

# Serenity Failing

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*Serenity was an ordinary 11th grader, untill she became anything but ordinary....*

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# 1 - Bad omens

Serenity was your ordinary teenager. Nothing about her was more or less different from anyone else. Until that strange day at school when the unexpected came rushing into her life.

The dark storm clouds rolled in all across the sky. Rain poured down in buckets, drenching the students stuck outside. The class was being punished for unruly behavior (mainly from the obnoxious boys in the back of the room). The 11th grade class now had to pick up trash outside until their limbs were frozen. Did Serenity imagine it or was there an evil gleam in her teacher's eye? Probably every one in the class thought that.

The teacher's name lived up to her personality: Mrs. Strickland. Pretty much everyone thought of her as evil except the boys at the back who weren't afraid of anything. They especially didn't care about risking everyone else's limbs. They would think up some ingenious plan to keep themselves dry.

Serenity's teeth were chattering and her fingers felt like they were made of ice when Mrs. Strickland came out with an umbrella an hour later.

"All right, who gets to go in first, boys or girls?" She said, with that evil look in her eye. This time Serenity knew she saw it.

The boys and girls face each other, Boys smiling, girls glaring.

"I know, we'll have a contest. One member from each side will chose a contestant to sing a song that I chose. If they don't know it, they stay out here an hour more."

*Why does she enjoy torturing us like this? Serenity thought. And in the weirdest ways, too.*

"No volunteers? Okay, I'll choose. Grant, you represent the boys, Serenity, you represent the girls."

*Why ME?*

Mrs. Strickland choose Sebben Crudele, an Italian song. Lucky for Serenity, she knew it. Unfortunately, so did Grant. At least, the tune.

So Grant hummed. Then I sang. An evil sneer spread across Mrs. Strickland's face. Later Serenity would wished she'd run away then.

"You lose," Mrs. Strickland said looking directly at me. But she didn't mean the contest. Serenity felt a muscular hand cover her mouth so she couldn't scream and an arm wrap itself tightly across her stomach, pinning her arms at her sides. Slowly she was dragged backwards as she fought against her captor, watching her teacher and all her classmates wave goodbye...



## 2 - Weird Just Got Weirder

Serenity's feet were dragged through the muddy earth as she watched her class disappear. She looked pleadingly at them even though she knew it was too late. Then Mrs. Strickland's eyes *glowed*. They glowed *red*. How weird is that?

Suddenly Serenity felt herself be whirled around to face the direction she was being hauled. She fought back with all her strength but her captor was too strong, all she was doing was making herself tired. Then she felt her captor's breath against the side of her face as he (it was definitely a he) whispered to her.

"Just go along with it, I'm on your side."

*Yeah right*, Serenity thought to herself.

Finally they got to the edge of the schoolyard. But as she watched the parking lot draw near, it fell into the earth, changing into a deep chasm. Serenity screamed and tried to turn back but his arms were too strong. Just when she thought things couldn't get any weirder, a gigantic monster came out. Shiny scale rippled down its immense hulk while its teeth glimmered in what little light there was. Razor as long as a full grown man's arm rested at the end of each oversized claw.

Fear gripped Serenity's heart. She heard a sound of metal on metal behind her and turned to see what it was. Finally, she got a good look at the kidnapper. Her heart melted and she began to feel all tingly inside. He was gorgeous! But he was wearing a breastplate and gauntlets over his dark clothing. On top of his white hair was a long gray hat.

Then she pinpointed the metal noise. He'd drawn a huge sword, as long as she was tall, and held it in the hand that had been covering her mouth.

The monster in front of them gave a deafening roar. Serenity was brought back to the present as icy fear reclaimed her heart.

Then she felt herself being hoisted into the air as her captor jumped. They began to soar through the air, straight towards the beast. The monster's blood red eyes homed in on the odd couple and launched on of his claws at them. The claw found its mark, on Serenity's arm.

A long red gash ran all the way down her arm. Blood dripped from the long wound. Serenity shoved her fist in her mouth to keep from screaming in her captor's ear.

Just as they passed over the monster's head, the man holding Serenity thrust his sword into its brain. They landed on its falling form and then were off again, sailing through the air like two very strange birds. Finally they landed on the other side. Serenity wanted to lie down and kiss the soaking dirt, but neither her captor nor her arm would allow.

“If I let go of you, will you swear to stay right there?” he asked.

Fear still slightly holding on, Serenity could only nod.

Then he pulled out a strange, round instrument that Serenity recognized as an ocarina. As he played a beautiful, hypnotic tune, another hole opened up in the earth, only this one was purple. It ripped like the waves in the ocean and sparks popped out.

“What is that?” Serenity asked, her voice only a hoarse whisper.

“We must hurry this world has been unstable since I showed up,” was his reply. Then he grabbed Serenity around the waist and jumped in...

### 3 - Minnin

Bright colors swirled all around Serenity. Confusion fogged all senses. Which way was up? Down? Sideways? She could tell she was falling, but which way? Bright swarming lights glared in her eyes until she was finally dropped onto solid ground.

She'd landed on her torn arm. She would've screamed in pain if the air hadn't been knocked out of her.

Serenity looked over to her left, still gasping for air. There stood the boy that had captured her, smiling at her. Obviously he'd had more experience in the whole purple portal category (if that's what it was) than she had, because he was on his feet. She frowned up at him.

Using all the strength she could muster, Serenity pushed herself up. In the grass where her arm had been lay a puddle of blood. When the boy saw it, his eyes widened and he rushed over to her side.

That's when she noticed his eyes. They were white. Pure, milky white. Serenity shivered as she wondered how he saw through them.

"Gosh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize I'd gotten that close to that monster," he said. Serenity could here compassion in his voice, but still pretty much hated him.

"Yeah, would you mind telling me what the heck is going on?" She would've yelled at him but was still fairly shocked.

He was now trying to stop the bleeding with a small piece of cloth he had produced from his belt. "My name is Tlen. Welcome to Fayrah." He swept a gauntleted hand across the landscape. Serenity looked out at the grassy foothills. Behind the rolling mounds of dirt lay huge mountains. Although they were far in the distance, their snowcapped peaks looked very near.

Then she noticed it. The small village nestled between two hills. Small lights flickered in the windows as dark storm clouds covered the sky. People could barely be made out bustling through the darkening streets.

When Tlen noticed she was staring at the town he said, "That's Minnin. We'll be staying there tonight as I straighten a few things out to you."

Serenity could only nod, only somewhat understanding.

A few minutes later, Tlen helped her to her feet and they walked down to Minnin. Well, Serenity sort of trudged along.

As they made their way to the village, Serenity tried to get some things straight. She fired off questions left and right.

“So why am I here?”

“I'll tell you later.”

“Okay then, how come my teacher said ‘I lose’?”

“Because to her, you did. Everything. She thought I was going to drag you away to here and destroy you when we got here.”

“Wait a minute, I knew she had no heart, but I didn't know she was evil! Okay, new question. How come her eyes glowed red?”

“Because she has what's called ‘wolf blood’. All your class does. It basically makes you evil and almost unstoppable. They were all just waiting for the right moment to destroy you though.”

Serenity shivered. The thought that everyone she'd ever known practically had been planning on destroying her was not a pleasant one.

Then she started to wobble a bit. She realized she was starting to feel dizzy from all the blood she'd lost. Even the little piece of cloth wasn't enough. She tried hard not to complain as dizziness took over. The best she could do was place one foot in front of the other and try not to look ahead.

For what seemed like hours later to Serenity, they reached village. People in dirty, unwashed clothes stumbled about, buying things from shops and stands. Serenity could just make out heaps of garbage at the end of each alley way. Tlen leaned in and said, “Stay close. This town isn't a pleasant one, but it's closest to the mountains.”

Serenity wondered what he meant about “closest to the mountains” but stayed close anyway. She still wasn't sure about him, but she was even less sure about the town's folk.

Now that she thought about it, there was almost a sense of protection around Tlen. It made her feel safe, and slowly she started to trust him. But even so, she kept a cautious eye on him. He *did*, after all, have a stinking huge sword strapped to his back.

The two made their way to the center of the town, where all the main shops were. There were bread shops, fish shops, fruit stands, armories, groceries, you name it was there. Well, not any *modern* shops, but there were clothing stores and jewelry stores to.

But they didn't go into any of those. Instead Tlen opened the door to a small, two-story inn. As they stepped in, the smell of beer and stew mingled together, making Serenity feel nauseated along with her dizziness. Tlen took her hand and led her to a counter off to the left.

*Well, Serenity thought. Hopefully the rooms are nicer than this trip will be. Maybe I'll even get my own room for a change...*

## 4 - The Inn

They sat in the far corner in the downstairs restaurant. People all around were shouting out bar songs and getting drunk. But in the corner where they sat, the noise disintegrated. Slightly.

Tlen had bought some medical supplies to clean Serenity's arm up with and her arm now lay cradled gently in her lap, bandages and all. He'd also bought a dress that blended in with the other clothes of the town, instead of her "Earthly" blue-jeans and zip up sweatshirt. Serenity wasn't even sure if these people knew what a zipper *was*.

While he was out, she stayed in the room he'd rented. Serenity had sat on the bed closest to the window which she'd claimed when they entered their room.

The dark room was small and stuffy. The only furniture inside was two beds, a dresser and a washbowl. It could hardly even fit *that*.

But now they both sat downstairs in the corner by the fire.

The dress Serenity wore stopped several inches above her knees and it had thin straps holding it up. At first she was disgusted that he'd bought it, let alone that she had to *wear* it. But she quickly changed her mind as they sat by the roasting fire. Serenity was glad it wasn't long sleeved.

Steaming bowls of soup were placed in front of them and two cups that Serenity could only guess by the smell was ale. Surprised that they gave beer to under aged teenagers, she leaned over to Tlen and said, "I'm only seventeen! I don't drink alcohol." He gave her an amusing smile but told the cook to bring her a glass of water any way.

Once the cook brought the water out, he settled back in his seat and said, "Well, let's get down to business, shall we?" He stared at her with those milky eyes. Although he had no pupils and irises to follow around with, Serenity soon learned that you could feel the heat of his gaze with your eyes closed. But once you learned their secrets, you could read them like a book. Gradually, she learned how to do this, too.

"Yes, *please*. Tell me everything. How `bout you start with why you brought me here to this place that I've never known existed *in my life* and how we had to go through a purple...popping.....*thing* to get here!," Serenity sputtered.

"Are you finished?"

"Yeah, for now."

"Okay then," he said putting his cup down. "Where do I start?"

“Um, well on our planet we have what are called Earth Keepers. What an Earth Keeper does is, put in the most simple terms, holds the ground together. Every root, every tree, every blade of grass is controlled and, or held together by the power of the Earth Keeper. If ever the Earth Keeper would die, the kingdom he or she controls disappears.”

“Wait, do you mean literally disappear or figuratively disappears?”

“I mean literally. It just falls into the earth, becoming a deep hole in the side of the planet. Each kingdom has an Earth Keeper. If they don't, then that kingdom simply does not exist.”

“But what if there was a war or something and the boundaries are changed?”

“The only way to ‘change’ the borders would be to make the Earth Keeper give up their claim.”

Serenity sat back in her chair, trying hard to swallow the forming lump in her throat. Finally she collected up enough courage to ask the question she wanted answered the most. Her voice still came out small and squeaky even with her remaining courage. “What does this have to do with me?”

He let out a sigh and wore an expression that seemed to say ‘I’ll have to tell her sometime’. “Okay, well, the parents you grew up with, the ones you know and love, are not your real parents. Your birth parents were from here. Your father had *the most important* job on this planet. He was Fayrah’s Earth Keeper.

“On his death bed he gave his gift to his daughter, you.”

The words hung in the air for what seemed like hours. *Great*, Serenity thought. *Now I’ll have to stay here a while.*

Tlen continued. “I had to come and get you today because your teacher was starting to make her move. I knew that if I waited any longer, you would die along with all of us Fayrahniens.”

Serenity folded her hands in her lap and stared at them. *Why her*. *Why did she* have to be the important person, of all the people it could've been?

Tlen must've seen her anxiety, because he then asked, “Do want me to continue?”

Serenity looked up at his white eyes and whispered, “Let's just get this over with.”

## 5 - Finally some sleep

Tlen looked at Serenity with absolute seriousness. "Look, tonight you need as much sleep as you can get. And I don't want to completely confuse you."

Serenity looked back at him. "Fine, then just answer a couple more questions. First, where are we going tomorrow that I'll need a lot of sleep for?" She eyed him carefully, but it only made him break into a huge grin.

"Well, I hope I don't scare you *too* much because we've got to cross those mountains. There weren't dangers for you just in your world. People are hunting you. Kings of different kingdoms want larger land to rule. By capturing you they can force you to give them what they want. At least here I can protect you better."

"How come you, of all the people here, are protecting me? I mean, it could be anyone."

Tlen let out a sigh. "I'm sure you'll know soon enough."

Serenity wasn't. She still didn't understand what the heck she was doing here really.

Slowly, her eyes started to droop. Tlen noticed and smiled again. "Better start getting some of that sleep now. We'll leave early so we can buy some more supplies. You won't get half way in that," he said, referring to her dress.

Serenity frowned at him. "Then why'd you get it?"

He just shrugged. "You need some souvenir." He let out a little laugh. It was a good laugh, one that captivated her for a moment. Then she shook herself out of it, figuring she was just tired.

Tlen helped Serenity up from their table and they headed up the wooden stairs to their rented room.

Since Serenity didn't have any shoes to wear except her Converse sneakers from Earth, all she had to do to get ready for bed was lay down.

As she drifted off to bed, she silently hoped that she wouldn't snore. It seemed she'd made a bad enough impression as is.

...

Serenity felt herself be shaken awake. The light of dawn could barely be seen streaming through the one window. Groggily, Serenity tried to remember where she was. Then memory flooded back to her.

She shot upright in the bed and looked over to see who had waken her. Once again she looked into those strange white eyes that belonged to none other than Tlen.

“Time to go,” He gently whispered in her ear.

Slowly, she stood up as a wave of dizziness washed over her as her bare feet touched the cold wood floor. Temporarily her vision went black then the light started filling in again.

Serenity looked down at her arm. Tlen must've changed the bandage while she was asleep, because a new white one replaced her old bloody one.

She walked towards the door, gathering her few possessions as she went.

“Shall we?”

## 6 - The Journey Begins

The Town shops and stands of Minnin were just starting to open as Tlen and Serenity stepped outside. It took a while to find what they needed in all the crowded shops. Fortunately for them, there were only a few people wandering the streets.

After a few hours of searching, they were able to find boots, gloves, capes, and fur coats for crossing the mountain range. In their leather supplies sacks (also recently purchased) they placed a bounty of food. Well, at least enough for their long journey. To go along with that, there were two leather flasks with enough freshwater to get them past the foothills, longer on rationing.

Tlen had also managed to find a mapmaker, where he bought a map of the mountains and a few miles beyond.

Finally, well into the morning, the two started out for the looming mountains in the distance.

They had only been walking on the rolling foothills for a couple of hours when Serenity breathlessly asked Tlen to stop.

"I'm sorry. I'm just not as strong as you. The most exercise I get is in gym class once a week."

He just smiled at her but let her take a breather.

After a little while she got up again. "I don't know how you can stand it under all that armor. You lug it around everywhere," Serenity said, trying to break the silence that floated between them.

"Well, you never know when someone might attack. In Fayrah, it's *much* better safe than sorry, considering 'sorry' might be lying in a ditch dead some where."

Serenity shivered at the thought, but tried again. "So, why do we need to cross the mountains? I mean, couldn't we just go the *opposite* direction?"

"The *opposite* direction is the kingdom of Gidora. It's where all the wolf blooded traitors bide their time. Each and everyone one of them is under the control of King Zhanrayne." Tlen looked into the distance with a look of disgust. So instead of talking, Serenity decided to just be quiet and walk. She would need all the energy she had.

Sometime later, when the sun was high in the sky, they took out some food for lunch. Serenity ate as slowly as she could, not wanting to get up for a while yet. Her feet were sore and her knees were tired, but the mountains hadn't seemed to get too much closer.

When she finished eating, she lay back on the grass staring up at the puffy clouds. It was much clearer than yesterday, but storm clouds loomed in the East, daring to make their way here. At least, she figured

that was the East, considering Tlen had something about the mountains being to the West.

Serenity realized that Tlen was watching her, so she turned to look back at him.

“Time to go again?” she moaned.

“Well, if we want to find some tree cover before that storm gets here, then yeah.”

Grumbling to herself, Serenity pushed herself up onto her feet. She knew he was right, but she wasn't about to admit it openly. She still didn't know what to think of him. What if she *did* trust him? What if he then turned his back on her and killed her? What if it was all a lie?

She argued with herself as they continued their journey. In the end she finally came to the conclusion that Tlen was the only person she knew in this (what did he call it?) Fayrah so she basically *had* to trust him. If she ran away, where would she go? She didn't know this place any better than she knew the terrain of Jupiter. And he had to use that stupid ocarina just to get here (she would have to ask him about that later). So basically, she was better off with him. At least *she* wasn't expected to pay anything.

Her thoughts were quickly ended when she bumped into Tlen's back. When she looked around, she realized they'd reached the tree line.

“Well, we can make shelter here for the night. Tomorrow we'll be getting an early start,” he said, not even turning to her. Serenity groaned inwardly. She *hated* getting up early and she *hated* walking for long distances.

When she looked up to the sky, she noticed the sun had gone down considerably. Maybe she would survive this after all...

## 7 - The Mountains

After a small meal consisting of water, biscuits, and dried meat, Serenity set up her sleeping mat. She was so sore and worn out from the long day she crashed almost instantly. But Tlen stayed up, watching their surroundings with sharp eyes that never missed a single detail.

Even though his eyes were white, he was far from blind. It was just a bit of something that came along with who he was, although he himself despised it. He wasn't planning on telling Serenity any time soon. She knew too little about his, *her*, world. For now.

Every nerve tensed in Tlen's body as some twigs cracked somewhere in the distance. He placed a hand on the hilt of his sword, but relaxed as a little bunny hopped out. You could never know when someone (or *something*, for that matter) lurked in the shadows waiting to kill you. With King Zharayne sneaking deeper into Fayrah, it was all he could do to protect Serenity.

He kept watch until dawn. After quickly grabbing a bite to eat, he woke Serenity up. Groggily, she ate something herself, then they were off.

The day wore on as the sun rose high in the sky. It produced no heat this close to the snow. Instead, the temperature seemed to decrease as they neared the growing mountains. Serenity and Tlen finally had to pull out their cloak and mittens.

Serenity huffed and puffed, trying to keep close to Tlen. She was going to try and prove that she wasn't a complete weakling, even if she was. Tlen knew this but only smiled to himself.

Instead of stopping to eat like they had the other day, the two ate while walking. Tlen wanted to reach the mountains by nightfall and wasn't going to waste any time. Zharayne was getting close, he could feel it. From now on out, they couldn't waste a single moment. Tlen wasn't going to scare Serenity by telling her though. There seemed to be a lot of things he wasn't telling her, but he just told himself it was for the better.

Somewhere around evening, the two found that they were actually starting to clime upwards. Tlen, satisfied at their progress, decided to stop in a tight grove of trees.

Serenity plunked down on the ground, made soft by layers of moss. Lying down, she attempted to catch her breath.

Sitting down next to her, Tlen smiled at her. "You did good. I'm surprised that you never even asked for a break this time."

"Well, it wasn't easy," she replied smiling back at him. "I've never done so much walking in my life."

"You'll get used to it."

"I don't know, how long will it take before I `get used to it'?"

Tlen laughed, and once again Serenity found herself staring at him with a smile on her face.

"Well, if we intend to eat, we'd better get something *out* first," Tlen said with a broad grin.

"Ohhh, if we have to." At that they both fell over laughing. Neither of them really saw what was so funny. Maybe it was just because they had said hardly anything since they left their last campsite. Who knew? Most certainly not them, and yet, there they lay on the ground, clutching their sides from laughter.

Once the last fit of laughter was over, Serenity reached for her pack with her rations in it. Just as she was about to open it, something hit her hand. Hard. When she looked up, a squirrel with bright red eyes was bouncing away. She looked down at her hand where a huge red mark was already starting to form. She would've cried but she was just too shocked.

Tlen jumped up from where he had been sitting. Alarm was written all over his face. He knew they couldn't waste any time on sleep now. Zharayne had found them.

## 8 - Earth Keeper

Since they had begun their journey, Serenity had secretly been practicing her Earth Keeper ability. So far, she'd been succeeding. A wiggle of a little blade of grass here, a shake of a tree leaf there. No large victories until just a moment ago.

When the pinecone hit her hand, Serenity tried to pick it up. But before her hand even touched it, it started to float in the air! All she had done was think about lifting it and the pinecone seemed to have done the rest. Then something *really* weird started to happen. Not that flying pinecones isn't weird, but this was *much* weirder. On the weird scale, this was a definite ten.

Her blood was *boiling*. Only it wasn't hot, just a warm, bubbly feeling up and down her arm. When she looked at it, her bandage fresh blood coated the white cloth and was starting to bubble. She couldn't explain it but she *enjoyed* the sensation. Serenity nudged Tlen. Finally he peeled his eyes away from the direction the squirrel had gone.

His jaw dropped. "How did you know what to do?"

"I didn't."

The two stared at the floating pinecone until Serenity finally dropped her hand and the pinecone fell to the ground.

"I'd been practicing while we were walking, but nothing ever really happened till now."

"Well, you're going to have more chances to practice. We're leaving now."

"What? Why? It was just a squirrel."

"Yeah, a squirrel being controlled by Zharayne."

"How did he find us?"

"Oh, trust me, he has his ways."

Without another word, they both left there would-be-campsite as quickly as they could.

Serenity scrambled after Tlen. "Okay. It's about time you start explaining a few more things. Start with the day you brought me here."

Without looking back, he said, "Well, you know almost everything about your teacher. But the reason that monster came up was because your world became too unstable after I showed up. I can't really explain it, but that's where the monster came from."

“Wait! That monster came from *Fayrah*?!”

“Not necessarily *Fayrah*. It could've been from *Gidora*, *Zharayne's* home, or *anywhere*.”

“And what about that ocarina? How does that work?”

“It's a special tool given to me by someone very close that allows me to travel to different worlds.”

Then Tlen broke into a run. “Stop talking. We're *both* going to need all of our strength.”

“Why? We reached the mountains.”

“I thought I said stop talking? Well, you saw it. *Zharayne* knows where we are. He probably found us when you were practicing on trees and grass.”

Not quite understanding (when *had* she?) *Serenity* said, “I don't get it!”

Frustrated Tlen turned to face her. “*Zharayne* can find you or any Earth Keeper simply by sensing when they use their ability. Do you get it know?”

“Yes. But it's not my fault! It's not every day a normal teenager gets taken to some...some...weird *place*!”

Tlen took a step back with a look of regret. “I'm sorry. But if something ever happened to you, it would be my fault.” Then without another word, he turned around and started walking again. *Serenity* felt lost. She didn't understand what was going on really. How come it would be *his* fault? Wouldn't it be *her* fault for not doing something? But she didn't ask anymore questions, just kept walking closely behind Tlen.

## 9 - Snow

Tlen and Serenity had been walking quickly for several hours when a light dusting of snow could be made out. There weren't quite as many trees as lower on the mountainside so the snow fell easily onto the grass. As the two continued on, the temperature dropped considerably and finally had to put on their fur coats.

All the energy Serenity once had had been drained from every cell in her freezing body. Her legs gave way and she collapsed in a heap to the frozen ground. An inch or so of snow broke her fall.

"Wait!" she gasped. "I can't go on any more. I need to rest," she said in between pants. Tlen stopped and trudged back to her.

He sat down next her leaning his back against a near by tree and she noticed his face was red and his bottom lip was quivering from the cold.

"I guess I didn't realize it, but I need a break, too," Tlen managed to wheeze.

So they sat there until Serenity said she thought she could walk again. And for the third time that day, they started walking. But the next thing to get in their way was the weather.

A few hours later, snow flew at them with the strength of a lion. It pulled at their hair, ripping Serenity's raven black hair from the tie behind her head and making Tlen's gray hat to flop around, revealing a short ponytail at the back of his neck. The snow froze their hands-even with the gloves- and stung their faces. The pure whiteness blinded their eyes until...

*THWACK!*

Tlen ran into a tree and fell on top of Serenity. They tumbled backwards into the snow that was now level with their knees.

Tlen rolled off of Serenity as she lay there moaning.

"Ouch. I might've had a lot of snow to break my fall, but you're still heavy."

But he wasn't listening. Tlen was furiously digging a hole in the snow. "We're going to have to stay underneath the snow where the wind can't get us." He almost had to yell to be heard over the roaring winds.

Serenity understood and helped him burrow deeper into the snow. Finally some grass could be seen poking through and they started digging sideways. After a while, they had a fairly large hole in the snow with an entrance and a hollow inside.

Underneath their fur coats, Tlen and Serenity were roasting but their faces still stung from the biting, icy snow. They both crawled into the hole, Tlen letting Serenity go first. Once they were inside Serenity noticed Tlen had a large bump forming on his forehead from where he hit the tree.

There wasn't enough room to do more than kneel, so the two lay down and pulled out their supplies. They ate just enough to satisfy their starving stomachs, but Serenity could've eaten more. She would've, too if she hadn't noticed that most of their supplies were missing. And by the look on Tlen's face, she knew he'd noticed, too.

She wasn't sure what they would do. They hadn't gotten halfway over the mountains yet, or even to the peaks. As she laid there, with her back to Tlen, Serenity felt anger growing inside of her. She was mad that she had to be the Earth Keeper. She was mad that her friends and teacher had lied to her. And she was *especially* mad that Tlen had to bring her here. But not just that he'd brought her here. She was mad at him. There were things he wasn't telling her and she knew it. Some of the most important things were being kept secret from her. But she was stuck here. With *him*. And there was nothing she could do about it.

...

*Serenity...*

The voice was small but it interrupted Serenity's dreams. She wasn't awake, but conscious.

*Serenity...*

Now she could hear it clearly.

***SERENITY!!!***

Finally she pried her eyes open to see Tlen kneeling next to her on one knee with worry in his eyes.

"What?" Her voice came out more of a mumble than a word.

"Your face, your *skin*, it's turning blue!"

Now that he'd mentioned it, she was beginning to feel it. She pulled her hand out of her glove and touched her face. Her cheeks almost *burned* they were so cold. She could practically *feel* her blood beginning to freeze.

Panic swept through her. "How come *you're* not so cold?" she croaked.

"I can only guess, but I think it's because you're an Earth Keeper. You mentally feel the ground around you and it's frozen, do you start to freeze too."

"What? Then how do I `let go'?" Panic could be heard in her voice and her skin was only getting colder.

"I'm no expert, but I'd say concentrate on the ground somewhere else, where it's warmer."

Nodding Serenity pictured the only other ground she'd really seen that was completely thawed, back at Minnin. Then her thoughts went deeper. She began to feel the soft grass on her face. The richness of the soil on her bare feet. The warm sun embracing her as it gently touched the ground. She felt like she was actually there.

And suddenly, she began to feel *warm*. It started in her toes and spread all the way to the roots of the hair on her head. Serenity could feel her blood begin to rush, turning her cheeks to a rosy red.

She looked over at Tlen who was looking at her in amazement. "I have to be honest, I didn't think you would be able to do it. Earth Keeper children have to be schooled for years before they can actually do anything," he said, his jaw dropping.

Serenity wasn't sure if she had just been insulted or complemented. But she couldn't help but smile. "How did you know?"

"I didn't. It was just a guess. Besides, you'd be surprised about how much People know about Earth Keepers."

Then she lifted her gaze from Tlen to look around. The entrance they'd dug was completely covered. Now they were in a bubble of snow underneath who knows how much snow. It made Serenity feel kind of claustrophobic. So she sat up and said, "Well, shall we begin digging again?"

## 10 - Useen Rufuge

Their fingers frozen and wet from digging themselves out, Serenity and Tlen continued walking through the icy winds. The snow now reached their thighs, making walking *very* difficult. The slope of the mountain wasn't helping much, either.

They'd been walking for hours and had only reached a short distance. Serenity was starting to feel anger and frustration bubbling up again. Then, without warning, something hit her in the chest. She tumbled down the hill they had just climbed until she landed on an outcropping rock with a thud.

The air had been knocked from her body. She could barely move, but she managed to turn her head to see Tlen running down to help her. Even through the blowing snow, Serenity could see the worry and alarm on his face.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a shadow dart between the trees. But when she turned her head to see, Serenity saw several pairs of red glowing eyes, looking directly at her.

Tlen had reached her side and his oversized sword was drawn. He eyed the shadows carefully. "Just stay down and try not to get hurt."

*Too late*, she thought.

One of the shadows dared to dart out from its hiding spot and the rest followed. Fear gripped her heart with icy fingers.

*Wolves*. But not just any wolves. They were *Zarayne's* wolves. Completely controlled by him.

The wolves lunged at Tlen and he hit one square in the chest. It rolled backwards in the snow, dead. The rest turned their eyes from their fallen comrade and leapt for Tlen again, drool dripping from their teeth.

He swung his sword again in a wide arc, throwing two more to the ground. But one of the wolves was expecting this. It lunged underneath the flying sword and grabbed Tlen by the leg. He screamed in pain but grabbed a dagger from his other boot and thrust it deep in the wolf's skull. He kicked the wolf away from him.

*"Don't think you'll get away with this."*

Serenity couldn't believe her ears. The lead wolf was *talking*. But before she could wonder any longer, the wolves disappeared in the snow.

"Come on, we've got to get away from here." Tlen grabbed her hand and pulled her up.

This time up the mountains was slightly easier with their old tracks still fresh. Well, they weren't tracks so much as trenches.

Serenity's head was still spinning from her crash when they started walking again. She was finding it hard to stand, let alone walk. Wading through the deep snow was tiring her out even more.

"Can we please stop? *Please?*" Her legs were starting to wobble and the trees around her seemed to swirl with the wind.

Looking over his shoulder, Tlen said, "We're almost to a safe shelter I found a while back. It should be just up ahead. Can you last that long?"

"No," she grumbled and fell face first into the snow, more on purpose than anything else. "I'm not going anywhere," Serenity mumbled through the snow, but it sounded more like, "*Mm nt gnin mmywer.*"

"What?" Tlen couldn't help but smile.

Serenity lifted her head and said again, "I'm not going *anywhere.*"

"Well, right now we can't waste any time. Zarayne knows exactly where we are and could attack us at any moment. You can make it a few more miles"

Sarcastically she said, "Then you'll have to carry me."

So Tlen came over and picked her up.

"I didn't mean it!" Serenity laughed.

"Good, then you can walk."

"No! I don't want to walk!"

"Okay."

So the two went on, Serenity in Tlen's arms, wading through the snow while Serenity continued to complain sarcastically. She couldn't help but burst out in laughter.

Finally she gave up her useless complaints and asked, "So what's so safe about this place that Zarayne won't find us?"

"Oh, you'll see." A smug grin played across his face. "I hardly found it until I ran right into it."

Not understanding, Serenity just stayed quiet. Not more than half an hour later, Tlen stopped and put Serenity down. "We're here," he declared.

Serenity looked around to see what "here" was exactly.

Nothing but white could be seen through the wind. She continued looking in each direction until she turned back to Tlen, who was smiling at her. She notice his eyes seemed to blend in with the snowy background.

“Where?” she asked.

“Right there.” He waved a hand directly in front of them.

Serenity looked again. It was just as white as everything else.

Tlen walked over to where he'd pointed and motioned for Serenity to follow. Then he walked right up to the whiteness, and knocked on an unseen object.

And it *opened*. The whiteness opened up and a short hairy face poked out.

“Yes?” It asked gruffly.

“Toffan, it's me, Tlen.”

“Ah, yes! Come in, come in.” Just before the short fellow shut the door, he looked around outside cautiously.

As Serenity stepped inside, she realized it was a trading post. Furs hung on racks and food on shelves. Boots lay neatly on the floor while walking sticks aligned the wall. It seemed weird to her, to walk from snow into a warm cozy building. Now she understood what Tlen meant about running into it. You couldn't even tell it was there!

When the short man popped his head back inside, Serenity guessed he was a dwarf. He had to be. He had a long, thick beard hanging from his round face. His plump body only reached about four-and-a-half feet tall.

“So what can I do for you this time, Tlen?” his gruff voice asked.

“Well, this time it's under a bit more serious circumstances, Toffan,” Tlen replied.

“Oh boy, what did you do this time?”

“Toffan, I want you to meet Serenity, Fayrah's Earth Keeper.”

## 11 - Toffan the dwarf

Toffan's eyes opened wide in awe. "Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine meeting the Earth Keeper! And that she would be so beautiful, too!" Toffan took Serenity's hand and kissed it gently while her cheeks grew a crimson red with embarrassment. "Welcome to my humble home and dwarf trading post. Stay as long as you like, it will be an honor to have you here."

Tlen took over for her. "Thank you, good friend, but Zarayne is hot on our trail. We'll stay here for the night and be on our way in the morning."

"Oh that blood thirsty *wizard!* If I ever got my hands on him, I'd make his Wolf's blood spill all over this very floor!" Anger and hate fill the dwarf's eyes. Then, regaining his composure, he asked, "Would either of you like some tea?" And with that, he scurried off to a nearby room that Serenity suspected was the kitchen.

Tlen turned to Serenity. Puzzlement and confusion filled her face. He guessed she'd never seen a dwarf before or even guessed wizards existed. *Evil, filthy, vile creatures those wizards,* he thought. *Hopefully, she'll never have to meet one.*

"Care to take a seat?" Toffan poked his head out of the nearby room. "There's a table and chairs over there if you want to sit."

Serenity took up his offer and went to go sit in the undersized chairs. The table was also meant for shorter folk, so she moved her knees to the side so they wouldn't get stuck under the table.

Toffan came out of the kitchen carrying a pot of steaming liquid. He set it down on the wooden table and pulled out three cups from a cupboard, placing one in front of each of them.

"So, tell me, what makes me so special that I get a visit from the Earth Keeper?" Toffan inquired, raising one of his bushy eyebrows.

"Actually, under great danger. As you know, our former Earth Keeper, Alknahn, died after giving his Earth Keeper rights to his baby daughter. What you didn't know, is she was hiding on the planet Earth with an adoptive family to keep her safe from Zarayne. One of his minions was planning on capturing or killing Serenity, so I knew it was our turn to make a move."

Toffan looked thoughtfully over at Serenity. "Yes, our turn indeed." Then he snapped out of it and asked, "Hmm, I bet you're both famished after climbing that mountain, and you're not done yet. I have some beef cooking in the stove and it should be done by now. I'll go check."

Serenity knew there was something going on that she didn't know about. Secrets know by everyone, except her.

She would've continued to ponder, but Toffan interrupted her thoughts when he walked out of the kitchen with a big, juicy slab of meat on a plate.

“Ho, ho this looks like the best meat I've cooked all season! I'll go get the plates!” Toffan excitedly bounced off, leaving the Serenity and Tlen to smile after him.

...

The three of them stayed up late into the night listening to Toffan's stories and sharing some of their own. Laughter filled the small house.

“So there I was, just me, my ax, and this giant *bug* Zarayne had cooked up just for *me*! The thing looked quite a bit like his master, if ya don't mind me sayin' so!” Again, they were caught up in laughter.

“I once had an experience just like that,” Serenity said. “Only it was an actual *person*!”

And so it went on like this, deep into the night until Serenity's eyes started to droop.

Toffan led the two to a staircase leading into the earth. “Us dwarves fancy digging more than building, so the majority of the house is *beneath* the house,” Toffan explained for them.

They went down the stairs and found another table and chairs, except this one was bigger and longer than the last table. They turned left and found a cozy room with four cots lined along the walls.

“Here we are! It ain't much, but it's comfortable,” Toffan said as he left the room. “I'll leave this oil lamp on you in case you need to get up.”

“Thank you,” Serenity said as she put her traveling sack down on the ground and lay down. Memories of the wolves kept her awake, until she thought of how, even through the wind and snow, Tlen had carried her and how they'd both laughed. She was beginning to think she might not mind it here after all. These thoughts warmed her heart and she finally drifted off to sleep.

Tlen was just starting to fall asleep, when someone shook him awake.

“Young man, I think we need to talk.” Toffan stood above him, kicking him with the toe of his boot. Tlen crawled off the cot and stood up.

Toffan led Tlen to the other dining room with the oil lamp and sat down. “Take a seat.”

Tlen obeyed and sat down in the seat across from Toffan.

“She doesn't know, does she, Tlen?” Toffan's eyes bored into Tlen's own white ones.

“Well how can I tell her? She doesn't know enough about our world to understand.”

“Tlen, she needs to know. How much have you told her about yourself already? Nothing? Your past isn't that bad! *You're* not. But-“

“Look, how can I tell her? If she knew, she would probably hate me, and *then* how am I supposed to protect her?”

“You're not evil just because someone else's evil blood flows through your veins. You need to tell her, sooner rather than later.”

Tlen sighed and leaned back in his chair. He knew his friend was right. “Okay. I will tell her. But not for awhile yet, when she understands how this world works better.”

Toffan smiled. “Good. Then if we're finished here, *I'm* going to get my beauty rest.”

Tlen smiled. He was glad he had at least one friend her could trust.

## 12 - Wolves

The next morning, Toffan served Tlen and Serenity breakfast before they left. The wind had die down considerably and the snow wasn't falling anymore, despite the clouds that lingered above their heads. Serenity felt refreshed, better than she had in days. She walked outside in the crisp, cold air and waved goodbye to Toffan. After adjusting her pack on her back, she started following Tlen, who had already left a couple minutes ago.

The snow was still deep, but the going was easier without the wind blowing in their faces. Occasionally the sun could be seen poking through the dark clouds.

So far, the day had been uneventful. The only surprising thing that had happened was a squirrel tried to attack another squirrel, and in the process, fell off the tree and into the snow.

That was also the only sign of life they'd seen. Tlen was actually getting nervous that Zarayne's creatures hadn't shown themselves. Zarayne was defiantly cooking up something, but Tlen didn't have a clue as to what it might be.

Tlen would glance over his shoulder every now and then to see how Serenity was doing. She seemed much stronger than she had the other day. Maybe it was just because the snow and wind weren't there to sap her energy.

He also noticed just how pretty she was. He knew he couldn't get attached to her; it would only mean death for both of them, and Fayrah. But he couldn't stop his feelings. At least he could keep them from showing.

Serenity, on the other hand, was concentrating on her Earth Keeper power by slightly moving trees or lifting small, snow covered boulders. So far, she was succeeding, and this made her proud. She was glad she wasn't completely useless.

Tlen never noticed what she was doing. If he had, he would've stopped her. Because the next thing to move was the ear of a far off wolf with glowing red eyes.

The next stone Serenity picked up mentally, she tried throwing. It almost hit Tlen, but he sidestepped and caught it. He whirled around to face Serenity, his eyes wide.

“What are you *doing*? Zarayne can track us whenever you use your-”

He was interrupted by a series of howls, coming from every direction. Tlen grabbed Serenity's hand and ran as fast as he could. Serenity desperately tried to stay caught up, but stumbled. She cursed inwardly at herself for being so stupid. She knew Tlen had told her that already, and she'd threatened *both* their lives by forgetting.

The howls were closer now. *Much* closer.

Tlen and Serenity came up to a small cliff, but couldn't stop in time. Serenity hit Tlen hard in the back and the two went sprawling off the edge. Tlen was the first to fall through the layers of snow and hit the ground. Then Serenity, desperately trying not to scream and give away their position, fell on top of him.

When she rolled off and looked up, she noticed they were *deep* under the snow. If she stood up, the snow would still be at least three feet above her. She would have stayed and wondered why it was so deep here and not up there, but Tlen was urgently grabbing her hand.

"Start tunneling through the snow." The wolves would find them if they didn't try and cover up their tracks, so Serenity started digging while Tlen used snow to cover up the hole.

Feeling she was deep enough into the snow, Serenity dug a small hole, big enough for her and Tlen to sit in. Sitting down with her knees hugged to her chest, she watched as Tlen crawled in. He sat down next to her.

"I'm sorry. I...I..." She whispered. Serenity tried to find the right words but gave up. Tears filled her big, dark eyes as frustration and sadness filled her heart. Tlen looked at her with understanding in his white eyes. He put his arm around her reassuringly and pulled her closer.

Then they heard growls coming from above their heads. When they looked up, they could see the shadows of several wolves walking directly above them. It was a wonder that they didn't sink all the way through the snow into the small bubble in the snow.

The growls grew into howls and the shadows moved back and forth above them. Serenity leaned closer to Tlen, trying desperately to control her breathing while Tlen held her comfortingly. When Serenity closed her eyes, she could practically see the wolves tearing them apart, so she kept them open.

The two sat under the freezing snow while the shadows came and left. The wolves seemed to know where they were, but not enough to go tunneling through the snow and find them.

Hours seemed to tick by as fear continued to hold onto Serenity's heart. Tlen had his free hand on the handle of the dagger in his boot. Well, at least one of them.

Finally, after what seemed to be days, the wolves stopped pacing, lifted up their heads and bounded off in another direction. Letting out a breath Serenity didn't know she was holding, she realized how hungry she was. When she looked back up, she noticed how *dark* it was.

Tlen released his grip on both the dagger and Serenity's shoulder and reached for his pack instead. He pulled out enough food for both of them and gave half to Serenity. She ate it half-heartedly.

After they'd finished eating Tlen said, "We need to get out of here, the sooner the better. Those wolves will come back, but this time they'll have larger numbers. Besides, the sir can't get in here very easily."

So Tlen laid on his back with his knees in the air and started to dig upwards. Snow fell on his face but he kept digging. Serenity followed suit and started to dig too. A while later, they were able to kneel, then

squat, and then finally stand. The air by now was starting to get thin, making it hard to breath, let alone dig.

The snow still reached far above both their heads, so Tlen grabbed Serenity around the waist and lifted her up so she could dig higher. Finally she reached the outside air and climbed out carefully. Holding onto a nearby tree, Serenity pulled Tlen out.

Their legs sunk deep into the snow, making walking even more difficult than before. Getting a foot out of the snow was almost as difficult as bringing it forward.

After a few fruitless steps, Serenity sat down in the snow and said, "Why don't we dig beneath the snow. The wolves won't be able to see us and if another blizzard comes around, we'll be safe."

Tlen nodded. "The only thing I can't figure out is why / didn't think of that." Serenity smiled and trudged back to the hole they'd made when getting out of the snow. She half fell half jumped into the small opening. Tlen came crashing after her, almost falling directly on top of her.

So the two continued digging, but this time they dug sideways in the direction they'd been going before. Tlen went first, pushing through the wet, cold snow and making it easier for Serenity.

Progress was slow, but faster than traveling above the snow.

After digging and walking for about two hours into the night, Serenity tripped on a pile of snow and let out a little squeak. Tlen heard and turned around just as Serenity fell on top of him. The two fell to the ground, face to face. Serenity's cheeks burned crimson red and she hurriedly got off of him.

"I...uh...sorry...I...uh," Serenity stuttered. She could feel her cheeks glowing and knew they must stand out against the white snow.

Tlen got up after her and but his cheeks were about just as red as Serenity's. "It's okay...I...um...I." They both stood there, stuttering and embarrassed for a little while longer, until they started laughing. At first it was just an embarrassed laugh, then they started laughing at each other. Finally, they were lying on the ground laughing uncontrollably.

Once the last laugh had died down, Tlen suggested that they both get some rest before tomorrow. So they sat huddled together in their small cave and fell asleep.

## 13 - Secrets Revealed and Questions Answered

Serenity felt herself shaken awake. She blinked slowly and let out a moan. Light could be seen dancing above the layers snow. The sight would have been beautiful under different circumstances, but today it symbolized more weary traveling and digging with freezing fingers through the impossible snow.

When she looked to her right she saw Tlen's face looking down at her.

“Care for some food?”

Serenity gratefully took the meat from his hand and started chewing.

Tlen went rummaging through their packs with a worried look on his face. “Unfortunately, most of our food supply consisted of bread, and as you know, snow is wet. *All* of our bread is spoiled. The only thing we have left now is the dried meat.”

Serenity slowed her chewing as the words sunk in. They weren't even to the top of the mountain yet. How would they survive the rest of the journey? A wave of homesickness swept over her and she fought back the pressing tears. She wanted so badly to be back on Earth with her family. They would probably be enjoying pancakes right now with maple syrup and butter on top. Then an even more sickening thought crawled into her mind. What if her family was worried sick? They'd probably contacted the local news station and police office by now. They all probably thought she was dead or kidnapped.

She half smiled at that last thought. She was kind of kidnapped. She was taken here against her will and was being led to a place that for all she knew was Zarayne's palace.

“Where are we going?” It came out a bit harsher than Serenity had wanted it to.

Tlen looked at her. The inquiring look in his eyes couldn't be mistaken. “What?”

“After we cross the mountains, where are we going?” Serenity kept her eyes pasted on the wall of snow in front of her. If she looked at him, her courage would melt and she'd lose her confidence.

“Would it even matter if I told you? You don't know any cities or towns or forests, so why ask?”

“Because I need to know.” She could feel the resolve in her start to fade.

Tlen sighed. “Okay. It's not like I have anything to hide.” He felt the guilt creep into his heart. He was hiding everything from her. *Everything*. “There's an elven village where I have a few friends. Zarayne would never dare enter the sacred realm of the elves, so I'm going to keep you there as long as possible.”

Wow. A *real* elven village. Serenity was expecting him to say another dumpy town like Minnin. Then yet

another question came to mind.

“How do I know that I can trust you? I-I mean, I don't really *know* you,” stammered Serenity.

Tlen perked his head up and looked Serenity directly in the eye. A look of sadness passed over his face, but just as quickly as it appeared, it disappeared. He turned his head forward and sighed. He had to tell her now.

“Serenity, there's a lot you don't know about this place yet, so let me straighten out a few things. As you already know, people who are born with Wolf blood are mainly evil and their eyes are red. Zarayne also has Wolf blood and it-it allows him to do...*unnatural* things.”

Tlen took a deep breath before he continued. He didn't want to tell her, but he had made up his mind.

“Well, when you have Wolf blood, you have to make an extremely important decision when you turn ten. You have to choose whether you will use your Wolf blood to do evil or good. Zarayne makes sure all of them choose evil and they become his faithful minions, which is when their eyes turn red. Never has a recording of someone choosing good been made.”

Serenity listened carefully, not quite sure what this all had to do with Tlen, but she remained silent.

“Zarayne had a son. Of course, he had Wolf blood and when he turned ten, Zarayne did everything in his power to make his son turn to evil. The boy's mom wasn't evil and he loved her very much -“ Tlen's eyes looked pained and faraway. After taking another, shaky breath, he continued. “Zarayne's son chose good. His ey-eyes became white. Pure white.”

Serenity stared in disbelief. Tlen was Zarayne's son.

She could barely breathe. Just because he'd chosen good over evil didn't change the fact that he was Zarayne's *son*.

Tlen looked back at Tlen. His face was red and he looked like he was about to cry. “If you don't trust me, you have every reason not to.”

“Why are you protecting me?” Serenity's voice was barely a whisper.

“There was -is -a prophecy. It was written years ago, before anyone alive can remember, not even the elves. A young ranger stumbled upon it one day. It goes something like this:

When a wolf of white is born

His father gives birth to scorn

His life is forever in danger

Until the day he finds her

The lady living on distant reach

Found only by musical speech

She controls the green in Fayrah

And protected by the wolf of white

“Pretty much, it sums it all up. When I chose good over evil, everyone knew I was the wolf of white.” Tlen closed his white eyes. “But I cannot protect you if you are unwilling to except my guardianship.”

Serenity couldn't believe it. Was she really so important? This place was *very* strange. It made no sense. Questions flew freely around her head, a jumble of confusement and fear.

But out of all the questions came an answer. Serenity looked back up at Tlen, resolve reflecting in her eyes.

“You were born for this, as was I. If I was to refuse your guardianship, *both* of us would die.” She reached her hand out and rested it on his. “I will go with you.”

Something behind Tlen's eyes lit up as he looked at her. He knew there were mysteries that neither of them knew, but he was ready to uncover them with Serenity at his side. He gripped her hand firmly and pulled her to her feet.

“Then let's get moving.”

## 14 - Blood Red

The day had started out just as ordinary as any other for Serenity and Tlen. Well, as far as things go around Fayrah, yeah. The snow was slowly receding along their journey, and by midday it reached just above their ankles.

Serenity had been staring intently at her feet so she wouldn't trip and fall in the frozen snow. Besides, she was thinking. She was beginning to have mixed feelings about Tlen. She really liked him, and she didn't want to abandon him or runaway or anything. After all, hadn't it been *her* who agreed to let him protect her? Right? On the other hand, he *had* kept the secret from her this long. All she wanted to do was scream at him and pull her hair out in frustration. But somehow, she was able to keep her anger under control and inside.

Questions swam in head, buzzing around like bees. They were hardly visible long enough for her to grasp before it disappeared and the next one popped up. Why had she agreed to let him stay with her? Why had he kept his secret for so long? Why not just tell her? Why? Why? Why?!

But out of all the questions, one answer came up. *He's protecting me*, she thought. *Not just from Zarayne, but from himself.*

Serenity stopped walking and looked up. Tlen heard her stop and turned around. "Tlen, I-I'm sorry," she stammered. Tlen looked at her with questioning eyes.

"Why?"

"I-I don't know. For ever doubting you, I geuss. But, what I said earlier, I meant it. Please stay with me."

Tlen smiled and walked back to where she was standing. He took her hands in his. "Don't worry." He turned his head and looked around them. Serenity followed his gaze and noticed for the first time the beauty of the mountains.

Almost as far as the eye could see was white. Mountains surrounded them on all sides, save for a small gap ahead of them where green forest poked through. The glare of the snow on the mountains made her squint her eyes, but even so she could tell just how far they'd come.

Serenity looked back at Tlen who was smiling again at her. "Well, can't we sled down? What are we doing all this walking for?" she asked with a playful tone to her voice.

Tlen raised an eyebrow. "On what?"

Serenity smiled mischievously. "You're big enough."

Without warning, she pushed him down the steep slope. Laughing and screaming, they tumbled down

the hill. Finally they reached a small leveled area with Serenity under Tlen. The two smiled at each other. But as they looked into each other's eyes, their smiles faded. It was in that moment that Serenity realized she wanted to be with Tlen. If there was anyone that she could chose to protect her, it would be him. Tlen leaned his head closer to Serenity as she closed her eyes.

Something sharp dug into Tlen's back.

"Miss me? I sure *hope* not."

There was no way Serenity could forget that voice. It was the wolf. All around them wolves were packing in, much more than their first encounter. Tlen cursed inwardly for letting his guard down when he felt something soft brush against his side. Serenity was reaching for the dagger in his felt. He silently urged her on, doing the best to make contact with her eyes which were glued on the wolf's head.

"You owe me a kiss," she whispered to him. Despite their circumstance, Tlen smiled.

The wolf continued talking with its venomness voice "Maybe you should just run home to your momma, boy. That's all your good for anyway. Then I'll take the girl to where she's safe. *Truly* safe."

Then her hand found the hilt of the deadly knife. Her fingers wrapped around the cool leather. She closed her eyes shut for a moment, gathering all the courage she could muster. As fast as she possibly could, she drew the dagger and thrust it in between the wolf's eyes.

Blood dripped from the wound as the wolf yelped and staggered backwards. The blood mixed in with the color of his eyes, making it impossible to tell which was which. But he was still alive.

The wound Serenity had inflicted to the wolf gave Tlen just enough time to jump up and whip out his huge sword.

"You want her, come and get her!" he said through clenched teeth.

Serenity leapt to her feet, her fingers tightly clasping the bloody dagger. Her knees shook so hard they threatened to knock her over, but she continued to hold up the dagger menacingly.

Standing back to back, Tlen and Serenity turned slowly around. Then the first wolf jumped, followed by all the rest. The melee was on.

Tlen got the first two with his sword while Serenity kicked one hard in the chest. Another one came at the side and she managed to stab it in the neck. The fighting raged on until Serenity let her guard down, just once, but it was enough time for a wolf to grab her hair and pull her down. She screamed in pain and swung her arms wildly to prevent being attacked unaware. The wolf holding her hair was slowly pulling her backwards.

But she realized what was happening too late. As she watched Tlen slowly get smaller, Serenity began screaming, trying desperately to get her voice above the snarls of the wolves. The wolves were trying to get her far enough away from Tlen so that he wouldn't have a chance to save her or stop the wolves.

Serenity struggled to reach the wolf pulling her with her knife and managed to stab his paw, cementing him to the frozen ground. Tlen turned his head, almost costing him his life. A wolf jumped from the side, knocking him the ground. He grabbed a second dagger from his belt and thrust it into the wolf's skull.

Running, slashing, and shoving, Tlen fought desperately to get to Serenity's side. His eyes a mask of fury and hate, he stabbed any wolf that dared get in his way. Wolves flew every direction as Tlen's deadly blade sliced through them. Finally he reached where Serenity was being held.

The wolf holding her hair started chanting strange words that she couldn't understand and a light beneath her started to glow. Serenity's stomach rose to her throat. They were trying to make one of those portal things and take her straight to Zarayne! With the remaining courage Serenity possessed, she fought as hard as she could, but other wolves pinned her down.

Until two of them went flying. Tlen swung his sword again, causing another two to launch in the air. Serenity leapt to her feet and started kicking and slicing with the dagger at anything that moved. Finally, there was nothing left of the wolves but their bloody remains.

Serenity was shaking so hard her knees gave out beneath her. Tlen caught her in his arms and started walking in the direction they were headed.

"We'd better get out of here."

"I second that," Serenity mumbled from his arms.

Tlen smiled. "Nice job I don't think I've ever met a girl who's fought that well without passing out."

"Is that a complement? Oh, here's your dagger."

"You keep it. Trust me, I've got plenty more where that came from."

Serenity smiled as Tlen started walking again back down the mountainside.

## 15 - Doubts

There she was again. The lady with raven black hair and a pure white gown that flew in the unseen breeze. Her back was to him, but he knew who she was. She turned her head and smiled.

But her smile didn't last long. Her face contorted into an expression of absolute pain. She cried out for him to help her but he didn't move his feet. He couldn't. As much as he wanted to help her, he was cemented to the spot.

Red started to appear in different spots on her dress as her pain increased. She crumpled to the floor as the spots grew, turning her once white gown blood red. He started feeling a hate and anger against the girl that wasn't his own.

Then, out of the darkness came a man dressed in black with grey hair that had once been black.

“You have done well, my son.”

Tlen shot straight up, breaking the nightmares hold. Cold sweat ran down his back and his forehead. He'd been having the dream for a while now, and he knew what it was.

It was what would happen if he were to fail. If he were to let Zarayne take control over his mind. If he were to let Zarayne kill Serenity and claim Fayrah as his own.

It was too much. Tlen knew that it wouldn't happen if he was careful. But that only brought back memories from the other day. Thoughts of how he failed to completely protect Serenity. Thoughts of the *wolves*.

He'd let his guard down and Zarayne took his chance.

Zarayne. Scenes of the dream flashed through Tlen's mind. Scenes of Serenity on the ground bleeding from a dozen wounds. And with it came the sudden urge to protect her more than ever before surged through his body and mind.

But at the same time, knew he was falling into a dangerous zone. A place where he could not risk being. That place was love.

In other words, Tlen was having doubts. He wanted so badly to protect Serenity and to be with her, but a voice at the back of his mind told him likewise. Love was a dangerous position to be in. At least, for them. If they did fall in love and followed their feelings then one or both of them would end up dead. He wanted to just leave her once they got to the Elven village. But it was his destiny to protect her, just as it was her destiny to be the Earth-Keeper.

Tlen looked over to his right where Serenity was sleeping peacefully. Lying back down on the cold

ground, Tlen stared at the brightening sky. They had made it to the edge of the forest, but the ground was still frozen.

It had been two days since their encounter with the wolves and Zarayne hadn't made his next move yet. Yet.

By now the sun was just beginning to peek over the top of the faraway eastern trees, casting rays of gold across the tree tops. It was almost time to get Serenity up and get a move on. Tlen looked back at her sleeping form and quickly looked away. Standing up he moved to the small sparks of their smoldering fire and kicked dirt on it. It hissed as it doused the remaining coals. The sound awakened Serenity as she slowly got up.

“Good morning,” she mumbled through tired lips. Raising her eyebrows she sniffed her shoulder. “Woo! I think I could use a bath.” Tlen looked over at her and tried hard not to laugh.

“What? What's so funny?”

Through stifled giggles Tlen managed to say, “I didn't think your hair always looked like that when you got up.”

“Oh boy, is it that bad?”

Tlen nodded.

“Do you have a comb I could borrow?”

“Nope. Here, you can tie it back with this.” He handed her a length of leather and she quickly tied it behind her head.

“So what's for breakfast?”

...

Fifteen minutes later the two were walking through the thick forest. The trees crowded in close together but the ground was carpeted in a thick layer of pine needles, making the going much easier.

Serenity had been feeling funny ever since they entered the woodland, and she sensed that Tlen did too. This resulted in no conversation at all.

As they ventured deeper into the forest, Serenity felt a strange wind blow. She swore she could hear voices whispering as it passed by her ears. The wind tugged at her hair and her dress but when she looked around, nothing else was moving. She turned her head in Tlen's direction. The only movement she could see was his hat bouncing up and down as he walked.

Suddenly extremely creeped out, Serenity picked up her pace until she was almost touching Tlen's back.

*Whooo aaaaree yooooou....*

Now she knew she was going insane. The wind *was* talking to her. But out of an impulse that wasn't her own, Serenity answered, *I am Serenity of Earth*. Suddenly she could feel every single tree in the forest as if it were trying to pull her in different directions. She closed her eyes and watched as trees rushed past her, taking her somewhere different.

*You have come against your will to a sacred realm...*

The wind rushed harder, pulling at her until she had to come to a stop. Her eyes were still closed but trees were zooming by in every direction. Then everything stopped in a blazing flash of light.

The light still lingered as Serenity opened her eyes. Out of the blaze came men armed with bows and arrows. They gracefully but effectively surrounded the two travelers, pushing them into a small circle. Serenity's feet wobbled and she felt dizzy as she realized that these were elves. Then everything went black.