

Rise of the Shadow Panther

Prologue

The morning sun's rays began to embrace the small Resztaki village on the second day after the Aversin raid. Like the Resztaki, the Aversin were the remnants of the first two races to inhabit the eastern continent. They had been created by the old gods to care for the land over eight thousand years ago. The Resztaki were once known as the Odsisk, which translated into the *footprint of the gods*. Both races had worked in unison toward ensuring the land was well cared for. Then, the Deceiver had risen, a lesser god who dwelled within the negative planes of existence. As a result, the once harmonious rule the two races shared had quickly fallen into chaos and war. In a land where peace had once flourished, only bloodshed, death, and sorrow remained.

It was during this strife between the two races that the smaller race of humans began to arrive on the shores from across the Great Valet Ocean. At first, they arrived in small numbers. But as time passed, they continued to arrive in greater and greater numbers. It was not long before they outnumbered the warring Resztaki and Aversin. With their seemingly unending numbers and strange magic, the humans quickly became the driving force that threatened both races. The Resztaki had pulled back to their mostly lush lands in a final defense, hoping to save what was left of their race. From there, the events became varied in the telling. Regardless of which was true, something had happened to despoil the land into what is now known as the Korvak Wastes. Now, it is upon these harsh lands that the Resztaki battle for their survival against the Aversin who were corrupted by the Deceiver.

While the Resztaki continued to hold on too much of their old ways, the Aversin continued down their path of corruption by the Deceiver. Their once regal bodies were now disfigured and twisted, thick and oily hair now covered their bodies like that of a primate and gave off a putrid smell. Eyes once golden had turned to solid black orbs, and their brows were heavy and protruding. Their savagery and brutality only increased, as they no longer fought for rule over the Resztaki but attacked like feral animals intent on destroying their prey.

Having spent most of the previous day burying his family lost in the raid, Staszu sat in the small tent's opening, looking about. No one appeared to notice him as he observed the village begin to come to life. *Why should they notice him?* he thought. He was just another orphan after a raid. This was nothing new in the life of a Resztaki. Then, he noticed Nisa, a widow with no children, strolling toward him. Knowing she had no one to help provide for her, he had often shared what he had caught in his snares with her. By her plumpness, he guessed he was not the only one to do so. While she had not reached a hundred years of age, she had signs of grey in her golden hair; something usually not seen until his people reached two hundred. He knew she was coming to take him to the meeting tent which made his stomach twist in knots. It was not fear or disgust that caused the knots, but more the anger that he would not have any control over what was decided for him today.

When a child lost all family lines, it fell to the village council to appoint a family to foster the child.

The council had complete control, and he did not think there would be a shortage of applicants. He would bring a tidy sum as the son of a goldsmith. By law, all family possessions would pass with him. Ordelik had not been his birth father and he had not revealed this when he arrived. Only Nias knew the truth and had kept the secret.

His birth parents had been killed in a similar type of raid almost two years back. Ordelik had demanded fostering rights, even knowing that he had nothing to transfer with him. Instead of seeing him as an inheritance, he claimed he would teach him what must be known to be an honorable man among the Resztaki. A vow he kept.

The short walk to the council's tent felt like a funeral procession. Not truly a tent, it was more like a framed structure and walled with hides. In the Wastes, wood was scarce and mostly used out of necessity. Ducking into the door flap, the area was crowded. Two girls stood at the front and appeared to have family members ready to take them in. The remainder of those here would be looking at him like a fatted calf. Such a debate could take hours, if not days.

Staszu stood there as if wrapping himself in a mental cloak to block out what awaited. As he did so, his mind drifted back to the attack and it was as if it were happening all over again. He was returning from checking his snares with only a few shorthaired brush rabbits that held little meat. Not far from the outer tents, he heard the mix of shouts and screams as battle erupted. Without thinking, he darted forward and fell over the body of a slain Resztaki warrior. A single thought raced through his mind—he had to reach his mother and sisters. Pulling out the fallen warrior's belt knife, it was more like a short sword in his hands, he took a breath and rushed into the village.

He moved as Ordelik taught him while hunting in the dim morning light, shifting quickly and silently from one shadow to the next. Within moments, he found an Aversin with its back toward him as it fought one of the warriors. Spotting another shadow, he moved quickly, cutting at the back of its leg as he disappeared into the shadow and the Aversin stumbled and then fell to the warrior. As he dashed through the village, he continued the attack style on what he later learned was a hamstring.

His newfound success caused the memories of the loss of his birth parents to come flooding back, overwhelming him. Anger raged, causing everything he had kept caged for so long to break free. Soon, he found himself lost in the battle that was unfolding around him. Completely blinded by his lust for revenge, he continued attacking the Aversin as he forgot about his true goal. When the battle was over, he had struck six perfect blows from behind and nearly double that in not so perfect strikes.

As he stood there looking at the bodies strewn about the village, he felt like he was hit by a club as he began running back toward his tent. Upon reaching his family's tent, the sight knocked what little breath he had left from him. His mother and sisters had not simply been slain, but butchered. A Kashi or Resztaki fighting knife lay next to his mother's remains, and a dead Aversin lay nearby. Shame and rage filled him, as he felt his mother had shown more honor in her defense of his sisters than he had. Then, he learned of his father's death. Falling to his knees, his emotions took their hold on him as he wept. He had taken pleasure in avenging one family's death, only to allow another to die. He doubted he could have saved them all, but his sacrifice might have saved his sisters. Now in his eyes, his sisters held more honor than he would ever

have, even if he lived five lifetimes.

Nisa's hand gripped him on the shoulder softly and brought him back from his thoughts. The two girls were now gone, and everyone's eyes looked at him. He could not say how long he stood there, but his legs felt numb as Nisa ushered him gently forward. As they neared the front, her reassuring grip firmed as if she sensed his despair. When they reached the front, he spotted the two Starego or male council members, and two female council members or Onaver. Deciding he would not be a victim all his life, he shifted an icy stare between the four of them who sat before him.

"The Shadow Panther looks as if he is ready to strike again," the elder Starego stated. His golden hair was heavily woven with grey and set in the braid of a Weapons Master's. While his body might have hinted at looking frail, his posture spoke of something different. Even without the braid, anyone could see this man was no stranger to weapons. Most likely close to three hundred years old, or three-fourths of the average life expectancy for the Resztaki, his eyes still flared with a hidden fierceness. After a moment's pause, he began rubbing his chin with his thumb and forefinger.

"It is known by this council and all here that you have no remaining kin. So because of this, by law, we must find you a family that best suits your needs," he finally declared. And then added, "Let us begin."

Murmurs began to rise all around him, as others talked about him but not to him. Finally, anger overpowered judgement, and Staszu blurted out in an icy tone, "Don't you mean to say, let the bidding begin?" As everyone stared at him in disbelief, he tried his best to look strong. Now it was so quiet that a fly would sound like an invading swarm of locusts on a fresh crop.

The council looked ready to lash out with a venomous tongue until the elder Starego raised his hand, forestalling the others. While Staszu did not know how the leaders were chosen, he could see this man led the group.

"My name is Staszu, not Shadow Panther," he began. The title was one they had started calling him after the battle and only held harsh memories. "And this is close enough to be an auction, only backward," he finished, and tried to look defiant.

"Enough, little one!" the Starego boomed, as he stood with his fists pressed on the small table as he leaned forward. "You push this council and my good grace much too far," he added in a stern tone. And while his voice sounded like controlled rage, Staszu thought he saw amusement in the man's face.

Taking a deep breath and returning the Starego's stare as best he could, he tried to keep his voice calm and sure. "Then, I claim eldest son's rights," he demanded. When his birth parents had died, he had seen boys make such requests before the council. From what he pieced together, it allowed the boys to raise themselves as adults.

Surprised, the eldest Starego was laughing a deep and booming laugh. He laughed so hard that he almost doubled over, holding his stomach. The other three were a different story altogether, obviously missing what the elder found so amusing. "You are too young boy. How old are you now? Eleven? Twelve, perhaps?" he asked, as the other three kept passing quizzical looks and sharp whispered comments.

“I am eight, but tomorrow I will be nine,” he replied, still trying to look defiant. The slight cracking of his voice only helped to fuel his rage and anger over his own weakness.

Again, the Starego’s laughter echoed all around. “Then, you are far too young,” he replied, as he settled down and wiped tears from his eyes. “You are big for your age and have a bit of pride to boot, I’ll give you that,” he added, as he finally stopped laughing in earnest.

Feeling as though he was the target of everyone’s amusement, he again lost control. “How long do I have to wait to claim eldest son’s rights?” he asked in a tone that sounded more like a growl. There were no squeaks or cracks in his voice this time, but it did little to ease his feeling of hopelessness.

The silence that followed his question was followed by surprised looks on the council’s face. Instantly, all four members gathered and fell into a heated debate. The Onaver appeared to be the most animated, protesting feverishly. Frenzied whispers and crazed murmurs dominated the tent. It felt as though the debate would continue forever, and he felt a pit open in his stomach. Minutes that seemed like hours passed, and then the council called for order.

As the elder Starego stepped before him, he had to crane his neck to look at the man’s face. “You shall be granted eldest son’s rights,” he began, and those gathered erupted in a mass of protests. “Silence!” his voice roared, and the crowd quieted. “As I said, you will be granted eldest son’s rights. It appears that the law never listed nor hinted at an age. We have laws and follow these laws. For without them, we are no better than the Aversin who just raided us.”

Again, a flurry of protests sprang up all around, though not voiced as loud as before. There was an air of something else coming and he hoped to avoid it. Staszu was about to turn and leave as quickly as possible before anyone could change the council’s mind. The Onaver were obviously not happy with the decision. But before he could move, the elder Starego’s voice froze him where he stood.

“But!” his voice boomed. “We have also decided this to be a conditional decree. First, you must find a trade or means of support. If you have no family to support you, we will not allow you to be a burden on the village. Next, your health, cleanliness, and tent must be maintained. You will be held to those standards as the rest of the village. There will be no excuses accepted. As for your inheritance, one half of it will be turned over to the council for safekeeping until such time as it is deemed you have proven yourself. If you fail, you will be classed as one who is not fit to even bathe himself. The other half of your household will then be given to the family entrusted with your care. The whole village will be responsible to report any lapses and failures, as well as positive progressions to this council. You have one full year to prove yourself. If you do so, the other half of your inheritance shall be returned and you shall be counted as a full member of this village. Do you agree to these terms?” Gone was any sign of amusement as he awaited an answer.

“Agreed,” he replied, trying not to let his relief show. But still, a slight crack laced his voice. It angered him slightly, but the relief at not being assigned another family he knew he would watch die someday overrode it.

“One last thing before you go little one. From what I see standing here before me, I believe those

who started calling you Shadow Panther underestimate you. If you ever cross paths with one, I would not be surprised to see you riding it with its tail between its legs. Do not prove me wrong for giving you this chance,” he said in a deep booming voice, as a smile cracked his lips.

“I will not fail,” he replied, standing as straight as he could and then turned and left.

Once outside, he went straight to his tent and gathered half of his possessions to turn over to the council. After that was done, he spent the rest of the day making his residence smaller. In his mind, less room would mean less to worry about and leave more time to work and train. Several times, women stopped by and dropped off food for him, cautioning him in a roundabout way to not mention where it came from. Men also stopped by to give him advice on one thing or another, and always leaving similar cryptic warnings. He had to suppress a remorseful laugh. In his attempt to avoid having another family to worry over, he now had a village who viewed him as family.

That night, he went to sleep and his dreams were filled with nightmares. When he awoke, he felt a strange burning on his left thigh. Looking at his leg, he saw the znak of the bow. All Resztaki received this as their first znak, but he should not have received it for a few more years yet. It was a calling by the gods; a sign they had not been forgotten. The znak would show a man which path the gods had chosen for him in life. To refuse to follow such a path would mean banishment from the Resztaki people, and becoming what was termed to be a Roamer. He prayed he was up to this new challenge.