

## Chapter 1 CLARA'S FOLLY

Clara walked wearily down the path yet again. She was very much on the alert, as Pastor Brenner had had a premonition that something evil was going to happen tonight. He was rarely wrong. Tal, the One, was certainly with him. She had seen it time and time again. The Aphel-Dor savages would be the most likely reason for his apprehension, but the Ky'Leen-Mer, the forest rangers that passed through last week, told her that the barbarians were far to the north at this time. But if not them, then who?

The full-length chain mail she wore was heavy. Although her training as a protector usually inured her to the weight, she was more used to wearing it while mounted on a horse. Tonight she walked on foot, and it was taking its toll. As she passed the village cemetery a few miles from town, she sought out the familiar tree stump and decided to sit on it for a few minutes before she resumed her patrol.

Despite taking a break, she was careful not to drop her guard. She leaned her three-foot-long mace upright against the stump, with the tether still attached to her wrist. She positioned her hand so she need only close her fingers to grab it. Her blue shield, emblazoned with a crown, a tree, and a lamb, remained on her left arm. She continuously scanned the area and listened intently.

Total silence. Not even the crickets and frogs made their familiar chirps. It was never that quiet; something's wrong. Metallic slamming suddenly broke the unnatural silence. To Clara, it sounded like a dozen swords being dropped into a pile at once. Grabbing her mace and jumping to her feet, she forgot her fatigue. The sound came from the north, and was probably the cemetery gate. As silently as her armor would allow, she approached the gate. It was open. Now she knew something was wrong.

For a moment, she contemplated going for help. Instead, she continued on. Being an initiate protector in the Order of the Shepherd of the Woods made one ready to face any challenge. At least that was what she thought.

Clara crossed the gate and carefully advanced. Tombstones of all sizes and shapes lay scattered about on either side of the path. The quarter moon provided quite a bit of light—enough to cast shadows. The effect was a horrific mosaic that could chill the bones of the most stalwart soul. Although unnerved, she never halted in her search.

The whinnying of a horse reached her ears. She paused, trying to judge the distance. She took a couple more unsteady steps when she noticed a motion to her left. Well-trained muscles reacted to the threat, and the shield was in place before she could identify what was coming at her.

She felt a dull pain on her forearm as the object and shield collided. Had her reflexes been a little off, no doubt her skull would have been cracked like an egg. With her opponent's first blow successfully blocked, she launched an attack of her own. Her mind tried to register an image of her assailant as her mace struck home. It appeared to be a thin man in a dirty white mask. She heard the sounds of bones snapping as her mace swung through its arc and the man dropped at her feet.

The blow did not feel right. Her mace had sliced right through its target, but she had expected it to rebound. Slicing was supposed to happen with swords, not maces.

She looked down at her feet and saw a pile of bones scattered on the ground.

*Tal, what is this?* she asked herself. Looking at the bones for only a second, she snapped her head in the direction the horse sound had come from. She jogged forward a few feet and the entrance of a mausoleum came into view. The half-moon's light cast eerie shadows on it. The metal gate that guarded the entrance was on the ground, pulled out of the stone walls by its hinges. She saw a man with a dark brown beard and short moustache leap onto a horse. He glanced her way and pulled his hood over his head to hide any other features she might make out. Kicking his horse into a fast gallop, he charged right at her.

Diving out of the way, she barely avoided the deadly hooves. The maneuver itself brought its own perils, and she had to twist in mid-leap to avoid smashing her head on a nearby tombstone. The rider and horse quickly disappeared into the darkness. Getting back on her feet, she stared in the direction they had vanished. Some sixth sense, however, told Clara to turn back toward the mausoleum again.

When she did, she wanted to scream. Dozens more of the white-masked men were coming out after her. A pit formed in her stomach, and she realized that she needed help. She turned and desperately ran for the cemetery gate. At this time, the young protector learned her first real world lesson: armor works both ways. It did protect her from attack, but it also hindered her escape.

Once out the gate, Clara began to formulate a plan. She knew she could neither fight them all nor outrun them. Making for the wood line alongside the path, she chose a

spot that would force her assailants to break up their formation.

Turning around, she landed a swift blow to the closest one and dropped him at once. Again there was the sound of breaking bones, and not the thud of metal hitting flesh. For the third attacker, she dropped the mace on his right arm, severing it. Readyng her mace for the next target, she caught movement off to her far left. Figuring this better be the last one before she left, she smashed her fourth assailant and tried to run again. Her attempt was foiled by a sharp pain that shot through her leg before she moved a step.

Looking down, she saw a one-armed man stabbing her leg with a dagger. His other arm lay next to him, where it had fallen due to her attack. She knew that that blow should have killed him. Forgetting the danger of the men flanking her, she paused a moment to look further at her attacker. First she noticed that there was no blood coming from the wound, and then she realized that she was seeing right through him! Fear overcame her pain, and she fled toward the safety of the churchyard with all her might.

Her brief delay gave one of her opponents a chance to get in front of her. He slashed out with a rusty short sword as she approached him. The weapon clinked as it glanced off her armor. Before he got a second chance, Clara dropped him with a blow from her own weapon. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the one-armed man charging her, dagger ready for the kill. She shrieked in fear as she swung at him, but her mace found its mark. Another pile of bones lay at her feet.

She turned and ran again, but the pain from the leg wound increased. With every agonizing step, she could feel her strength ebbing as her life's blood spilled out onto the ground. She was soon beset by skeletons grabbing at her from every direction. Although she was stronger than any one of them, their numbers and her injuries added to her burden until she collapsed.

Once she was on the ground, the skeletons pummeled her mercilessly. Her armor blocked most of the blows, but more and more found the weak spots. Pain flooded her body. She knew she was dying. She struggled to force out a final prayer. Suddenly, the pounding stopped. With this came the clattering sound of bones dropping about her. She heard twigs snap behind her. With the last of her energy, she looked toward the sound and saw the outline of a hooded man. Then everything went black.