

The Flames of Destruction

Book 1

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(Take Two)

Chapter One: The Warning

It was an odd, out-of-body experience. Neela felt that she was there and yet she knew that she was not. The place was rocky and barren with only the occasional volcanoes and streams of lava keeping it from being completely flat. In front of Neela was a large pool of lava that bubbled and spat the occasional flame. A voice echoed through the dead silence and resonated within Neela's head.

'Zecara was once the center of Onterza, the very beginning... However, a cruel king came to rule and Zecara changed to match his black heart... The elders of the kingdom were forced to remove Zecara from the rest of the land in hopes of holding off the evil that had begun to grow and infect everyone who resided in the cities, turning them into monsters of the dark...'

The lava began to pulse as something rose from its center, a large rock with veins of blue dancing along its surface. Neela stared in wonder as the rock fell away to reveal beautiful blue gem with an ethereal glow surrounding it. As the gem rose from its place among

*the flames, the lava seemed to be pulled with it like a marionette.
The voice spoke:*

'Now Zecara has become the birthplace of all evil, its banished king calling for revenge as all his minions gather... But a greater evil has appeared, once the protector of Onterza, now its ravager.'

A creature began to form around the glowing gem, but before Neela could get a good look at it, the scene changed.

Now, Neela stared down at the whole of Onterza, with its patchwork landscape and the giant body of water in the middle of the continent. Slowly, a dark mist seemed to descend on the beautiful land as something of colossal size made its way across the Mirror Sea.

The land began to change; a dark grey began to bleed into the colors of Onterza as the creature made its way closer.

'If this creature reaches the center of Onterza, it will destroy this world... You must stop it!'

Suddenly the creature was in the Sea of Zoltan, the world around it began to crack, revealing the lava underneath the surface. Slowly, the land began to break apart, sinking into the ocean until there was nothing left.

'Save the world Neela... Only you can...'

Neela gasped and jerked upward in her bed, her face covered with sweat and her blankets tangled about her like snakes. Quickly, Neela scrambled out of her bed; panic still fresh in her mind as she expected to go out and find a world of dead grey. Instead, Neela rushed out to find her father, Nortan, chopping wood, her mother, Natasha, washing clothes, and her younger sister, Nina, playing with their Northern Inuit, Naala. Neela let out a sigh of relief as she looked at the dulled greens of the forest around that made up her home, Netherla.

As Neela looked out at her family, she felt a wave of protectiveness wash over her *'If my dream was true, then that means that this could all be whipped away...'* Neela frowned at her thought before straightening up. "I'm going to visit Old Man Salis." Neela claimed and her mother turned around, "Be sure to bring him his lunch, you know how he can get." Neela smiled before ruffling her

sister's hair and walking back into the house to grab the old man's lunch.

Old Man Salis was considered the 'village crazy' as he was older than the dirt beneath Neela's bare feet and was always going on about one thing or another. Everyday, Salis would hobble into the village and start to tell stories of the 'olden days' to anyone who would listen. Neela herself was one of his regulars, and because of this she was often given the task of bringing him lunch. However, today would be slightly different as today Neela had her own story to tell.

Neela walked toward a small pond where she normally got her water for a great deal of things. As Neela knelt down to dip her canteen into the ice-cold liquid, she found herself looking at her reflection with a frown adorning her face. Neela glared lightly at her limp hickory brown hair, and flinched at the pale scars that painted her tanned skin. She glared at her skinny build and then she turned to her mark of normalness: her eyes. Neela's eyes could only be described as a galaxy within her iris. Depending on her mood, Neela's eyes could glitter with billions of bright stars and be filled with anything from midnight blues and purples to forest greens and bright pinks. On the other hand, Neela's eyes could be a dark navy blue with only the barest of pinpricks for stars. This was the thing Neela hated the most about herself. Neela felt a sigh escape her lips as she continued on her way, adjusting her oversized tan tunic on her thin frame.

Not more than a few minutes later, Neela arrived at the busy hustle and bustle of the marketplace where Salis was normally found. However, it seemed as though he wasn't in his usual spot on the corner of the street. Neela walked up to one of the children who often listened to Salis' tales, "Hey Natalie, do you know where Old Man Salis is?" The young girl, not older than eight with poison green eyes shook her head, "He left to go home; he said that he was expecting someone... He told me to tell you where he went." Neela gave the young girl a soft smile, stars glittering kindly in her blue and purple eyes, "Thanks Nat- I'll see ya around, yeah?" The younger girl smiled before melting into the crowd.

It was another several minutes before Neela finally arrived at the old man's house. "Old Man? I brought you your lunch!" Neela called out as she approached the run down cottage. The old house

was made of Nither trees, a tree native to Netherla that was known for its strength. Vines grew up one side of the house, and beautiful nirth trees huddled around the old cabin, like they were to protect it. The grass around the house was dotted with small, white flowers and clovers with a rich green grass as the background.

Neela examined the delicate ferns that grew near some of the trees as she waited for Salis to answer her call. That's when, of course, a small girl popped out of the foliage. She had hair made of flowers and bright green vines and Neela immediately recognized her, "A Leimakid..." She breathed and the meadow nymph tilted her head to the side, "What are you doing in Laspen?" She asked softly and Neela shifted on her feet, Leimakids were normally very placid but if provoked, they had the ability to tear you apart.

"I'm here to see Salis, I have a few questions I need to ask him and I have his lunch." The Leimakid's eyes widened before a soft smile graced her pale green face, "Ah, so you're the girl he was telling me to look for." Neela smiled awkwardly and her eyes glittered nervously. "That's me I guess..." Neela admitted cautiously, the Leimakid smiled again.

"He's further in the forest, come, I will show you the way."

"Of course he is." Neela said warily.

None-the-less, Neela followed the Leimakid further into the enchanting greens that made up the magical forests of Laspen, a kingdom that bordered Netherla. As Neela followed the Leimakid, she took notice that the trees of Laspen almost seemed to be *alive* as the wind caressed their emerald green leaves. Out of the corner of her eye, Neela saw the sparkle of a unicorn's mane and she heard the giggle of fairies. To her right, was a beautiful lake that revealed the jewels at its bottom and the merfolk dancing in its clean waters.

Neela and the Leimakid walked for a little longer as Neela marveled at the wonders Laspen held. Finally, they came to a long tunnel made of interweaving trees and ivy. The Leimakid stopped in front of the tunnel, "The *dírhael* sits on the other side of this tunnel." Neela stopped before looking at the meadow nymph, "What's, uh, that thing you said?" Neela felt her curiosity rise as she looked at the Leimakid with sparkling eyes, "It means 'wise man' in my language. You call him... Salis." Neela's eyes widened in recognition and she felt a smile light up her features, "That's so cool!" She cried before slapping her hands over her mouth. The Leimakid let a smile grace

her features before she backed away, "He waits for you..." Then the Leimakid was gone, leaving Neela to travel down the ivy tunnel by herself.

The tunnel widened until Neela came to an area surrounded by closely knit trees that whispered secrets to the wind. There were ferns and different flowers that surrounded a single stone path which lead to a small area with a few wooden benches and a small giggling fountain in the center. Off to the side was an old man with a long beard and thousand year old brown eyes. "Salis, you gave me quite the goose chase." Neela grumbled, despite the irritation in her tone there was a small smile on her face; she was glad that the old man was okay. "Ah, young Neela, you come searching for answers of the dream you had last night, no?" Salis asked, seriousness in his old voice. Neela felt her breath catch in her throat as she stiffened, "H-how did you know?" She whispered and Salis gave her a weary chuckle. "My dear child, when you live to be as old as I, you pick up a thing or two."

Neela rushed over to the old man and sat next to him on a bench, "What does it mean?" She asked almost desperately, the old man sighed, "It means exactly as it's meant to sound. You must save the world Neela." The girl felt panic grip at her heart as her insecurities began to settle in, "*How?* I'm just a girl, I've got no powers, I've got no training in weapons or traveling, the farthest I've ever been from home is your house!" Salis let out a chuckle, "And yet you have traveled to the very center of Laspen like it was nothing."

Neela stuttered at his remark, "No- I-I followed the Leimakid! That doesn't count! Why would *I* be chosen? Of all the capable people in Onterza, *why me?*" Salis smiled gently at the eighteen-year-old, "You have this ability to bring others together, Neela, and in these dark times it is greatly needed." Neela felt her eyes water and she looked up at the old man with a broken expression. "But Salis, I *don't* bring others together! I tear them down, you of all people should know this! If, and that's a big if, I tried to save the world, I'd end up messing it up even more." Salis smiled warmly.

"One mistake doesn't define your life." A tear raced down Neela's cheek as her fingers ghosted over the scar on her neck. "But they *do*, Salis, I'm reminded of it every time I look at myself!" The elder placed a wrinkled hand on the girl's shoulder as she burst into tears. "My child, *you* were chosen to save the world. *Only you* can save us all. You might be broken, yes, but it is the most broken of us who change the world." Neela stared at her teacher through blurry vision, "If... If I don't succeed then Nina will die... Right?" Salis nodded solemnly and Neela squeezed her eyes shut, "Believe me Neela, I wish it could've been someone else... You've already been through so much."

Neela looked at the old man with determined eyes that shone with stars. "What do I have to do?" Salis grabbed a small, leather bound book from where it rested on the bench.

Chapter Two: Departure

Salis gently opened the book, revealing yellowed pages to his apprentice. "You must gather the Warriors of Old. Each will have a relic that you can identify them by. This book, The Book of Sarcoff, will give you the history of each relic and where it is found." Salis flipped through a few pages before he found a page marked by an old, broken compass. It hung on a cracked strap of leather, the gold was tarnished and scratched, the glass broken, and the arrow didn't even point north. Salis handed Neela the compass and she looked at him oddly. "You will need both of these items to complete the first part of your task."

"Uh, Salis? This compass is broken. How can it help me?" The old man gave the girl a cryptic smile, "While the Book of Sarcoff *will* help you find the general *area* of the relic, the Compass of Cartive will allow you to pinpoint the *exact* location of it." Neela stared at the compass in awe, a thousand stars glittering in her eyes. Neela looked up from the small object to see Salis, a kind smile on his face, as he gestured for Neela to take the Book of Sarcoff. The girl felt a jolt of doubt and her eyes darkened and lost their stars, "You are ready for this Neela. I've known for a long time now that you would

be the one to save us. That's part of the reason I took you under my wing."

Neela looked down at her hands, which caressed the compass like it would shatter if she wasn't careful. "*How? How do you know I'm ready?*" Salis put his hand over Neela's and closed it around the compass. "I don't. No one does. You must take that step first step, only *then* will you know."

"And if I'm *not* ready?"

"You must do your best anyway, I know you will."

Neela's eyelids fluttered shut. "Fine. Where do I need to go first?" Salis fingered through the scritta paper. "It would be best if you worked in a circle around Onterza. By going to the furthest places first, you might be able to save yourself from traveling to places like Queber in the winter." Neela blanched and looked at her teacher with large, shocked eyes. "*What? I have to go to Queber? That's on the other side of Onterza!*" Salis chuckled, "These relics are found all over Onterza, my child, do not act so shocked." Neela rubbed her face tiredly, "How long do I have?"

"One year."

Neela stared dully at the older man, "Why am I not shocked? It'll take me at least two months just to get to Queber! Not to mention all the money it's going to take to get to everything." Salis gave the girl a reassuring look, "I have money saved just for this; the first place you must go is Underakin. There you will find the Ring of Riverna." Neela was just about to stand up when she paused, "Why is the Ring of *Riverna* in *Underakin*?" Salis handed the Book of Sarcoff to Neela as well as a sack of golden coins with a light chuckle, "That is something you must read about. Now go! You have little time!"

Neela turned to go and looked over her shoulder at Salis, "What about you? Will you still be here when I get back?" Salis gave the girl a smile before he leaned back, tilting his head towards the tops of the trees. "I have spent many years waiting for this day. For one thousand years I searched for the leader of the warriors who would save us. I was entrusted with that compass for that very

reason. I discovered half the world looking for you Neela." The old man looked to the girl, who had now turned to look at him fully. "I must pass on to the next life and reunite with my family."

Neela felt tears push at their prison walls once again as she took a step towards her old friend. "You mean you're going to die? What about mater's lunch? You haven't even eaten it yet." Salis smiled softly, "I guess I can stay a little longer. I might as well pass on with a full stomach." The old man let out a raspy chuckle, reminding Neela that her friend *was* very old. So Neela sat with her teacher as he ate his last meal.

He was finished far too soon. The old man stood up with a small smile on his face before he brushed off his brown robes, "Neela, my child, you *can* save the world. No matter what anyone else tells you, it *is* possible." Salis began to glow and Neela allowed a sob to burst from her lips, "No- please. Salis don't leave me!" Neela's hand flung to grasp Salis' own and a smile came to his wizened face. "Thank... you... Neela..." Then he burst into a flurry of small golden orbs, as all people did when they died.

The warm lights danced on a strong breeze that circled around Neela, whipping her hair and baggy clothes around her body. A small smile teased Neela's lips as the warm light pranced higher and higher into the air before bursting into golden dust. The dust fluttered to the ground, making the area around Neela glow in an ethereal light. Neela exited the calming area, Salis' dust still sparkling in the girl's hair.

By the time Neela had returned home, the sun had relinquished its grip on the day the moon was rising. Neela entered the house to see her family at their small dinner table finishing dinner. "Neela! You spent a long time with Salis, was today a good story?" The girl gulped quietly and looked at her bare feet.

"He died."

"What?"

"Salis died and he asked me to save the world before he left." Neela's father stood from his seat, "I thought we'd been through this Neela. I thought you were done with the attention thing." Neela flinched and her eyes darkened to a deep midnight blue, there were no stars. "There's... something coming... I don't know what it is but if I don't find these heroes and stop it, *everyone* will die. Everyone." Neela's mother grabbed Nina's hand and pulled her away, whispering something about it being 'past her bedtime'. Neela's father gave a deep, disappointed sigh. "I thought you'd learned your lesson. What set it off? Do you feel as though Nina's been getting all the attention?" Neela shook her head violently, "No, pater, Salis said that-"

"SALIS IS CRAZY!"

Neela stared coolly at her father, "Was. And Salis *was* not *crazy*. You never saw his eyes, pater. They were *brown*. *Normal*. He said he'd been alive for one *thousand* years." The girl's father scoffed and Neela looked to the scuffed, wooden floor.

"I'm going whether you approve or not."

"What did you just say."

Neela looked up, eyes shining harshly, "Pater, I have the chance to save everyone in Onterza. I can save Nina. Contrary to what you might think, I'm not lying this time and I'm not risking the chance that Salis was *right*." Neela stormed past her father towards her room. The girl's eyes sparkled dangerously as she violently shoved items into her bag. She placed the Book of Sarcoff gently within an extra set of clothes, threw the compass over her neck, and grabbed cloak and the bag of coins Salis had given her. Neela looked around her room with a vicious glare before grabbing a small knife that she kept under her pillow.

"Neenee?"

Neela whipped around to see her five-year-old sister standing in the doorway, Neela's mother and their dog behind her. "Neenee where are you going?" Neela rushed to her sister's side with a soft smile, "I'm going to go away for a little while." Neela saw her mother pale from the corner of her eye. Nina rubbed her tired eyes.

"For how long?"

"Around a year. I'm going on an adventure to places far away."

Nina looked up at her sister, diamond irises sparkling in the faint light. "Can I come?" Neela hugged her sister tightly, "No, not this time Nina. When I get back we can go on all the adventures you want, but for now you need sleep. Okay?" The little girl nodded, "Okay Neenee! Be sure to get back soon!" Neela smiled as her little sister walked back towards her room.

"Neela tell me you're lying." The teen looked at her mother, "Mater, you know I wouldn't joke about these things. Not anymore." Natasha's starry eyes filled with tears and Neela rushed forward to embrace her mother. "I'm not lying mater. You must believe me." Natasha looked at her younger daughter's determined eyes and gave a weak smile, "I believe you." Neela nodded before she strode out of her room to the kitchen.

There she grabbed enough food to last her for a few days 'Until I can get to Riverna.' Neela's fingers grazed the handle of the front door when a voice called out, "I hope you know what it means if you walk out that door." Neela turned around to face the cold, golden eyes of her father. "I have to do this pater. If I don't, the world is doomed." Norton's eyes narrowed, "Are you so willing to keep up this lie? And for what, a chance to see the world?" Neela whirled around, her own eyes burning with anger. "If I had the choice," she gritted out, "I would happily stay here and take care of Nina, but if I do that all of you will die. I *can't* let that happen." Norton eyed his daughter suspiciously, but his stance wavered when he noticed her eyes.

They were filled with more stars than he'd ever seen before. Nortan sighed deeply and ran a hand through his greying hair. "You're telling the truth?" Neela gave a sharp nod, Nortan nodded slowly. "I take it you're going to head to Riverna to get a boat. Again, Neela nodded, cautiously taking her hand off the handle of the door. Nortan gave his daughter a tired look, "How long've you got?"

"One year. As of now, the furthest I have to go is Queber ." Nortan let out a puff of air, "Going to Riverna will take you too long. Take the *Ninella*. It'll get you to Scholis, from there you'll have to find another type of transportation." A smile broke through Neela's calm mask as she rushed to hug her father. "*Thank you.*" Nortan gave a crooked grin before he handed his daughter a large lantern. "The oil's in the boat... Just, come back safe. I don't think your mater and I could take another scare." Neela nodded firmly, "Of course pater, I'll do my best."

The *Ninella* was a large sailboat able to hold up to eight people. It was old yes, but it was reliable and Neela's father had used the boat to make the rare trip up to Cartive.

Cartive was a kingdom of creators. It was made up of three districts: Cartive, where most industrial items were made, such as boats, tractors, and odd horseless carrages. Scholis, a place made up of scholars, univesities and small businesses. Finally, there was Pichov, where musicians came to train and show off their art.

Within a few long weeks, Neela was nearly to Scholis. One night, when the mood was full, she opened the Book of Sarcoff. She flipped through the thin pages until she came to a stop on the picture of a ring. '*This must be the Ring of Riverna!*'

The ring looked to be made of Ulteria, a metal only found in Underakin. On the outside were cravings of waves with mountains rising above them. On the inside of the band were words in a language Neela had never seen before. The teen's fingers grazed over the worn page to hover over the words beneath the drawing.

The Ring of Riverna (originally made in Underakin) was used for years in Riverna to carve rivers through Onterza and up the mountains of Queber, the ring had the ability to command earth and

change the tide. Even today, rivers can be found that travel up mountains rather than down. However, when Cartive was founded and began to create boats that moved without wind or tide, the Ring of Riverna became useless to traders. So, the legendary ring was returned to Underakin where it was soon lost to time and legend. The inscription on the ring reads "Terra et Aqau" or "Earth and Water."

Neela flipped to the front of the book, where a well worn map rested. The teen's finger traced the straight she had been sailing, it seperated Major and Minor Onterza as well as connected the Driadian and Lavara Oceans. It was the best way to get around the center of Onterza quickly. As she was now, Neela would arrive in Scholis by early morning. *'That gives me enough time to restock on supplies. Just a quick get in, get out.'*

However, what awaited Neela in Scholis was something she never would have dreamed would happen to her...