

A NEW BEGINNING

Galatyne Knightwyng

During a war that draws humans and elves into a tenuous alliance against a demon host, Falana meets Galatyne, loses her home, and finds a new purpose.

The morning sun slid over the rim of the dale, brightening the heavy mist that enshrouded the valley floor below, and glinted coldly off the armour of the elven outrider that scouted along the western ridge on her white charger. Light brown hair flowed out from under the hood of a blue cloak that was pushed back to reveal a finely wrought breastplate emblazoned with a flaming sword through a crown. Her left hand rested on the hilt of a slim longsword with a casual familiarity that comes only with the confidence and discipline of a blademaster.

For her part, Falana Raesaenen, first lieutenant of the Elven Home Guard, felt anything but confident. In just a few short days, the elven army would meet in battle with a horde of demon-spawn pouring down out of the north. Fighting beside the Elves would be the knights of the church of Lyfaye, which, until recently, had declared all non-human races as infidels and heretics. And it was here, in the quiet valley below her, that these three powers were to meet. For this quiet valley was the gateway to the south, and if the dark army were not stopped here, all the lands beyond could fall prey to the Shadow stirring in the North. . . .

Falana's reverie was cut short by the blaring of a horn to the east. She looked up to the far rim of the valley although she knew she would see nothing. The elven army would be making camp after marching through most of the night. They were still wary of the church and had wanted to arrive on the field first. The horn was calling back the outriders to report their findings to their commanders. Falana decided to complete her circuit of the valley before rejoining the army.

It was midmorning before Falana rode into the elven encampment to the southeast of the valley she had scouted. She rode directly to the large blue and gold tent belonging to the captain of the Home Guard. The two elves standing guard outside nodded in greeting as she pushed aside the tent flaps and stepped into the surprisingly well lit interior. One side of the tent was curtained off for use as private sleeping quarters. The rest was orderly and comfortable, if sparsely furnished. The floor was covered with a well worn rug depicting the Home Guard's charge in blue and gold, a flaming sword through a crown. In the center of the rug stood a simple, but sizeable, oaken desk fronted by two wooden chairs for guests. A trunk and a scroll laden shelf occupied the left wall. The lighting was provided by magically charmed globes resting on the desk and hanging from the tent roof.

In a high backed chair behind the desk sat the captain of the Home Guard, head down as she scanned the map spread out on the desk in front of her. Long, blonde hair cascaded down over armoured shoulders and spilled onto the desk.

"Hello mother," Falana said as she dropped into one of the chairs facing the desk.

Laurissa Raesaenen looked up at her daughter, "You're late."

"I was nearly to the far side of the valley when I heard the horn. I figured I might as well make a complete circle while I was there."

Her mother nodded, "Good thinking. Did you find anything?"

"No. No sign of the dark host or the church army."

"Good. We should have a day to rest before the western knights arrive and another day or two to prepare to meet the horde." Laurissa stood and walked around the desk towards the opening of the tent. "Before that happens though, there is something we need to talk about."

"Oh?" Falana followed her mother with her eyes.

Reaching the doorway, her mother pushed back a tent flap. "Dismissed," she said to the guards outside. "Return to your posts in one hour."

The guards left without a sound and Laurissa turned back to face Falana, drawing the tent flap closed behind her. "There is something you should know before we go into battle."

"What?" Something about her mother's tone bothered Falana. She was worried, and nothing ever worried the Home Guard's captain.

Laurissa sat back down behind the desk. "Soon, a battle will take place in the vale you scouted"

"I know that mother. What --"

Laurissa raised a hand, "It will not be the battle upon that field that will matter," she said. "Another battle will be waged there at the same time. . . . A battle of the spirit will be fought beyond the sight of men."

Falana frowned, "I don't understand, mother. What are you talking about? A battle of the spirit?"

"Falana, you are familiar with the Blaizes, are you not?"

"Of course. They are elves who seek out individuals who are strong in the Light and ward them. But what does that have to do with. . . . You? You are a Blaize?"

Laurissa nodded her head slowly.

"Mother -- I didn't know --"

Laurissa smiled sadly, "You were never meant to, dear one. Often the family does not know -- it is hard on them, for they worry. And I knew you -- you would try to help me, and I would not place you at risk."

Falana could not help but feel a little hurt at being left out of this important part of her mother's life. Being a Blaize was one of the highest honors that could be bestowed on an Elf. "You're right, I would have helped. You should have let me. . . ."

"No, Falana. You had to be allowed to train unburdened by concerns for me, for it is now that you shall be needed."

Falana looked at her mother and saw in her eyes a light she had not noticed before. She did not trust herself to speak and so waited for her mother to continue.

"I do not know the specifics of what will happen on the field when the battle comes. . . . But I do know that I may have to sacrifice myself to see my duty done. If that should be the case, you will be my successor and become a Blaize -- if you are willing."

"Of course I am willing. You need never have asked."

Laurissa smiled, "I thought as much, but I had to ask. One must become a Blaize of one's own free will, and if I fall fulfilling my charge, I fear that the Light will be in peril if someone is not there to follow me immediately. I wanted you to be prepared to do so should the need arise."

Falana nodded, "I am ready, and I will be there should the need arise."

Laurissa reached out and squeezed Falana's hand, "Thank you daughter. You should go and rest now. Come have dinner with me later."

Falana stood and gave her mother a hug. "I shall," she said. Then she turned and stepped out of the tent into the bright morning sun.

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Less than a days march west of the elven encampment, another army was riding hard toward the valley Falana had scouted -- a host of armoured knights. And they bore before them the standard of the Lyfeian Church. . . .

It was late evening when the Lyfeian Knights set up camp at the southwest end of the valley and sent to the elves an emissary -- one Galahalt WhiteWyng, captain of the Shadow Knights, an elite company of knights that seemed to be blessed by Lyfaye Herself and had, on more than one occasion, single-handedly brought low the forces of darkness. Soon after his departure, Shadow Knights began to slip, unnoticed, out of the camp and up into the forested slopes to the north. . . .

Galahalt rode his white charger through the elven encampment to the area set aside for the Home Guard, and dismounted in front of the tent of the captain.

"Galahalt WhiteWyng to see Captain Raesaenen," he said to the guards outside the tent.

"You are expected," replied one of the guards. "Go on in, your mount will be well here."

"Thank you." Galahalt patted his horse's neck and stepped inside the tent.

Laurissa rose from her seat behind the desk. "Gal, it is good to see you. How was your journey? Uneventful I hope."

"It was, fortunately, for we had little time to waste on delays." He clasped the hand Laurissa extended to him in greeting, then kissed it gently. "How go the preparations here?"

"As well as can be hoped." Laurissa returned to her seat, and Galahalt sat in one of the chairs across from her. "Everyone is still mistrustful of the Church, Gal. This isn't going to be easy."

"No, beginnings never are. I must admit I was surprised at the Church's change of heart myself. Perhaps there is hope for our two peoples after all."

"No Gal, we are one people, we just need to re-learn it."

Galahalt smiled, "That we are, Laurissa, that we are." He stood then and moved toward the door. "Well I should go. I just wanted to stop by and say hello."

"You were ordered to, you mean," Laurissa said with a grin.

"I would have come anyway." Galahalt winked at her then stepped out into the night.

Galahalt rode west, back towards the Lyfeian camp. But he did not enter the encampment. Instead, he turned and rode north, up into the woods. Soon, he reached a clearing about which stood shadowy figures dressed in armour. Galahalt dismounted and walked the final few yards to the edge of the trees. As he entered the clearing, swords cleared every sheath with a faint ring. The blades were inverted, and as one, planted point down in the earth about the perimeter of the clearing. The knights then entered the circle and stood in the starlight, facing their captain.

Galahalt looked around the circle at each of them before saying, "My fellow Shadow Knights, I have called you here this night because the next day or so will see me in preparation with the heads

of our order and the elven commanders, and I would speak with you as a group one last time before the coming battle."

Around the circle of knights, heads nodded, but not a word was spoken, and Galahalt continued, "We will be entering into a battle against the Darkness alongside the elves. I know you have faced evil countless times before, and I know I need not stress the importance of our victory over the Dark Ones, but there are other issues here as well.

"This will be the first time since the wars of the races that faery and human have come together as one to defeat a common foe. If we are successful here, and we must be, this relationship may grow and heal the wound that has kept us apart. I believe that all the races must be as one in order for the Light to flourish."

Around the circle, heads nodded in silence again.

"This brings me to my next concern. As you know, the Lyfeian Church has long condemned the faery races as unnatural and thus of the Darkness. I do not know the reason for their change of heart, but I must believe in it, for if hope dies, then all shall be lost. Yet I must also be wary, and so I caution you. . . . All may not be as it seems. It may come to pass during the course of the battle that you must choose between the orders of the Church and those things that I have taught you. You all know the importance of this battle, and you all know the penalty for disobeying a direct order from the Church is death. You must follow your own heart. I know my path, but I will not require others to follow it, for it is a dead end unless it is traveled willingly."

Only silence was returned to him from the circle of knights.

"Dismissed. Return to the camp before dawn. The Light go with you all."

As one, the knights turned, retrieved their swords, and, though they were dressed in full armour, disappeared into the woods without a sound. Galahalt knelt in the clearing then, head bowed. A soft blue glow that did not come from the starlight surrounded his form. He remained that way for a time, then he rose and the glow faded.

"Captain?" came a voice from the darkness of the woods behind him.

"Yes, Kieran," Galahalt replied without turning to see who the speaker was.

"You have taught us well. The Darkness will not triumph."

Galahalt smiled, "No, Kieran, I do not think that it shall."

For a moment there was nothing but silence.

"Good night, Captain."

"Good night, Kieran."

* * *

The next day was indeed spent in preparation for the battle. Strategies were laid and plans were drawn. The commanders of both armies instructed each other on their capabilities and preferred tactics. The Lyfeian Knights began the construction of catapults and ballistae at the southern end of the valley, while the elves installed blinds and light fortifications along the rim of the pass from the north.

Late that evening, an elven outrider returned with news of the approach of the Dark Host. They would arrive at the north end of the valley on the morning after next, and they numbered about seventy-thousand, just more than triple the combined elf-human forces. But their troops, horrible and evil as they were, would be undisciplined at best, and most would be little better than

animals. In addition, the commanders of the elves and the Lyfeians hoped to use the narrow mouth of the valley to its fullest advantage.

Preparations continued in earnest the next day. Only one catapult and two ballistae were completed by the Lyfeians, but they would have to suffice. If the northern pass was lost, they would be used to cover any retreat out of the valley through the southern pass, which was nearly as narrow. Then they would hammer the rear ranks of the opposing army while the front was engaged within the pass. Consideration had been given to using the siege engines at the northern pass, but the risk of them falling into enemy hands in the event of a retreat was too great -- they would remain at the southern pass, where none would leave except in victory.

The floor of the valley was mined with covered pitfalls, except for a straight path down the center, between the two passes, along which the elves and knights could fall back to the second position with ease, and along which was aimed the two ballistae that were set part way up the walls of the southern pass, behind sheltering boulders.

Evening found warriors, elven and human alike, polishing armour and sharpening weapons -- activities that lent purpose to nervous hands. The fires were kept high that night, both to aid in security and to drive back the darkness that served as a reminder of the much more deadly Darkness just to the north.

Two units, however, did not spend the night with their respective camps. The Home Guard spread out along the rim of the valley. Each warrior carried a horn so that they might warn of an approaching enemy. The Shadow Knights camped within the valley itself, nearly at the north end. They were only one hundred strong, but where they rested, the darkness did not seem so deep. Neither unit slept much that night, but neither did the forces of darkness venture too close.

The first light of dawn found the Lyfeians and the elves arrayed just inside the northern entrance to the valley. The first line of defence was a phalanx of Lyfeians and elves, just inside the pass, armed with 9' to 12' pikes. The nimble elves held the center, with the heavily armoured Lyfeian knights forming virtually indestructible barriers on the flanks. Along the cliffs were ranged elven archers, ready to rain death down upon the dark host as it attempted to breach the wall of pikes. Behind and to either side of the pike wall, reserve units waited to fill any breaches in the line. The Shadow Knights and the elven Home Guard stood mounted and ready, to drive the enemy back into the pass should the phalanx collapse. Further back yet, were additional units of Lyfeian Knights. In the event of a fall back to the southern pass, they could hammer the front ranks of the advancing enemy in waves, until they drew within range of the siege engines.

Thus arrayed they waited. And they did not wait long. Soon, a chilling wail, as of thousands of tortured souls crying out in agony, rose from beyond the northern end of the pass. In the valley, pikes raised, hands tightened on sword hilts, and arrows were nocked on bow strings. The wail continued, growing louder. And then, at the far end of the pass, the Dark host appeared.

At first it seemed nothing more than a rolling, black mass. But as it drew closer, the true horror of its nature became apparent. Everywhere was nothing but claws and fangs and glowing coals for eyes. Gaping maws opened to emit howling screams, and malformed limbs groped and clawed their grotesque bearers along at a frighteningly rapid pace. Hatred rolled outward from the horde in a tangible wave that swept over the elves and Lyfeians, turning the blood to ice; but not a one stirred from their positions.

As the demon tide surged through the pass, arrows rained from the cliffs above, felling hundreds before they even reach the phalanx at the other end. But many others were struck and did

not fall, for they were protected by tough hides and armour-like exoskeletons. Yet others were pierced like pincushions but did not even falter in their steps.

With a roar, the horde crashed into the phalanx, teeth and claws flashing like blades. But few found their marks through the forest of pikes, and the line held. The press was nearly overwhelming though. Soon the bodies of the demon-spawn began to pile up in front of the phalanx, and the line was forced to retreat as the monsters climbed over the bodies of their brethren to leap upon the stalwart defenders. Arrows continued raining death into the pass, but the stream of demons did not end, and for each one felled two more took its place. It was only the narrowness of the pass that kept the defenders from being utterly overwhelmed.

The elves and Lyfeians had thus far lost very few, but they were pushed nearly to the mouth of the pass. There they would hold as long as they could, for if they retreated further, the dark masses could slip around and flank them.

For a while it looked as if they would be successful, for the horde could not budge them. But then the sky to the north grew dark. At the north end of the pass, the sea of demons parted, and a wall of blackness rolled into the defile. At its head rode a company of dark knights on gaunt, black horses. They stirred no air in their wake, but where their horses trod, the path was burnt and blackened. They were cased entirely in black steel with points of red light staring out from behind demonic helms. They bore serrated swords and spiked maces that dripped a green, venomous ichor. Their leader wore a horned helm and wielded a sword that glowed red in the darkness. Thunder rumbled, and were they passed night closed in and lightning raked the cliffs, striking down the elven archers stationed there.

As the dark company drew near the front lines of the battle, their commander raised his hand, and red fire leapt from his palm and lanced through the demons, who burst into flames, to strike full upon the defenders' line. Men and elves screamed in agony, and the center of the phalanx collapsed. Demons, shrieking in glee, poured into the breach.

But as soon as the lightning struck, Galahalt had put his unit in motion, and when the phalanx collapsed, they were there -- driving the demons back through the breach. Then he heard the Lyfeian horn sounding "fall back", and he looked over his shoulder to see the armoured knights of the church riding to the south. On the flanks of the phalanx, the Lyfeian warriors were pulling out. He could not believe it. . . . *"They were leaving. . . leaving the elves to be butchered. The enemy had taken heavy losses, and the Lyfeians believed they could finish them alone at the southern pass -- and be rid of the elves in the process, for they would not retreat; could not at the moment."* And indeed they could not, for the demons were pressing at the weakened flanks, threatening to surround the elves at the mouth of the pass.

The elves were still holding the line, but Galahalt knew that it would not stand up long under the press of demon-spawn and the fire of the Dark Knight. As if in confirmation another jet of flame lanced into the elven line, this time on the left flank, nearly obliterating it. But Laurissa was there, the Home Guard around her, driving into the breach. *"They would not last,"* thought Galahalt and looked around for something, anything. Kieran was next to him, and all about him the Shadow Knights watched their comrades depart but fought on. Galahalt raised his battle horn to his lips and blew a "rally and charge" and spurred his mount strait towards the company of dark knights. The Shadow Knights followed. . . every one.

About them, demons fell like wheat. Once, a bolt of fire lanced out at them, but Galahalt raised his hand and it flew harmlessly off to the side, burning demons in its wake. Soon the Shadow Knights found themselves in a clearing amidst the demon horde. Not a one had fallen. Before them waited the company of dark knights. Both sides stopped and stood still, measuring each other

silently. Then another group thundered into the calm -- the Home Guard, with Laurissa at its head. Galahalt's eyes met Laurissa's, and he wished he could go back to a past meeting and speak to her what was in his heart. A moment was all he needed, but a moment they did not have. They saluted each other, then turned and led their units in a charge toward the dark company.

The dark company responded with a charge of its own, and the two sides clashed with the force of a thundercrack. The Shadow Knights glowed with a blue light as they scythed into the dark knights, and the blackness surrounding them fell away. Blades edged in blue fire cleaved armour and bone. Demon-fire engulfed the Shadow Knights, but the light shielded them from its touch, and they did not falter.

The Home Guard, too, drove hard into the demon-knights, dealing death with their nimble mounts and quick, deft blades. They danced around the heavily armoured knights, slipping their elf-made blades through gaps in armour.

But for all the prowess and skill and faith of the Home Guard and Shadow Knights, the poisoned blades of the dark-knights were taking their toll; not to mention the demon-fire of their captain, against which the elves had no protection. By the time Galahalt reached the Dark Lord, only a handful of Shadow Knights remained, and they were buying him the time to finish this with their lives. To his left the elves fared little better. Only a handful of the Home Guard remained, and he could not see Laurissa among them. He scanned the battlefield quickly, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but then the Dark Lord was before him, and he drove all else from his mind.

"Come, Galahalt," the knight rasped from beneath his demonic helm, "Come and we shall finish this. You and I."

"That was ever my intent, Mastema" Galahalt replied simply and stepped up to meet him, sword at the ready.

Galahalt closed with the Dark Knight, and their blows rang out above the sounds of the battle around them, and fire flashed from their blades whenever they connected. Neither one seemed able to gain the advantage although both were battered and worn.

Suddenly the Dark Lord stepped back. "Enough of these games, Galahalt. Let us see how you fare on *my* ground." And he waved a gauntleted hand, and the air shimmered.

Kieran saw a mist closing about his captain and Mastema. He dispatched a demon and leapt into the swirling vapors. Laurissa and Falana appeared out of the press of bodies and followed, not a dozen steps behind. . . and then the mist was gone and and they with it. . . .

Everything went black, and Galahalt felt himself falling. He reached out. . . and felt a hand. He grasped it, and light returned to his eyes, and Kieran stood before him clasping his forearm. Behind him, Laurissa and one so like her that it could only be her daughter, fought back demons that were trying to reach him from behind. They were no longer in the valley. All about was blasted rock and fire. Mastema had brought Galahalt to *his* plane, *his* center of power.

"I see your friends managed to stay by you, Galahalt," the Dark Lord bellowed. "It is no matter, they will die as shall you, and I will torture their souls for eternity."

Galahalt, pulled himself up without a word and faced off once more against Mastema. Again blows rained back and forth amidst showers of red and blue fire, but here the Dark Lord had more power, and Galahalt felt the strength draining from his battered body. He stumbled once, but Kieran was there to catch him. As they touched briefly, a spark leaped between them, and then Kieran was gone amidst the press of demons, and Galahalt fought on alone.

Kieran saw his captain battling the Dark Lord and knew that something more than the valley was at stake here. He had to buy Galahalt time. . . somehow. . . but he could barely swing his own sword. He glanced over his shoulder. . . . His captain needed more time, but Kieran was out of strength. As his sword slipped from his grasp, he prayed to Lyfaye to ward his captain. . . . Then the demons closed in. Suddenly, it felt as if his blood were on fire. Kieran doubled over in agony and then leaped upright, his eyes glowing with a blue-white light. Blue flames poured out from his hands, melting his gauntlets. The fire raked across the demon horde, and where it touched, nothing but ash remained. But even with his new found power, Kieran knew it was only a matter of time. The demons were too many. . . . sooner or later one would slip past the fire. And then the young elfess was beside him, weaving a barrier with her slim blade, and the gaps were closed.

Behind Kieran, the fight raged on. But this was Mastema's realm, and here his might was great indeed. Galahalt was slowly weakening, his blows falling lighter, his parries coming slower, until finally, Mastema's blade slipped past his guard and connected fully, caving in his breastplate. Galahalt dropped to the ground, gasping for breath, blood flecking his lips. He saw the Dark Knight towering over him, blade descending in a slow arc and a gleam of joy in his eyes. He tried to raise his blade but could not.

And then Laurissa was between them. Her blade came up to meet the Dark Lord's. They clashed, red fire flared, and Laurissa's blade shattered. Mastema's sword bit deep into her shoulder and she crumpled.

Now Galahalt did raise his sword and pulled himself to his knees over Laurissa's fallen form.

The Dark Lord laughed, "Now you shall die, mighty Galahalt, and your toy elf will be mine, to do with as I please, for eternity!"

Galahalt struggled to rise, but a hand tugged at his arm. He looked down and Laurissa's eyes were open and upon him. "Not the sword, love," she whispered, "you need not the sword. Look to your student."

A flash of blue light off to the side caught Galahalt's eye then, and he glanced over to see Kieran, weaponless, holding back the horde of demons with blue fire that poured out from scorched gauntlets. Beside him, Falana dispatched any that slipped past the purifying flames, dancing here and there almost faster than the eye could follow, her feet barely touching the ground. Galahalt looked back at Laurissa and she smiled weakly. He looked up Mastema. Again the blade was descending.

With his left hand, Galahalt held tight to the elf captain, and with his right he reached up and caught the blade. The force of the blow shattered his arm, but he held on and reached deep down inside and pulled up the power that had always lain there, placed within his breast by Lyfaye. His eyes glowed blue, and blue flames snaked up the blade from Galahalt's hand and wrapped around the Dark Lord. Mastema screamed in agony and tried to push away the searing fire with his own crimson flames, but they flickered and died. Mastema was consumed in a pillar of blue fire that seared away flesh rotted by evil and burned the impurities from his soul. When the flames died, not a trace of the Dark Lord remained.

Galahalt looked down at Laurissa, and their eyes closed together. . . .

Kieran and Falana saw what passed behind them and tears streamed down their faces, but they fought on, drawing strength from each other. Suddenly, thunder rumbled, and blue fire rained down from the sky. Demons screamed and erupted into flames. Blue lightning flashed and fiends were turned to ash where they stood.

The storm ended as quickly as it had begun, and as it passed, the blasted rock and red fires faded to be replaced with a wooded glade. In the center lay the bodies of Galahalt and Laurissa, his across hers in a protective embrace.

Kieran and Falana walked slowly over. Kieran stopped when he was yet several yards away, but Falana rushed to her mother's side and wept bitterly. Kieran recognized this glade. . . . It was the same clearing in which Galahalt had spoken with the Shadow Knights. . . .

"Kieran. . ." came a voice behind the young knight.

Kieran turned and saw, just inside the trees, an armoured figure swathed in a faint, blue-white nimbus. It was Galahalt. "Captain?" Kieran asked and glanced back to where his captain's body still lay.

"Yes, Kieran. It is I."

Kieran walked toward Galahalt. "But. . . You're. . . I saw you. . ." and he pointed over his shoulder to the bodies in the clearing.

Galahalt smiled softly. "I am, and I'm not, Kieran. I have passed from this world, but I am not destroyed. Mastema sought to prevent me from moving on, to bind my soul, because he knew what I would become if I left this world. . . . He may have succeeded had it not been for the three of you. Now, I serve our Lady, Lyfaye, still, but in a different way, and I have come to tell you that you too are called to serve."

Kieran was visibly shaken and could hardly speak, "I. . . I do not understand. What do you mean? Called?"

Again, Galahalt smiled. "Kieran, you are the last of the Shadow Knights, and yet you are the first. You are the beginning of a new order. You bear within you the power that I discovered at my death. Lyfaye has chosen you, and others like you to bear Her Light here. From this moment on, you shall be known as Galatyne KnightWyng. You are the Light of Lyfaye, and you will walk in the Shadow that it may be banished. Know that She resides within your breast and wards you from the Darkness."

Kieran stood silently, eyes focused on his captain.

Galahalt continued, "I must go now, Galatyne. Thou hast done well. I do not think the Darkness will triumph. . ." He smiled then and slowly faded from the glen.

Kieran/Galatyne turned, eyes bright with tears, and saw Falana lying unmoving across her mother's body. He walked to her and knelt at her side. For the first time he noticed that she was covered with wounds, her armour nothing but shreds of metal. She was pallid and her breathing was ragged and shallow. He reached out and touched her face, yet wet with tears. Instantly, colour filled her cheeks and the blood ceased flowing from her wounds, and she slept. He lifted her gently in his arms and walked into the forest. Behind him the bodies of Galahalt and Laurissa glowed momentarily with a soft, blue-white light, then vanished.

Galatyne had not gone far when he heard a soft whicker from up ahead. He paused and saw a riderless horse coming towards him. He stared at it in disbelief -- it was his horse. It trotted up to him, stopped, and shook its head once. Galatyne shrugged and pulled himself and Falana into the saddle, cradling her gently in his arms. It was then that he noticed the swords on either side of the saddle. One was his, but the other, nearly identical, was scorched black as if it had passed through a great fire -- black except for a sliver of bright silver on the pommel. Galatyne knew without looking whose sword it was -- Galahalt's. He nodded in acceptance. "I will wield it for thee captain," he whispered then nudged his mount to a gentle walk.

Only minutes later, Galatyne crested a ridge and looked down onto the valley he had so recently left. After Mastema's demise, the Dark Host had lost its binding force and was now fleeing north. Elves and Lyfeians were giving chase -- apparently many of the knights had turned back at Galahalt's horn. At the southern end of the valley though, the Lyfeian commanders were waiting. . . . They would not be pleased. Galatyne shook his head sadly and turned his horse south, towards lands he did not know. . . .

* * *

Falana stood in a clearing in a wood by a crystal clear brook. Her mother stood in front of her holding her hand. . . .

"I am proud of you, my daughter," she said, eyes bright with love. "You have done well this day. You are a wyvern in battle and others shall come to know you as the WyvernStryke."

Tears filled Falana's eyes. "Mother, I would come with you. . . ."

Laurissa smiled. "No, my daughter. My task is complete, but your work has just begun. There is one who needs you. He is strong, but he needs you nonetheless. He cannot watch everywhere at once and his goal will blind him at times. You must be there to see what he does not, to steady and support him. You are now a Blaize."

Falana trembled. "I know, mother, but. . . ."

"We will meet again, my daughter. Never doubt that. But you must return now," and she kissed Falana upon the cheek and turned to where an armoured knight awaited her across the stream.

"I love you, mother," Falana whispered as they parted.

Across the stream, Laurissa turned once more. "I know, and I shall always love you." She waved and then took the knight's offered arm. Then, the two together walked into the wood and faded from sight. . . .

* * *

Falana awoke to find herself held gently in armoured arms on the back of a horse. She looked up, and her eyes met those of Galatyne. She smiled and closed her eyes again. . . .