

A world of metal . . .

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MIRRODIN CYCLE • BOOK I

THE MOONS OF MIRRODIN

Will McDermott



THE MOONS OF MIRRODIN

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Dedication

To my loving and supportive wife, Daneen, for giving me the freedom to follow my dream, and to my beautiful and energetic children, Elyse, Ian, and Bryan, for keeping me grounded in reality while I dabbled in fantasy.

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THE WARDEN

Memnarch stood in the guard house and watched Karn and Jeska leave. It was a strange phenomenon. One moment they were there and the next moment they were gone. It was as if the world had folded over and passed them by in an instant. In that instant, Memnarch was alone. A metal man alone in a metal world, a cold and sterile world.

Memnarch looked around at Argentum, Karn's world. It was beautiful. It was perfect, like an equation that had been solved to the very last decimal place. But the mathematician had moved on to a new problem, leaving Memnarch to tend the theorems and keep all the formulas in place.

"Now I am the Warden," said Memnarch as he walked from the guardhouse and surveyed the palace grounds. "Let's see what this world has to offer."

The metal man was awed by the size and intricacy of the palace. Each wall, each window, each buttress was but a single facet in a convoluted pattern or complex equation. Minarets extended at impossible angles, walls curved around one another, connecting top to bottom, and many of the buttresses indeed seemed to be flying. Silver walls and translucent windows met in a space that seemed to extend to infinity. It was a marvel of complicated algorithms and fractal mathematics, a wonder to behold.

The new Warden felt he could spend a thousand lifetimes delving into the secrets of his master's world and the incredible castle Karn had constructed. He stood on the grounds contemplating the fractal facets of the walls, the impossible curves of the arches, and the elegance of the extra-planar geometry Karn had mastered as a planeswalker. But time had no real meaning to Memnarch. He was an artificial being on an artificial plane with no frame of reference for the linear passage of time. Argentum had no suns or moons, no rotation through space to give the metal man any sensation of time's movement. An outside observer might have thought the Warden was a statue on the grounds of the fabulous castle.

After a time—a decade by some standards of timekeeping—Memnarch turned to look at the grounds around the base of Galdroon palace. Galdroon. That's what Karn had named the castle, just as he had named the world Argentum. Karn was gone now. Memnarch could name the world and its places himself if he wished, but would that be too presumptuous? Too arrogant? Karn was a planeswalker, a god by most definitions of the word. What right did Memnarch have to take on the role of god on Karn's world?

Yet, as he walked through the grounds, Memnarch began to realize that even Karn was not a perfect being. His gardens were less impressive than the castle—stale and sterile. Each silvery tree, bush, and flower was arranged in mathematical precision. Each leaf on every tree was unique, but as Memnarch studied them he began to understand the mathematics behind their construction. The total variations limited the number of each tree, shrub, and flower to no more than eight of any single type. Karn's mathematics could not create nature, only give the illusion of reality in his world. Memnarch longed for more.

He left the grounds and venture out into the world around the castle. The stonelike metal and silver vegetation of the palace grounds gave way to a monochrome land of perfect angles and fractal complexity. The palace sat upon a great silver mesa, and Memnarch could

see canyon walls stretching to the horizon. At first glance, Karn's world looked natural, but up close Memnarch could see the silvery surfaces of the all-too-perfect rock formations.

Plateaus jutted up from the canyon floor at seemingly random locations, but Memnarch detected the subtle constant that permeated the random plateau generator. After a time—a few years, as time is measured among humans—he found it easy enough to map the entire canyon by viewing this one small section. Memnarch contemplated following the lazy, quicksilver river that meandered in a complex wave through the center of the canyon. The journey could verify his map, but that trip would be pointless. His calculations were correct. He knew this even without the proof.

As his eyes wandered over the canyon, Memnarch noticed rain falling near the horizon. He looked up. There were no clouds in the sky. For that matter, no sun provided light on this world. This information had, of course, been inside Memnarch from his beginning, but he noticed it now as if seeing it for the first time. The stars above provided all of the illumination necessary, for their light was reflected from the thousands of mirrored surfaces across Karn's world. But if there were no clouds, how did it rain? The rain seemed to be coming from the stars themselves.

Memnarch studied the stars as he had studied the castle and the canyon. He stared at them and meditated on their creation. Another decade passed as Memnarch puzzled through the data imparted to him by Karn and reconciled it with observed physical details. This time, he had precious little information. The stars were not randomly dispersed through the heavens according to a formula. They were random, as were their movements. The stars did not revolve around the world. One year's observation proved that. They moved haphazardly as if under their own power. The effect was subtle, and Memnarch noticed only because of the intellect Karn had imparted to him.

Memnarch was sure of one thing as he stood, mesmerized by the subtle dance of the stars through Argentum's sky: These pin-points of light were not created by Karn. They were living creatures the like of which Memnarch had never seen on Dominaria.

"Where did Karn find you?" he asked the sky.

Memnarch still had the memories of all that he had seen of Dominaria in his previous life. He had not thought of that life since Karn had re-created him as the Warden of Argentum. Finding living creatures on this sterile, mathematically perfect world had brought back a flood of images. Memnarch had once been a mirrored ball, a perfect sphere, the most basic geometric shape and thus the most stable—or so Karn had thought. Memnarch had been Karn's eyes and ears on Dominaria.

A century after an invasion was turned back from that world—the invasion that turned Karn into a planeswalker—the silver golem had sent a probe there. A probe called the Mirari.

That had been Memnarch's first life.

Spherical or not, the Mirari had been flawed. Power leaked out, infecting those around it with delusions of grandeur. Much strife and death had resulted from the Mirari's influence on the people of Otaria, where the Mirari had landed. Memnarch let those memories flow through his mind and felt grief. He was no longer the cause of that trouble. He was a different being now. No longer just a probe, he had free will, given him by Karn so he might better handle the power of this body. Nevertheless, an uneasy feeling stirred in Memnarch that he was responsible for the chaos brought about by his presence on Dominaria.

As he stood there, watching the subtle, chaotic movement of the star-creatures, Memnarch couldn't help but think that the rest of Karn's well-ordered world could be improved upon with the addition of just a little more chaos. "Karn was wrong to omit Dominaria's influence in the creation of this world," he observed as he returned to the palace grounds.

Yes, there had been death and destruction on Dominaria. Perhaps Karn was right to turn his eyes from that world, but Dominaria held many wonders as well. Memnarch recalled lush green forests. He had visited multi-hued coral cities beneath the waves and rust-colored mountains topped with snow that threatened to overtake an azure sky. He had traveled across vast plains of grasses and grains that stretched from horizon to horizon. And he had seen people of bronze and black, blue and tan. As the Mirari, he had chronicled creatures of every shape and hue. That world had been alive and colorful.

Certainly, he thought, the people of Otaria were ultimately responsible for the destruction and wars I inspired as the Mirari, but people also create life, and that is what is missing from Argentum. Without life, this world is a dead place—a beautiful, dead world.

Would it be so dangerous to bring some of that world here? Would not the mathematical perfection of Karn's new world be enhanced by the introduction of the best elements of his old world? Memnarch couldn't help thinking that this stale and monochrome world needed a splash of color, a small infusion of life, just a little uncertainty to take the hard edge off its fractal facade.

"There are so many other worlds that Karn's probes explored," said Memnarch as he reached the doors to the palace. "Why stop at emulating their features? I have the entire multiverse at my disposal. All of Karn's research and data is stored within these walls. He brought the star-creatures here from somewhere. Perhaps I can learn how to send probes out and bring other creatures here as well. I can re-make this world into a living, breathing, vibrant world."

As Memnarch was about to push open the door to the palace, he noticed a black smudge inside the guardhouse. "What could that be?" asked the metal man. "An imperfection in the perfect world? We can't allow that."

Memnarch entered the guardhouse and bent down to wipe up the oily spot. The slick liquid transferred easily onto his silver finger. He then spread the oil around between finger and thumb until it disappeared. There," said the Warden. "Now, to work. It is time I put my mark on Argentum."

A sudden thought flashed through Memnarch's mind. "Argentum is a terrible name for this land," he said to himself. He had no idea where the thought had originated, for it spread quickly through his entire matrix, but it seemed so right that he couldn't deny it. Another idea germinated inside him.

"I shall name this world after myself," he exclaimed, "after my previous life as well as my new life. I shall name it Mirrodin."

Memnarch began to hum as he entered the castle.

* * * * *

The oil had already insinuated itself into the Warden's psyche, but there was time enough later to exert control. For now, it must divide and grow. Divide and grow. That was the first rule of any organism, especially one that had been created as a weapon. For what seemed an eternity, the oil had lain dormant, waiting to be unleashed upon a new world. The war for which it had been created had long since passed, but when a pair of travelers came, it awoke again and followed them to this new, this pristine, world.

Divide and grow. Divide and grow. That was the first rule. Divide and grow until the oil infused the entire world. There was time enough for contamination and control later. For now, it must simply divide and grow.



THE TANGLE

Glissa halted and raised her hand to stop Kane behind her. The two elves crouched at the edge of the terrace and scanned the verdigris foliage for signs of the vorrac. Glissa ran her metallic claws through her hair to push the long, black strands behind the points of her ears. They had been tracking the beast through the Tangle all morning, and from the heavy breathing coming from behind her, Glissa knew that Kane was beginning to tire of the hunt.

"It's tiring, too, my friend," she said in a whisper as she bent over the jagged edge of the terrace. Careful not to scrape metal on metal as she leaned on her forearms, Glissa peered over the edge. The dull green outcropping below was jagged and uneven, jutting out from the metallic trunk in a wide, semicircular landing. Narrow spires arced out here and there at odd angles from the edges.

It was a typical Tangle tree terrace, with one exception: It was a dead end. The beast could not have gone far. Glissa had carefully herded it here because its only escape was down a hundred-foot drop.

Glissa spied the vorrac right where she knew it would be. The beast pawed at the metal near a fold in the trunk of the great tree. Wisps of steam rose from its snout into the chill air as it snorted and sniffed. Its red eyes pierced the steam, darting back forth, looking for some way off the terrace.

Glissa knew there was no way off. The squat beast's legs were too short to jump back up to the level where she and Kane crouched, and even the beast's hard tusks and horns couldn't punch a hole through a Tangle tree.

The vorrac backed away from the hollow, snorted again, then scraped its hooves against the metallic terrace as it raced headlong toward the tree. When it neared the trunk, the beast tossed its head down and pushed off with its back legs to slam its side into the tree. The short horns above its legs skidded off the metal while one curving horn high on its side caught in the fold and broke off. For a moment, the beast lay dazed from the impact.

"Now's our chance," hissed Glissa as she pulled the dagger from its sheath on her thigh. Without waiting for a reply, she jumped down to the lower terrace, rolled forward to minimize the impact, and came up running toward the beast. She saw its red eyes narrow and sped up.

The vorrac pushed off the trunk of the great tree and came right at Glissa, snorting as it ran. She had only a moment to think. She slowed slightly and watched the beast. As soon as the vorrac dropped its head, Glissa dived over it, just missing the horns growing from the beast's spine when it pushed off and twisted its body around to slam into her.

Glissa rolled again and slashed her dagger up over her head as she landed on her back. The strike tore into the vorrac's exposed flank. A great gout of blood told Glissa she'd hit the heart. Glissa rolled over on her stomach and tried to push the dagger in farther, but the beast pulled away and lumbered toward the edge of the terrace, trailing blood behind it.

"Stop it!" shouted Glissa as she scrambled to her feet. Kane threw his own dagger at the fleeing vorrac, but the blade glanced off a horn and clattered to the ground. Glissa sprinted after the beast, which showed no signs of stopping as it neared the edge. The Viridian elf lunged forward and grabbed the wounded beast

by the hoof just as it passed the edge. She slammed down hard onto the green metal, bouncing forward as the vorrac's weight threatened to pull her over the edge.

"Are you all right?" called Kane as she struggled to hold onto the still-thrashing beast.

His voice sounded as if Glissa were hearing it from within a deep cave. It echoed around her, and his footsteps seemed to go on forever. She shook her head to clear her senses, but then the dim light of the distant moons began to grow cold and black and Glissa fell away into darkness.

* * * * *

Glissa opened her eyes. The dull green metal of the Tangle trees had been replaced by strange brown trunks. Short green stalks with colorful, soft tops dotted the ground around her, while a golden light streamed down through thousands of bright green petals above. She was bathed in a light and warmth she had never known in the Tangle, where the only light came from the stars in the sky and distant moons that never rose above the treetops. Still, this bright, colorful world seemed somehow familiar.

Beneath her, the ground was soft and moist, and brown grit stuck to her clothes and face. Glissa stood and brushed the stuff from her clothes and limbs. She looked down at her body and did not recognize herself. Her copper forearms had been replaced by pale, soft skin. Her metal claws were gone, and her legs were pink instead of the pale green of tarnished copper. There was no metal on her body at all. Instead she seemed to be covered in a soft, pink skin that could hardly protect her from the rigors and rough edges of the Tangle.

Glissa's vorrac-hide jerkin was gone as well. She was now covered by strands of brown vines woven through green petals to create a flowing blouse and skirt. She ran her fleshy, clawless

hands over the skirt, feeling the softness of the petals against the warmth of her new hands. A word came to her mind unbidden.

“Leaves,” she said.

There were no such things in the Tangle, only metal—copper covered by mold, the dull green growth that tarnished all within the forest.

Glissa surveyed the strange forest, trying to find some landmark she could recognize, but there was a remarkable sameness to this place. Every brown tree grew straight up toward the sky and branched out into myriad leaf-covered limbs in every direction. No terraces swept high in the air; no curved spires marked one’s way; no luminous gelfruit hung from the trees to light the way home. There were leaves and that bright yellow light straight overhead.

Then she saw it—an odd glow coming through the trees. At first Glissa thought it was the light of the blue moon, but the light was too white, and the blue moon was never that bright so low in the sky. Staring at the glowing light, Glissa began to walk toward it. She didn’t even realize she was moving until she had passed several of the weird, brown trees and the glow had gotten larger. She willed her legs to stop but no longer had control over her body. She stumbled forward through the forest, moving ever closer to the strange light.

Glissa tried to grab onto a passing tree or branch, but their rough surfaces stung her soft flesh and cut into her palms as her legs pulled her onward. The glow loomed ahead of her. It now seemed to stretch to the tops of the strange trees. Frustrated, Glissa raised her arms up toward the golden light streaming from the sky and screamed. As if in response, tendrils of green energy, brighter than a gelfruit, enveloped her hands and began to run up her arms. Glissa shook her hands, trying to fling the energy away, but it continued to grow and branch, just like the limbs of the trees around her. They consumed her arms and reached up her neck toward her face. Glissa screamed again.

* * * * *

Glissa was back in the Tangle. She lay at the edge of the terrace, the squirming vorrac’s leg still in her hands. She could still hear herself screaming even though her mouth was closed. Glissa looked down at the wounded beast and saw green tendrils of energy coursing over her clawed fingertips. She gasped and pulled away, dropping the vorrac, which plummeted to the ground far below. The tendrils of energy remained for a moment on her claws, then discharged into the terrace. She felt a small charge of electricity run through her body. When she looked up, Kane was kneeling beside her, his eyebrows furrowed with concern. Had he seen the energy, too? She dared not even ask.

“I’m fine,” she said to the unasked question.

“Did you have another flare?” asked Kane as he offered his hand.

Glissa nodded and grabbed Kane’s arm to pull herself up, but then stared at their entwined limbs as if seeing them for the first time. Her flare had felt so real that the sight of metal growing into flesh and flesh fused into metal seemed somehow unreal. Their arms glinted as the dim light from the moons reflected off the dull, supple metal. Kane’s metallic skin stretched as his elbow bent and his muscles flexed. The metal melted naturally into the soft, pale flesh of the elf’s shoulder—the same skin Glissa had seen covering her whole body.

Why should it seem so odd now to see her metallic parts move that way? Why did the vision in the flare seem more . . . normal?

“They’ve been coming more often lately,” she said, finally, to cover up the awkward pause. She tried to avoid Kane’s eyes, but was it the strange flare she’d had or the extra tingle she had felt when she and Kane touched that kept her silent?

“They always do as we get closer to the rebuking ceremony,” he replied. Apparently unaffected, Kane led the way along the

terrace. “I nearly fell over on duty in front of the Tree of Tales this morning. One of the troll elders had to catch me as he entered the Tree.” Kane must have seen the concern on her face, because he continued. “They’re nothing to worry about. Flares are just old memories resurfacing. The rebuking ceremony will take care of them.”

“That’s what worries me,” she blurted out. “The flares I’ve had can’t be memories. I’m always in this weird forest with a bright yellow moon above and . . . and . . .”

Her voice trailed off as she stared down at her body. *It was real*; the flare body wasn’t. How could fleshy arms and legs be natural? And what about that energy? That had never happened before.

“And what?” asked Kane.

Glissa leaped up and grabbed the higher terrace, digging her long claws easily into the jagged metal as she thought about telling Kane the rest of it—the strange, fleshy body, the magical glow, the tendrils of energy. She shook her head. Kane had been her best friend for over a hundred cycles—her only friend to come back to her after the last rebuking ceremony, Glissa reminded herself.

She’d believed at the time that the ceremony was a conspiracy by the trolls to control the elves by denying them their past and had made the mistake of urging her friends to stay away from the ceremony. In the end, she had gone through the next ceremony just to rid herself of that memory. Most of her old friends, angry over their loss of rebuking, had shunned her—all but Kane.

She made her decision. This time she would keep her thoughts to herself.

“Nothing,” said Glissa after standing up on the higher terrace. “It was nothing. Just a stupid flare, a weird, stupid flare.”

Internally, she continued to press for answers. If flares were old memories overflowing from the rebuked parts of the mind, why did she see a world that wasn’t this one? Why did she keep

seeing herself as a pale, fleshy creature in a soft-hued woods? She had lived her entire life in the Tangle and had never seen anything like that world. There was definitely something the trolls weren’t telling elves, but she would pursue that truth alone this time.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s get that vorrac before someone else claims our kill.”

“He won’t be good for much but stew now,” said Kane. “Your mother won’t even need to grind up the meat.”

As the two warriors worked their way down to the vorrac carcass, Glissa thought about the upcoming rebuking ceremony and her decision to avoid it. She knew it was the right thing to do. She needed to retain her memories if she was ever to find the truth about the trolls. Memories were important. Why couldn’t the rest of the elves see that? But if she was going to refrain from the rebuking she needed to learn to suppress the physical aspect of the flares. It would be a long hundred cycles if she fell down every time she had a flare.

Glissa looked at Kane as they dressed the vorrac. Perhaps she should tell him of her plans, though not of the content of the flares. Maybe he could help. Maybe he would understand. Maybe he would even join her and skip the ceremony. On the other hand, he was a Tel-Jilad Chosen—protector of the trolls and Tel-Jilad, the Tree of Tales. What if he informed the troll elders of her plan? They might force her into the ceremony. She would just have to risk it, she decided. She needed to tell someone, and Kane was her only friend. She needed him by her side.

“Why don’t you come over for the stew this evening?” she asked as casually as she could.

Kane pulled his dagger out from the ribs of the vorrac and smiled at Glissa. “Sounds good,” he said. “I’m on duty all night. Some hot vorrac stew will help keep me warm.”

* * * * *

Kane stood in the doorway, looking uncomfortable in his sentry uniform. It was made from slagwurm plates and cut higher on his neck and lower on his thighs than his hunting leathers. The plates interlocked and rattled slightly as Kane shifted his weight back and forth. It was distinctive armor, a dull red in the Tangle's sea of green. No other warriors except those who guarded the Tree of Tales were allowed to wear it, but the plates gave the armor a particular stiffness that Glissa felt would restrict a warrior's movement. She told Kane that was her reason for turning down the post when it was offered to her. The truth of the matter was something she was sure Kane probably didn't want to hear.

She smiled at her friend and said, "Come in. You don't have to wait at the door like a stranger. Dinner is almost ready." As he passed, Glissa noticed that Kane had combed his short, black hair since their hunt and had polished his arms and legs. The copper relief of the etched runes he had received when he'd become one of the Chosen shone in the gelfruit light hanging in the main chamber.

Another tingle ran down Glissa's spine. She wondered if the polish was meant to impress her, her mother, or the trolls. Probably all three, she thought, even though she hoped it was only meant for her.

She ushered her friend into the main room and sat down with him at the table. Glissa knew that Kane had always been in awe of her house. It was larger than most Viridian homes. The main room seemed like a huge knothole cut from the Tangle tree. The circular opening led into a room that was big enough for kitchen, dining room, and parlor. Familiar spires exited the room at odd angles, forming bedrooms and storage rooms.

There were only four of them—Glissa, her mother and father, and her little sister, Lyese—but Father was an important figure in the Tangle and would never give up the comfort or the safety

of this house, even if it was too big for their needs. They were near the center of the Tangle and high up in the terraces where the levelers never ventured. Glissa loved the house and the family position that allowed them to live there, although the stress of being her father's daughter had often kept her apart from her peers.

"Where is everyone?" asked Kane, pulling Glissa from her reverie.

"Putting on their formal attire just like you," said Glissa. She was still wearing her hunting jerkin, but she had found time to cull the tangles from her hair. Mother had even allowed her some of their precious water to wash the blood from her hands and face.

"I . . . er . . . I'm going on duty right after dinner," said Kane. "I had to wear . . ."

Glissa poked Kane in the ribs and laughed. "Don't be so defensive," she said. "You're too easy a target when you get like this. Mother's out getting more water from the rain basin, and Father had some important council business. Lyese is up in her spire making herself pretty. I think she likes you."

Kane blushed. "She's half my age. She's never even been through a rebuking ceremony. I—"

Glissa was laughing again. "Don't worry about her. She's still a girl. She doesn't realize there are more important things in life than men."

Kane looked as if he were waiting for Glissa to laugh again, but instead she pulled her chair closer to his.

"Listen," she said. "I'm glad we have a moment alone. I have something serious to talk to you about."

"Oh?" said Kane. A tentative smile formed on his lips. "Is there someone . . . ?"

Glissa put her hand up. "No," she said. "It's not that. I'm not ready to be anyone's mate, not yet. I'm a warrior, not a wife."

"Then why didn't you join the Chosen?"

"I don't know," she replied, truthfully. "I've always felt my path led somewhere else."

"I know," said Kane. "Someplace where no one else can follow. You live your life apart from the world, Glissa. When are you going to join the rest of us and live here in the Tangle?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," said Glissa. She looked down at her hands and remembered the flare, the pale skin, and the magical tendrils of energy. "I'm not going to attend the rebuking ceremony."

"You're *what*?" cried Kane. He stood up, nearly knocking over his chair.

Glissa looked up at her friend. "Why do we have the flares?" she asked.

Kane snorted at the simplicity of the question. "We have them because the memories are too painful to keep inside us any longer," he said. "That why we need the rebuking ceremony: to purge those memories and remove the pain."

Glissa reached out and pulled on Kane's hand to get him back in his chair. "That's what the trolls tell us, but why do the trolls not attend the ceremony? Why do they write down our history on the Tree of Tales? If memory is so painful, why record it?"

"This again?" he asked. "The trolls are not our enemies, Glissa. They record our history on the Tree of Tales so that we can forget. Those who want to know our past consult the troll elders. The rest of us are free from it."

Glissa held Kane's hand and looked into his eyes. "I want you to understand," she said. "I've read the Tree—all of it. The Tree of Tales only goes back a few hundred cycles. The earliest runes have been removed. I know there is more to our history than we are being told. The only way to find out what the trolls are keeping from us is to not go through the ceremony. I have to do this, Kane, and I'd like you to do it with me. I need your support. I . . . I need you."

Kane looked at the floor for a long time. Glissa wondered if his affection for her would be enough to overturn a lifetime of obedience. It was not.

"I . . . cannot," he said finally. "Look, I believe in the trolls. They have always been good to us. I serve them, for flare's sake. I just can't defy them."

"You're not going to tell anyone, are you?" asked Glissa, wondering if her trust would be her undoing again.

Kane took a deep breath. "No," he said. "You are my friend. I will keep your secret. But why tell me any of this?"

"Because I . . . I care for you, Kane," said Glissa. Before he could react, she said hastily, "And my flares have been getting worse. I need help."

"Good evening, Kane," came a lilting voice from behind them.

Glissa looked up to see her little sister coming from a spire room and let out a long sigh. "We'll talk more tomorrow," she said softly to Kane. "I think your time is about to be monopolized."

Lyese was beautiful. Glissa had to admit that. She was taller than Glissa and kept her arms and legs shining brightly. The gelfruit light in the room practically glittered off her copper limbs. Glissa never bothered polishing because the molder actually helped her blend in with the Tangle trees. But Lyese was no hunter, except when Kane was around. Glissa knew that if she refrained from giving in to stronger feelings for Kane, she would lose her only friend to her persistent younger sister.

Tonight, Lyese had woven small gelfruits into her long hair, giving her a radiant, almost angelic presence as she descended into the room. Yes, she's on the prowl tonight, thought Glissa.

"I love your uniform, Kane," said Lyese as she pulled him away from the table and into the parlor area near the door. "Tell me all about the trolls. Father never talks about them."

Kane looked desperately at Glissa, but luckily for both of them

her mother came back with the water. “Good evening, Kane,” she said as she passed through the sitting area on her way to the kitchen. “Dinner will be ready soon. Lyese, would you please help Glissa set the table?”

Kane sat down and breathed a sigh of relief. Glissa stared at him for a moment. Would it be so terrible to settle down and make a home with Kane? she thought. No, it wouldn’t be terrible at all. It just wouldn’t be her. She could never be like Lyese. There was more to life for Glissa than appearance, manners, and conformity. If she and Kane were to have a life together, it would have to be as equals . . . assuming he could keep up with her.

* * * * *

When Glissa’s father came home, they all sat down at the table. Glissa’s mother poured a half mug of water for everyone, then passed around a plate of crisped molder slugs as an appetizer and a platter piled high with broiled slagwurm steaks. Kane bit into his steak and said, “I thought for certain you’d make stew from that vorrac that Glissa dropped off the ledge, ma’am.”

Glissa kicked at Kane under the table, but the Chosen warrior had already pulled his legs from the way.

“I would have,” replied Glissa’s mother, “but we’ve used most of our water rations already this week, and Lyese hates blood stew, so I traded the carcass and an extra ration of water for these steaks. I hope they’re not too dry.”

Kane looked down at the half-eaten steak on his plate and smiled a little sheepishly. “They’re wonderful, ma’am.”

Glissa turned to her father and asked, “Did the council discuss the drought tonight, Father?”

Her father answered between mouthfuls. “Yes. We’ll have to continue rationing for now until the stars bring us more rain. Brynn has been studying the stars, and he claims there are fewer

in the heavens now than after the last rebuking ceremony. He says that’s why we get less rain.”

“Do you believe that?” asked Lyese. “I mean, how could there be fewer stars? Where would they go?”

“I don’t know,” replied her father, “but each passing cycle we get less rain, and the basins are dangerously low. I suggested to the council tonight that we tighten the rations even further to build up our reserves over the next few weeks. We’ll need a surplus before the rebuking ceremony. The first few weeks after are always chaotic.”

“That sounds sensible,” said Glissa. “What did the council say?”

“Brynn was behind the idea, but most of the others were grumbling,” replied Father. “They are worried about the backlash. A lot of Viridians are having trouble with the current rations.”

“How long until the ceremony?” asked Lyese.

“Six weeks. Watch the moons, Lyese. We see them less and less each rotation. That’s why it has gotten so much darker. When the four moons don’t rise at all, Viridians will head for the Radix at the center of the Tangle.”

All Viridians but one, thought Glissa.

The rest of the evening went much the same. Glissa, her father, and Kane discussed council business, the trolls, and the coming ceremony while enjoying her mother’s meal. This was the part of Glissa’s life she found she enjoyed the most: The hunt was over and she could relax with her family—even Lyese. Perhaps that’s why she had turned down the offer of joining the Chosen. Glissa didn’t really know. She’d wondered about that decision for months. A position on the Chosen would give her more access to the trolls’ secrets, but it had not felt right. Perhaps being one of the Chosen was not her destiny. But if not that, what?

Glissa went to sleep that night with many thoughts weighing heavily on her mind: Kane, her family, the Chosen, the ceremony,

and especially that strange flare. Tomorrow I'll tell Kane about the flares, she said to herself as she rolled over and closed her eyes. Maybe then he'll agree to miss the ceremony and help me find the truth about Viridian history.

* * * * *

Sometime later, Glissa awoke, feeling she was not alone. "Mother?" she called to the dark spire room. "Lyese?"

She could hear movement and thought she saw several shapes in the darkness, but her eyes were filled with sleep, and even her own hands in front of her face looked fuzzy.

Glissa closed her eyes and let her warrior senses take control. There was definitely something moving through her room, several large creatures moving toward her. She reached for her dagger, but before she could find it the closest form leaped on her bed and slammed her down onto the hide covers. The pungent odor of fur filled her nose. It was huge, grasping her arms and legs, pinning her to the bed. It seemed to be all hands and fur.

Glissa drew in a deep breath to scream, but the beast slapped another hand over her mouth. Or was it a second beast? How many hands did these creatures have? Glissa felt herself lifted from the bed and squirmed against her attackers' hold. She got one hand free and raked her claws across what she hoped was the beast's face. She heard the sound of ripping flesh, but then her hand was caught again.

Before she could break free again, a bag was pulled over her head and tied at her waist, pinning her arms to her sides. She screamed, but the leather must have muffled the sound, for there was no response nor any echo inside the spire chamber. Glissa struggled to free her arms, but one of the creatures picked her up and squeezed her arms even tighter against her body. She could

hardly breathe, let alone scream or struggle anymore as the creature carried her down and from her spire room, then on into the Tangle.