I made my new home here. It's really quite a good place to be with these nice natural advantages to support life. Think about it. There are edible plants aplenty..." He focused his eyes. "Are you the son of William?!"

"Yes! How did you know that?!"

Samuel immediately knew this man was not with the Urgan. Mostly because the man was now untying him from the trunk. He spoke, though not to answer his question. "I assume that the two people with you are your friends," he said.

"Yeah--would you mind untying them, too?"

"Sure. I mean I wouldn't mind it. By the way, my name's Tam. My full name is Tamtiar Sparkaxe Firehorn. Though that could get dreadfully inconvenient to say all the time; like in battle: 'Tamtiar Sparkaxe Firehorn! Come to assist--' and then you'd be impaled with an arrow. SO, I recommend calling me 'Tam' for your convenience and my pleasure."

"Cool," Samuel replied.

He led Samuel across the bridge and to Rose. "He's nice--except for the fact that he talks really quick and a lot," Samuel whispered to Rose. She got up and began rubbing her sore ankles



and wrists, which had been tied. They went to another tree where Christopher was tied. Samuel told him the same thing he had told to Rose.

Once Tam had untied Christopher, he led them back to where Samuel had been tied. Then Tam led them into the door in the trunk, which Samuel had spotted earlier. Inside was a spiral staircase. The staircase was all pretty much regular, except for when they came across a window. The window was a space between roots (they had gotten down to ground level.) It was not a typical shape, though it was still remarkable, with all the fancy details about it, and an almost invisible thin layer of incredibly strong glass.

After a few more steps, they came to a huge cavern. In it were armchairs, tables, mini sparring arenas, and many other things. But the main thing that caught Samuel's attention was that there were actually other people there, eating, sparring, and just sitting. Though Tam did not stop here, but rather led them down another level. This room, which was considerably smaller than the previous one, appeared to be a forge. In the center was a great big anvil and along the walls were different kinds of metal. There was only one person present.

"You may go, Cardo," Tam said. The man left with a nod. Tam turned towards Samuel. "We'll need our privacy," he whispered. Tam led them down a hallway. Finally, they got to his desired room. It was an armory. "Okay," Tam began, "take what you like from here, but leave at least one thing so we don't run out of weapons, but do not leave that." He was pointing at Samuel's broken sword and his battered shield. "Now don't take long choosing and don't take more than you can carry. No point getting greedy."

Rose exchanged one of her hunting knives for a long, light, thin sword. It was single-sided except for a small crook at the end of the sword. Then came the point, which looked sharper than any of the swords the trio had seen. She also got a new bow and more arrows, though nobody was very interested in that. Christopher surprised Samuel with exchanging one of his swords for a spear and a shield (No, he does not have three hands, he put his sword in his sheath). Samuel, on the other hand, made no major

changes--he liked the feel of a sword and shield. He got an oval shield with a gold "wisp" on it and a sword nearly identical to the one he had earlier, though it seemed much stronger.

Once they had all picked out armor, Tam led them back up a level to eat. The food was tasty. Because food is not a prominent subject in this book the food will not be described further. Tam found them a quiet corner and asked them, "So why were you traveling this way?"

Christopher explained the quest for the ring and the plan to murder the Urgan leader. When Christopher got to the arrow-in-the-Urgan's-back part, (which Samuel had told Christopher about) Tam said, "That was me scouting that got him. I had no idea you were there." This surprised Samuel greatly. At first, Tam had the same doubts about the success of the quest that Samuel had had, but Christopher used the same responses and convinced Tam. Once they were about to depart, Cardo came toward them and said three words:

"Can I please join?" (Okay, don't blame me that he had to say 'please').

"You heard?" Tam asked.

"Yes. Well I couldn't stop listening when I heard the word 'quest'."

"Can't blame you," said Rose, "I did the exact same thing when Samuel and Christopher were talking about this. Then we had a huge argument."

"I suppose you can come, though do know that it will be dangerous," said Samuel. Christopher nodded his agreement.

"You can go," Tam sighed, "but do be careful."

"Great!"

He ran down the stairs to the armory, presumably to get his weapons. Roughly a half hour later they all went to sleep, which was pretty boring.

SO, in the morning, Samuel, Christopher, Rose, and Cardo all awoke, packed some food, blankets, and all the other stuff they brought.

Fifteen minutes later the four of them were traveling through the Dark Forest.

## *Chapter Seven*

### *Traveling and Speculating*

Still in the Glador fortress, Kiat spent the next few days speculating the Glador's current situation. He decided that Samuel, Rose, and Christopher had probably gone out questing, though who had killed the guard? Perhaps an Urgon had been there that same night-- a random coincidence? Whatever it was, he redoubled his defense patrols.

Besides that, not much went on at the Glador fort. Then, one day...

The same thing happened.

However the next day proved a bit more interesting. Jakob, the father of Christopher, walked in. "I've been reading more about the Urgon leader. He is a full demon which means, first of all, he is very dangerous and second--well, it's explained in this scroll." Kiat read the first few paragraphs of the aforementioned scroll.

### ***Sior***

*Sior is the leader of the Urgon, and is a winged beast. This means, unlike the Urgon, who are half demon, half human, that he is a full demon.*

*The arms come right out in front of the wings. This gives a slight disability in moving the arm backward though it's still not a big difference. For the most part, the body is lighter, which helps the demon in flight.*

*The ribs and the bones in the torso are also shaped differently. The upper chest is slightly wider and . . .*

Jakob interrupted Kiat's reading. "For the most part bad news, huh?"

"Yes, sadly. What we need is a way to get this to Samuel. It would be good for him to be warned about this."

Jakob nodded understandingly. "Perhaps you could send out scouts to deliver the message?"

"That's what I thought at first, but the Dark Forest is far too big for that to work in the next month. We don't have nearly that much time."

"I'll think about it," Jakob said, "I'm almost certain there's a way." He left.

Kiat was deep in thought. The next few days, he wrote down ideas for different current problems of the Gladiol.

### **Attack**

- \*Diversion/charge at front gate--use a catapult
- \*Group in back--scale walls
- \*Group track down Sior

### **Getting the Scroll to Samuel**

- \*Get some more experienced trackers to get a rough approximation of where Samuel was, and then send some scouts to go where they are most likely heading.

Kiat struggled to think up any more solutions. So, he settled on the first option for each category. That day, he sent out three trackers accompanied by ten soldiers.

The following week, the trackers returned. They said that Samuel and company (the trackers also told him that someone else had joined Samuel) were due northwest, towards a river which led to a range of mountains.

Kiat acted quickly with the news. "Amber! Sam! Conner!"

The three scouts ran to obey. Kiat continued, "I need you to select fifty warriors and ten of your scouts to go towards the northern part of River Nalt, near the mountains. There you should find Samuel, Rose, Christopher, and one other. If they're not there, go southeast down the river. You need to deliver this scroll to him."

He handed the scroll to Amber. "Now there's no time to waste! Try to leave as quick as you can!"

"Got it!" The trio left.

Now that Kiat was getting something done, he relaxed a bit.

One day, when he was planning more on his attack, a guard on the wall top shouted, "There's an army of three hundred out here! Do come quick!!"

Samuel had not realized how many weapons Cardo carried. He had a sword and an axe in a sheath, a knife and three strange bottles of something-or-other on a sash, a case of javelins and a backpack on his back, and a sharpened lance, (which was also proving as a walking stick) and a shield at hand. Cardo did not seem at all bothered with the load.

Cardo had been a rather quiet travel partner. For the most part, he either hung about to the side, or discussed the differences and similarities of javelins and bows with Rose. Samuel, on the other hand, busied himself talking with Christopher about different approaches to get into the Urgon castle (Cardo had told them about it; he had once seen it).

It was late afternoon, quite a few days later, when the four adventurers spotted a stream. There was nothing all that special about it, but it still was a good source of fresh water (which they had been short on). "Let's stop here," Samuel said, "And tomorrow morning we'll continue following this stream."

"Do we have a real destination?" Cardo asked, "or are we just roving randomly in the Dark Forest?"

Rose replied, "I have no idea. How about you, Samuel?"

"Ummm... I'd guess that we are going to find a good spot to stay, then use our brains to figure out where the ring is."

"Ha. Brains. Like Samuel has any of that left," Rose muttered.

"I heard that!"

"You did? You have ears?"

Christopher and Cardo began taking sides in the debate. Eventually all of them were laughing helplessly.

After a while, the four settled down, with Christopher taking first watch. He had signed up for the post willingly, as an excuse to

read more in the scroll about the Ring of Hyal. He opened the scroll to a random spot.

*At that time, the humans lived on an isle, by the name of Kintiar, which before them, had been ruled by the elves. The elves, at one point, waged war against each other, and broke up to different parts of Hyshara. The humans made a town on Kintiar a while later, and specialized in mining, which, it is believed, is how the gem was discovered.*

*When disease struck the isle, the surprisingly few survivors, who had been warned by the ring, took the ring with them, across the sea, and to Hyshara.*

*The ring was causing much tension between the survivors. One, who acted as a mediator, hid the ring in some unknown part of the Dark Forest.*

Christopher went to another part of the scroll.

*One great mystery of the Ring of Hyal was how it got it's magic. Some say it was aftermath of the elves living there, but nobody is sure. Because of how the Ring acted, many think the spell was deliberate.*

Again, Christopher unrolled the scroll to another location.

*The ring, as many in the past had stated, "was strangely clever". Instead of warning the user in simple, easy ways, it gave a signal in a very subtle ways. Rather than flashing or making any noise, the Ring of Hyal would only tingle or shiver.*

Here Christopher looked up. Now *here* was some useful information.

## *Chapter Eight*

### *Urgon Attack!*

Kiat was a quick thinker. As he ran toward the rampart atop the wall by the front gate, he called out over the crenellation, "Archers, up here! Swordsmen, axe men, wait by the gate! Spearmen, up here!"

Kiat was completely surprised when he saw the army coming quickly toward them. He looked closer at the soldier at the front of the army. "Tam! Is that you?!" Kait called.

"Kait? I should say the same thing to you!" said the leader of the army, who had thus revealed himself to be Tam. In less than a minute, Tamtiar Sparkaxe Firehorn stood at the gate with all his band of three hundred behind him.

"Ahoy! What's this for a friendly greeting?! Open up the gates!!"

Chuckling to himself, Kiat and a few other soldiers opened the gates. "Come on in. Well, Tam, I haven't seen you for a while. What brings you here today?"

"Two things, but let's talk about them later." He turned around. "Firehorn soldiers, what are you doing there?! Be friendly to the Glador army!! Talk! Spar! Anything but sitting around, wiggling your noses and sitting on your behind as though you didn't know what to do!!!"

He and Kiat walked to a more private spot as activity began to commence behind them. They walked into his chamber. "So, why did you come?" Kiat asked.

"Well, number one, I decided that if you're going to try and defeat the Urgon, then you will need our help. Number two, I thought you may be looking for Samuel."

This immediately got Kiat's attention. "Where is he?"

"Well, that I don't know, but what I do know is his purpose for leaving your fort in the middle of the night along with the mystery of that dead guard I assume you have found."

"Well, then, what is it?" So Tam explained everything Samuel had told him, plus the fact that Cardo had joined the mission. Kiat was very surprised about what had happened to the guard, though the more he thought about it, the more likely it sounded. After a

while, Tam and Kiat went to where most of the commotion was going on.

After Kiat had made a few announcements regarding the mystery of what had happened to Samuel and the the dead guard. (here he didn't tell the truth for the safety of Rose's reputation in the Gladior army).

The rest of the night was rather uneventful. Though everyone else went to bed relaxed, Kiat was up and awake, planning out new strategies involving his suddenly much larger army.

The three trackers of whom Kiat had sent out, (Amber, Sam and Connor), plus their small army of sixty scouts/warriors had been having a rather uneventful journey. Amber had a simple plan: Go up through the Dark Forest to River Nalt and follow the river to the mountains, where Samuel should be. A few days before Tam's army had reached the Gladior fort, Amber and her crew reached River Nalt. The group followed it a bit before camping down for the night, much to the relief of the soldiers, who were not used to doing long journeys.

Though most of the small army were in high spirits, Amber felt uneasy. Everything had been too peaceful. The Dark Forest was supposed to be full of traps and evil creatures. Despite her suspicions, she settled down for the night.

"EEAAUGH!!" Everyone in the camp got up immediately. Sam, who was at the scene first, took charge.

"Urgon attack! Get cover! The Urgon are firing arrows at us from that hill!" The soldiers hastened to obey. Amber took a closer look at the situation. The Urgon were positioned on a hill, with very minimal trees for the area. The sides were mainly rock and sand and at the top, there were three trees, which were all very close to each other. Unfortunately, the position of the scouts was not super great.

She quickly thought up an idea.

Taking ten soldiers with her, Amber snuck around to the back of the hill. True to what she had thought, the hill, rather than being sandy and hard to climb, was harder and more solid. Silently but swiftly, the small group got up the hill. At the top, the rest was easy, due to the fact that it was too close range for the Urgon archers to



do much without hitting their own comrades. After the battle was won, (and a small lunch break) Amber led the small army onward.

In the Dark Forest... a boy came across the camp a few hours after midnight. As far as he could see, there were only four people - three boys, who were all fast asleep, and a girl, who happened to be on sentry duty. The boy was only twelve, and about five foot four inches, though he was a pretty decent warrior. He crept slowly towards the girl. Rose, (for it was she) was completely unaware of his presence until he had a blade at her throat. "What are you doing here?" he hissed.

Rose knew not to let her fear show, though also knew it was unwise to try and be tough with someone who was most likely a better fighter. So acting as though she were discussing the weather she said, "Why do you ask?"

"Because you're near my village," he replied.

"I didn't know there were any villages around here."

"Yes, and we'll keep it that way." His knife pressed harder against her throat. Rose wildly thought up a plan. The boy was about to lead her away, when Rose's plan went into action. Rose threw a pebble, which hit a tree. The boy's eyes darted toward the noise. Rose made full advantage of the opportunity. She pushed the knife out of his hand blew out a sharp whistle, waking the three boys.

Cardo was up first with a javelin pointed directly at the boy. Right then, his mood changed drastically. "Alright," the boy said, "You win. My name's Lucan. What's yours?"

"Didn't you just try and kill me?" Rose asked.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Well, I kind of assumed that you were our enemy."

"Okay, well, if you're against the Urgan, then you are not my enemy," said the boy named Lucan, "But..."

"How do we know you are against the Urgan?" Christopher asked.

"You don't," Lucan replied. Christopher knew this was true, though it was not very helpful.

"Well then, how do we know that we can trust you?" Samuel questioned.

Lucan shrugged. "I guess you don't."

Samuel could tell that Christopher was deep in thought. What options did they have? If they were going to succeed, they'd need to rely on allies. But if this were a foe, then the result could be fatal. Finally, Christopher said, "I think we should go with him. I think he knows something."

"I agree," said Cardo. Neither Christopher nor Cardo knew *exactly why* they were following Lucan. Christopher, who always had logical explanations for things, couldn't see why he had made the decision to follow. But it just felt right.

Once they were all agreed on following Lucan, he led them down further down River Nalt. While they were walking, Christopher said to Samuel, "Remember how I told you I had a plan?"

"Yes."

"Well, this is the place where the ring is. I can feel it."

Even though it was called the 'Dark' Forest, Samuel thought it was very peaceful. The tall trees full of twittering birds, colorful flowers on the dirt floor, the dark green light that shone through the trees...

At about midnight, the five came to the mountains. It was a wondrous sight to see after weeks of being in the forest. On a cliff towards the rear of the mountain was a great big waterfall.

"Welcome," Lucan said, "to my home."

## *Chapter Nine*

### *Werecat*

Meanwhile, the scouts were still traveling. Now that they were out of danger, Sam and Conner took charge of the journey along the River Nalt. It was rather uneventful. A couple of times, they lost the trail, but otherwise the journey went smoothly.

Amber and Conner were always very alert. After all, this *was* the Dark Forest. However, the third scout, Sam, had a different opinion. Rather than being afraid of the Dark Forest, he thought it was quite peaceful. It was not all evil looking as others had said. There were not an awful lot of weeds and the trees were in quite good condition. Had not so many people told bad stories about it, Sam thought it would have a completely different reputation.

He also thought it was rather mysterious. How was everything not completely overgrown? How was it that the flowers blossomed perfectly and did not die from lack of sun? Even some fruit was growing.

However Sam did not have much time to think about this, for there was constant need of his tracking abilities. They were getting close to the place where Samuel, Rose, and Christopher (and Cardo and Lucan, though they did not know about them) were.

It was the middle of the night, a couple days later, when the whole group was woken up by some shouting. Amber was in charge. She quietly led a couple trained soldiers to look at the scene. It was not good.

Back in Samuel's group, Lucan led them through sand, rocks and streams. Neither Samuel, Christopher, Cardo, nor Rose knew where Lucan's home actually was. After a good deal of stumbling over rocks, they got to the cliffs. He knocked on the wall. It didn't sound hollow, but sure enough a man about the age of Cardo opened up a hidden door, disguised on the outside with rough, rocky edges.

"Welcome," said the man. "Why are you here?"

Lucan answered, "For a place to stay, and help against the Urgan."

"I see. What are your names?"

They said their names and entered. At first, it was just a tunnel, but it then opened up into a marvelous cavern. There were ridges along the wall with doors in the side, presumably which led into houses. The floor of the cavern was below them. Surprisingly, there was vegetation and shops at the bottom. In the center of the whole cavern was a great palace. The tunnel had led them to one of the ridges, so houses were to their left and right. Across the cavern, Samuel saw similar entryways. Wow. It was amazing.

"Wow," said Rose, "this is amazing."

Cardo was not thinking about that. "So where are we going to stay?" he asked.

"That room right there," replied the man. "I am Oscar, the deputy of His majesty, Tigerclaw the Fierce, son of Bloodstripe the Strong, ruler of the werecats."

"What's a werecat?" Rose asked.

"I've read something about this," Christopher replied, "they are humans with the power to turn into a specific kind of cat."

"You're a *werecat*?" Samuel said to Lucan.

"Certainly." And with that, his form began to shiver. Less than a second later, they were looking at a fairly large, black cat.

"Wow," whispered Christopher. "So, is everybody here a werecat?"

"Indeed," replied Oscar. "Now I shall take you to His Majesty now." He led them down a long staircase to the floor of the cavern. Samuel noticed that most every building was strategically built for advantage against attack. Even the shops were built with thicker, tougher, walls.

Finally, they were at the palace. There were guards at every entrance, but for some reason, they did nothing to stop them from coming in.

The hallways were wonderful. There were fancy decorations made from jewels everywhere. It was amazing. However Cardo and Christopher appeared a little suspicious.

At last, they were in the throne room. Before them sat a man with ruffled hair exposing a scar on his forehead. He didn't look awfully friendly.

However, when he spoke, his voice was warm and welcoming.

“Greetings. I am Tigerclaw the Fierce, ruler of the werecats. Why do you come here?”

“We come for a place to stay for the night where we are safe from the Urgan,” Samuel replied, though it was a lie. They had really come because they were following Lucan.

“Brilliant. Why do you come here to me?”

Oscar said, “Just to meet you, your majesty.”

Christopher said, “We actually were in the Dark Forest on our way to assassinate the Urgan leader. Then Lucan found us and led us here. That’s about it.” Both Rose and Samuel noticed that he left out the fact about the ring, but both of them trusted Christopher, so they kept silent.

“Hmm.” Tigerclaw looked as though he were expecting something a little more exciting. He didn’t say anything. There was a moment of tense silence. Rose and Samuel, now both very suspicious of Christopher and Cardo, noticed that they looked nervous.

But at last, Tigerclaw said, “Alright. You’re dismissed.”

“Here,” Lucan said, “follow me. I’ll show you around.”

And the four of them left the palace, with Christopher and Cardo whispering as they walked.

## *Chapter Ten*

### *Traveling*

At the Gladior fort, Kiat finally knew what he wanted to do. He had gotten his plan approved with Tam and a couple others commanders in his army. It wasn't complex, though it was well thought out. So without further ado, the Gladior army set out. Everybody was aware of what the plan was, but there were still lots of questions to be asked.

The next couple days were spent traveling through the Dark Forest. Everybody was all aware and alert, but they were not attacked.

Kiat was thinking over and over through his plan. It was clear, yet for some reason, something didn't make sense.

"Relax," Tam said to him as they walked. "Sior won't be ready for this. When Samuel arrives, everything will be under control. Our army is strong. It'll be easy."

Kiat sighed and said nothing.

The next day, at a midday lunch break, Kiat talked to Tam. It was a fine time while the soldiers practiced by sparring against each other.

"What is there to discuss?" Tam asked.

"What if Samuel, Christopher, and Rose are already there?"

"They won't be. Use some common sense. How on earth could they travel that far in such a small amount of time?"

"Yes, but..."

"Will you stop worrying?" However, Tam was secretly trying to encourage himself as well. "Your plan is good. Okay?"

"Well... alright." Kiat left but both Kiat and Tam still had their doubts about the plan inside.

In the werecat home, Lucan led Samuel and his friends through long streets. As they went along, the four visitors noticed houses getting less and less big, and more damaged. Not the most poor but still pretty far from the center of town, Lucan brought them up to a house. He knocked on the door three times. The four of them waited a while. At last, a boy about the age of Lucan came out. When he saw Lucan he smiled, but he looked rather confused when he saw Samuel, Christopher, Rose, and Cardo.

Lucan introduced them saying that they were simply staying for the night.

"And my name is Edgar. Welcome," replied the boy courteously.

"Thank you. So what do you want to do?" Samuel asked.

"Well, I thought we could show them more of the tunnels," said Lucan.

"Good idea. Let's go up to the High Peak one."

They set off in the direction of the cavern wall. Once they were there, they went through a small door. Inside the cavern wall, the group went up stairs, around many corners, and even up a couple ladders. Finally, they came to a halt.

Samuel, Christopher, Rose, and Cardo found themselves in a small chamber. There were a couple tables with chairs, a small bed, a few cupboards, and some wooden boards pushed up against the wall.

"Where are we?" Rose asked.

"At the top of the cliff. Nobody else knows about this place," replied Lucan. "This is Edgar and me's hideout. We come up here when things are getting either too boring or too wild down in the main cavern."

"Interesting," said Rose.

Samuel walked around the room inspecting it. The other three adventurers did the same.

In about an hour of doing nothing, a short meal, and a little conversation, Edgar announced, "I have to go. You guys can stay up here."

Everybody said "Fine," and he was about to leave when Lucan suddenly said, "Wait. Why are you going?"

"I have to check on the garden. Why?"

"Didn't you tell me that it only had to check it every other day?"

"Yeah, well... the garden is being really tough this week."

Everyone in the room knew that it was a lie.

Back in their room, Samuel was trying to have conversation with Christopher and Cardo, (Rose was away changing for bed) though he was not succeeding. Something was making them unusually distant.

So the night continued without comment. Even though they were in a room and safe, Samuel insisted on taking first watch.

It was the middle of the night when Samuel remembered the scroll on the Ring of Hyal and how it was good for passing time. He looked in his pack for it, though it wasn't there. "*Maybe I should wake up Christopher,*" he thought. He looked for him but Christopher wasn't there!

Christopher happened to be with Cardo out in the main cavern. Christopher had thought things through, of course, being himself. He was aware of the fact that werecats were one of the most tricky specie there was.

Christopher and Cardo had started off by sneaking out the scroll without Samuel noticing and exited through a back door. The door led into another tunnel that led to a small room. To the common eye, it would appear as a dead end. However, Christopher, with his study in architecture, knew the truth. "Get ready," Cardo said. He jumped up and slammed his staff into the ceiling.

A small, circular, piece of the ceiling fell out. Above them was a tunnel. It was hard for both of them, especially Christopher, (who had had hardly any training in climbing) to go directly upwards. Fortunately, the tunnel turned so it was level and neither of them were in danger of falling.

A good deal later, the tunnel stopped. "I don't remember this part," Christopher said.

"According to you, this brought us right to the ring. I thought it was supposed to be right in front of us," Cardo replied.

"I know it's *supposed* to be, but it's obviously not." There was silence between them. "We must've taken a wrong turn," Christopher said at last. He turned around.

"Wait! Pull out the scroll." Christopher did so and gave it to Cardo.

*The ring belongs to the rock, and there it rests.  
Deeper inside it than you might imagine.  
Guarded by wisdom and guarded by walls. No  
entrance, no pathway to lead you. Use not this  
and your path is clear.*



“Guarded by wisdom, that’s the werecats because werecats are smart, and guarded by walls. There is no pathway. That’s what the scroll says,” Cardo exclaimed.

“But it says, ‘Use not this’. So... to not use a wall and not use wisdom... Well, I’ll walk right into the wall. That wouldn’t be using the wall or wisdom.”

Christopher walked right into the wall and nothing happened (except a bloody nose). “Well, darn,” he muttered.

“I have an idea!” Cardo exclaimed once again. “Do it again with your eyes closed.” Christopher did and even though he had his eyes closed Christopher could see - right through the wall.

And in there was the Ring of Hyal. Being anti-climactic like he was, he quickly took the ring and opened his eyes.

EDITOR: WRONG! TRY AGAIN.

*There the ring stood and Christopher walked right through the barrier of his own wisdom and into the chamber. He slowly lifted the shining ring--*

EDITOR: OKAY, WHATEVER. KEEP GOING WITH WHAT YOU WERE GOING TO DO.

Thank you! Alright, so..... “Let’s get out of here,” Cardo said when he saw that Christopher had the ring. One hour later they were out of the tunnel and in the sounds of war!

## *Chapter Eleven*

### *Untrustworthy*

“How did they find us?”

“Get them!!”

“Over here!!!”

Amber overheard this exchange as she looked through the edge of the Dark Forest at the attack:

The Urgan were attacking these cat-things that sometimes seemed more human and sometimes cat. Surprisingly, they fought better in cat form, tearing at any exposed parts with their claws. One boy with Samuel was yelling. That’s when she realized that Samuel was there! But she didn’t have time to think about that. “Get the traitor!! Get him!!” The boy was yelling. Amber saw him pointing at somebody jumping through the air.

Quickly, she fired her loaded crossbow into the air.

Edgar was in the air changing into cat-form when a soft wisp of wind could be heard. The crossbow bolt whistled right through him, spilling practically no blood. He fell, noiselessly, stone dead.

Lucan, in his surprise of seeing Edgar fall to the ground, turned around. “Did you do that?” he asked Amber, pointing at the motionless body of Edgar.

“Yes. Well, what did you think I did?”

“Hit the guy jumping with an... arrow?”

“Okay, yes I did.”

“Nice shot.”

“Thank you. However there happens to be a battle still going on.”

“Good point. I’ll get back to that in a moment.”

The rest of the battle went poorly for the Urgan. As Amber had noted, the werecats were surprisingly great warriors. The Urgan, this group at least, were beaten quickly after Edgar’s defeat.

After the battle, Amber’s group rested with Samuel, Rose, Christopher, and Cardo. Amber took the time to tell Samuel about Sior, with the scroll. (That was what had started her whole journey. You may have forgotten).

The next morning, Samuel, Christopher, Rose, and Cardo were riding wild horses full-gallop toward Sior's castle.

Even though all of the soldiers brought minimal things/people, it still was a large, clanging, group that Kiat was leading. It was exhausting enough to be marching practically all day, and even more so with the loud clangs of metal against metal, the constant thumping of the feet on the dirt, and the hot sun glaring down on them. The morale was going south in the army. Kiat wasn't able to do much about that till the next day.

The next day it was cool, misty, and creepy. Everybody was glad for that. Even though everybody was doing the same thing as yesterday, the soldiers were much more refreshed and did their task much better.

About midday, a surprise hit them. It was their one short break when a small group of Urgan tore into the camp. "Organize yourselves! Don't just randomly attack!" shouted Kiat.

The Urgan ran right through their ranks, however, and Kiat saw that his usual organization plan wasn't going to work. They were losing.

And that's when he saw Tam, who was in his element, striking down a soldier with each swing of his axe. Many of his soldiers were doing the same. So soon later, the Urgan left, but it left the Gladios horribly beaten.

Kiat, being a good leader, didn't get angry, but instead said that it was good that they had an idea of how hard the Urgan were. "Now, when we attack the Urgan later, we'll be ready," he said. Though at the same time, he made it clear that he was sad for those who had died.

Finally, midday the next day, something important was spotted...

## Chapter Twelve

### *Gladiator!*

Samuel, Christopher, Rose and Cardo were slightly scared as they rode the wild horses the werecats had given them. First, Christopher crashed into a tree. Second, Samuel's horse tripped, sending him flying into a ravine. Third, Rose got a branch to the head and fell, due to the fact that her horse kept going right under her. The only person that remained on the whole time was Cardo. And Christopher was the only one to fall off four times. It was a *tree-mendous* fail. I mean--Hey! What a *deep* joke! Glad to see you're *branching* out!

Anyhow, within the next three days, they got to Sior's castle.

It was midnight, when the four of them arrived. In front of them was a humongous stone wall. Christopher had not thought of this, however.

Thankfully, Samuel always packs his lucky rope. Within about fifteen minutes they were all over the wall. Unfortunately, it broke after Cardo made it over the wall.

The landscape was creepy. Instead of any grass, the ground was all jagged stones. There was no moon in the sky and no lights from the castle. "Sior's probably in the keep," Christopher whispered, pointing in front of him.

The others agreed with his reasoning and followed him. "Now the real question is how to get into the keep," Cardo added.

"I guess we should *keep* on going," Christopher joked.

"Seriously," said Samuel, who was secretly trying to keep a straight face himself. But there was an issue. None of them had considered that.

"There must be a door," Rose said.

"Well, not necessarily," Christopher replied, "Remember? Sior is a full demon with wings. If he wanted to have some place where nobody could get him, all he needs is a place without doors on the ground."

"So like I said, the real question *is* how to get into the keep," Cardo said.

"Well Samuel might still have his lucky rope," Rose said.

“No, that broke after Cardo made it up, remember?” Cardo replied, “Well unless you have more, Samuel? Samuel?”

Until then, nobody had noticed the disappearance of Samuel. The group didn't see him anywhere. Well, until Rose looked up. “There he is!” She whispered to the others.

Samuel was grappled up against the wall like a spider but with two legs, two arms, two eyes, one nose, no fangs, no poison, large body, and can't spin webs. Besides all that and many other characteristics, he was *exactly* like a spider.

Anyhow, Samuel had never been one for climbing terribly well. But something must have just kicked up in him. His feet were lodged into small grooves on the stone wall. A couple feet above him was a windowsill. Suddenly, the remaining three of them knew what he meant to do. Once he was to the window, he threw down some more of his now *very, very* lucky rope.

Fifteen minutes later, Samuel, Rose, Christopher, and Cardo had successfully penetrated their way into the leader of all Urgan - Sior's - keep *with* the Ring of Hyal in their possession. Samuel could hardly believe it.

The room that they had entered into appeared to be a conference room. Luckily nobody was in it. (Or within ear shot).

“I don't know where Sior is,” Christopher whispered, “But let's head upward and I'll keep a close look at the ring.”

So they exited the room and into a hallway. It was just wide enough for two of them to walk right next to each other, though it was tall enough to walk *on top* of each other. It made an uncomfortable feeling of being squashed, yet exposed.

The decoration was scarce. A couple tapestries here and there, mainly showing battles--though not on earth. In the sky. The moon had artistically been morphed into a chariot rider, the sun into a centaur. Those two figurines were in the center of the battle scene and many other soldiers were battling.

At last they found a staircase and went up.

The four adventurers found themselves at the top of the keep. Christopher glanced around the room. “Nobody's in here,” he declared softly, “Let's leave.”

All four of them were about to do just that when suddenly the Ring of Hyal became warm and bright red.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

### *A Duel with a Demon*

A soft tap sounded from behind Samuel, Rose, Christopher, and Cardo. Nobody heard or cared about it until the being behind them spoke:

*“Clever. But now, you weaklings, you are doomed.”*

All four of them whirled around to see a six foot tall black being with black scales covering his whole body except for his leathery black wings. The eyes were bright red, along with his claws, and his white teeth were filed and sharp.

“Sior...” Cardo muttered.

*“Yes, that is me,”* Sior replied.

None of them knew what to say. They continued staring at each other when suddenly in Sior’s arm appeared a long sword. He caught Cardo off guard, though he was a trained warrior. Cardo moved to the side quick enough to keep the wound from being fatal.

The duel had begun.

Samuel was pretty sure that they could handle Sior pretty easily at the beginning. However, as the battle went on, he saw that he had been mistaken. They had forced him back into the chamber room so that Samuel, Christopher, Rose, and Cardo could spread out around him. However, for this beast, fighting all four of them at once was just as easy as fighting one of them. This is because when Christopher and Rose came around in the back while Sior was busy with Samuel and Cardo, rather than having to fight all four of them with two arms, an arm *grew* out of each shoulder and a sword appeared in each hand. He fought the four of them off easily.

At one point, Rose realized that she would be better off trying to kill Sior from a distance. She was pretty bad at fighting at close range.

So, she crept back and left the others to keep fighting Sior. Rose loaded her bow and took aim.

She was about to fire when Sior suddenly brought one of his swords right to Rose’s neck.

Everybody in the room froze.

*“See, little ones. You are so helpless.”* Keeping one blade at the neck of Rose, he moved towards Christopher, presumably to grab the ring. And that he did.

As far as the four adventurers could see, their mission to assassinate Sior had failed.

Sior seemed to be trying to do something inside his head, like a math problem, though Samuel doubted that was the case. Sior’s eyes were closed and his fists were clenched (including the one holding the sword at Rose’s neck).

Out of Samuel, Christopher, Rose, and Cardo, the only two that could see each other were Rose and Cardo. *“What’s the plan?”* She mouthed to him.

*“Kill Sior and get out of here with the Ring of Hyal.”*

*“Right. But how?”* Rose asked.

*“Umm...”* Cardo didn’t say (or actually “mouth”) anything for a bit. Then he replied, *“If you slowly shimmy backward then you could stab Sior in the leg then... um...”*

Cardo was cut off by Rose urgently pointing at Sior.

Sior was about to crush the ring with a one of his three spare hands, when the door and part of the wall was smashed down. Before Samuel could see who it was, there was a loud shout.

*“GLADIOR!”*

## *Chapter Fourteen*

### *Gladiator to the Rescue!*

Three blades instantly appeared in Sior's free hands as he glared at the intruders. Samuel found himself thinking, "*I would be scared, too, if they weren't on my team.*"

Before them was Tam and Kiat, both seated upon winged horses. Kiat was in full plate armor and he had a great sword with a serrated edge. Tam was even scarier. In each hand he carried a single bladed axe with a small red gem on the top. His helmet was adorned with two dead-white horns that rose up, then curved backward.

Rose, contrary to her three traveling companions, wasn't gawping at Kiat and Tam, but carefully moving to get out of sword range of Sior (Sior didn't notice because he was too distracted with Kiat and Tam).

After about a minute of tense silence, Tam and Kiat lunged in unison. And the battle begun anew. Sior's blades whirling, Kiat and Tam repeatedly struck out at Sior. Samuel, Christopher, Rose, and Cardo weren't able to do much to help, though Tam and Kiat seemed to be handling it fine on their own.

Suddenly, the room shook. Sior seemed to be taken a little bit off guard, but Tam and Kiat didn't flinch. They kept battling. The room shook again. This time, a chunk of the wall fell off. "You have to escape!" shouted Kiat above the howling wind outside. At first, Samuel didn't realize that Kiat was talking to him and his friends. However, even when he did realize that, Samuel still stayed in the same place.

The building rumbled once again.

Again, Kiat shouted, "You MUST get away! GO!!"

Again, Samuel stayed, replying, "I'll stay and help!"

"NO!"

"I will!"

Just then, Kiat made the dire mistake of turning towards Samuel. In a split second, Sior's blade was upon him, slashing one shoulder. It wasn't a fatal wound, but it was damaging. Tam began to take on more of the fight.



Tam was a good, skilled fighter, yet Sior was pushing him back toward the open part of the wall. Tam didn't look like he could hold his own much longer.

The building rumbled again. This time, the whole room slanted the way Tam was about to fall out. He had to grab on to the edge of the wall to avoid falling. Samuel began to form a plan. He had no time to waste.

Samuel shared his plan with Christopher, Cardo and Rose. They all agreed that it was risky, however it was even more risky to not do anything at all.

Cardo, the strongest, pulled Tam out of the way of Sior. At the same time, Rose helped Kiat and Christopher began tying Samuel's luckiest rope to the space of the wall so they could get out. Then Samuel played his part.

Sior whirled around to face Tam to where he had been pulled to by Cardo, but Samuel, fueled by adrenaline, thrust his sword into Sior. Sior howled. Christopher felt the ring grow hot. Rose covered her ears. Then the sword in Samuel's hand shattered. Before anybody could do anything, Sior spread his wings and flew into the wind.

Samuel began to climb down the tied rope, when a weak voice said, "Wait." He turned around. There was Kiat. "I cannot make it out of here. I will need you, Samuel, to carry on in my footsteps. You shall become the leader of the Gladior. And you, Tamtiar," he continued, turning, "you may advise Samuel and continue to help the Gladior. You, Christopher, can keep the ring and help to learn and teach the Gladior. May you bring fortune and bravery to those around you." And with those last words, Kiat fell into an endless sleep.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

### *The End, for Now...*

In about one hour, all four adventurers were safely out of the tower, and back in the Gladior fort. Many Gladior soldiers had died, though the main mood was festive, for the battle had been pretty much won. At first, Samuel didn't even realize that there had been a battle, besides the one he had with Sior. Apparently, there had been a big battle with the Urgan on the ground. Samuel learned that the reason the tower had been shaking and rumbling was the fact that catapults had been firing at it.

Samuel was finding it hard to imagine leading a large group of warriors who were up to three times as old as him. Fortunately, everybody obeyed the initial simple orders without (much) question. So far, Samuel hadn't done much as leader, except recruit a few new members for the Gladior.

Christopher became a main scholar and did some research to explain what had happened when Samuel had stabbed Sior. It was really fancy, but the general idea was that there are three hearts in a full demon, and when one of them is destroyed, some back up-magicky thing came into action and hurt all the things around it.

Cardo became a lead general in the Gladior army. He enjoyed his position there, and was a very big help.

Rose didn't commit herself to one job, but she was an amazing archer, a good healer and skilled in many other arts.

There was a slight pause in the war, and there wasn't much more than the occasional assault. One day, about three months later, an unexpected visitor arrived. Amber.

According to her, her group of Gladior troops had gotten attacked by the Urgan and she was the only person left alive. Fortunately, besides a few scars, she looked okay.

So the life of the Gladior went on, with not too many crazy adventurers or magic rings. This grand battle had left both the Urgan and the Gladior armies without enough strength to mount an attack. However, they both regrouped and increased the power in their ranks slowly.

One day, roughly three years later, Amber came running toward Samuel. "Samuel! Come look at this."

"What is it?"

"A journal. Of Sam."

"Who's that?" Samuel asked.

"He was my traveling partner for getting that scroll on Sior to you."

"Right. What is its importance?"

"Well," Amber explained, "According to this, Sam was *an elf* who had some sort of family in the Dark Forest, which means that we could possibly have *a lot* more help in the war."

Samuel looked confused, so Amber explained further.

"If we could find Sam's family, then they could serve as soldiers in our army."

Samuel thought for a moment. Then he said, "Alright. Get some rest. You have a *big* mission in front of you."

Amber smiled and walked away.

The night was quiet. Though nothing of the current scenery would have showed what was going on in Samuel's head. He was planning the change that would decide the outcome of the upcoming war.

To be Continued...