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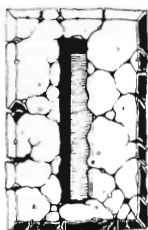




INTRODUCTION

PROLOGUE

—From the writings of Lady Rissa Daevenar



I still remember the first day I saw him. The kaers of the Unprotected had only been open for a year, and he was one of the first from Shosara to make the journey to Court. Like so many of our faraway kinsmen, he was drawn here to the Wood, for even those who rejected our queen's sovereignty in their minds are drawn back by their hearts.

His Name was Aris—a fair-haired man with a gentle face and a strange accent. I saw him first as he approached the palace along a wide, tree-lined boulevard. He was ambling along, marveling at all he saw like a child at a fair. Those of us who live day to day and year to year in the shadow of the palace sometimes forget what a marvel it is, but as he gazed upon it, I saw his eyes mist over with tears. So strong was his emotion that suddenly I too saw the palace as if for the first time. Our hearts touched in that moment, though I was of the Wood and he was not.

Most of those he had journeyed with left after a scant few days, saying they could not bear to witness the corruption they claimed we had wrought. Aris stayed. I took him in, and together we rediscovered the Wood's beauty and wonder. In time, his speech lost the awkward, halting cadences of the Northlands, and he began to feel at home. Sometimes he told me of life in the underground kaers, or of the Horrors that still roamed the land and preyed upon the Unprotected. Hearing these tales, I thanked the Passions that Queen Alachia had spared us such terrors, and wished that Aris had not suffered them.

I knew that I loved him, and believed he loved me. But I also feared that deep in his heart, he secretly felt as his companions had—that I and those like me were abominations, living perversions of the elven spirit. My joy knew no bounds the day he told me that he no longer wished to return to Shosara. I knew then that our hearts were truly one.

We chose to be married a fortnight after, and made the needful preparations. With some hesitation, I reminded Aris of the most important one—that in order to stay in Blood Wood, he must undergo the Ritual of the Thorns. He agreed at once, gazing at me with such love in his eyes that my momentary fears vanished. To live elsewhere was unthinkable, he said, for the Wood had first brought us together.

The morning of the Ritual, I made him a breakfast of berries and cream. He tried not to show it, but he was frightened of what lay ahead; he scarcely touched his food. But I also saw joy in him, at the thought of what would

come after—our wedding, and the rest of our lives together. For this he would face any fear, pay any price. Two blood warders came to escort him to the Ritual site, and with a kiss on the forehead I sent him on his way. The morning passed slowly toward noon; then the shadows began to lengthen. I whiled away the time as best I could, reading and embroidering—anything to keep my hands busy and my ears from listening for a step outside my door.

It was after dark when the warders arrived and asked me to come with them. My breath caught in my throat. "Is he ... did he survive the Ritual?"

The taller of the warders nodded, his eyes cast downward. "He lives. But you must come now, Lady Rissa. We have little time."

Through a maze of hedges we hurried, until we came to a small entrance near the back of the palace. I could hear his screams from outside the doorway.

Inside, I beheld a sight I still tremble to recall. The warders had bound him—shackled my beloved Aris to a wall to keep him from hurting himself. The soft cushions they had placed on the floor for him to sit on had been torn to bits and scattered around the room. His skin was pink and tender where the thorns had first pierced him, and he stared wildly around like a feral animal. The shards of a shattered goblet had been swept out of his reach, and streaks of blood smeared the carpet. The dark red slashes on his wrists told me where that blood had come from. I looked at the warders, wordlessly asking for reassurance.

"For some, the Ritual is harder than others, my lady," the taller one said. "Those who undergo it late in life sometimes find the change ... unsettling. So it is written in the accounts of the first Ritual. If the will is strong, the danger soon passes." He hesitated, then continued in a hushed voice. "I fear those who have lived so long Unprotected have a harder time of it. It is possible ... it is possible that this madness may not pass. He may be too weak to withstand it." He glanced at me, then away. "I'm sorry, my lady."

I turned back to my beloved. He was panting and sobbing like a wounded dog; his wailing ceased only when he gasped for breath. As I took a step toward him, the warder laid a hand on my arm. "Have a care, lady. He may not recognize you."

Slowly, I walked over to my Aris. Our eyes met, and in his gaze I saw a flash of recognition. He stared at me, tears welling up and spilling down his cheeks. I reached out to embrace him, but he shrank from me, muttering. "... Don't touch ... please ... no more ... the pain ..."

Gently, I loosed the bonds that held him. He sank to the floor, weeping. I caught the warders' eyes and





motioned for them to give us a moment alone. As the door clicked shut behind them, I knelt next to Aris and took his hand in mine. The world turned red and misty, but with all my strength I kept my own tears from falling. I must be strong for him now. I would be strong.

He closed his eyes and lay quiet. I could feel him trembling. "Rissa," he whispered. "Make it go away. I won't survive this. I can't. Please, love ... I can't live like this."

I said nothing. There was nothing to say.

After a time, he spoke again. "Can't you take the pain away? Can't someone take it away?" He sounded small and fragile and utterly exhausted, like a little child forced to learn too early that sometimes nightmares are real.

I pressed his hand to my lips. His new-grown thorns tore the tender flesh, and I tasted my own blood. He raised his free hand to touch my cheek; the thorns on his fingertips left faint red marks on my skin. I bent down and kissed him on the lips. At the taste of our mingled blood, he cried out in despair and wept once more. We sat there for an eternity, he with his head pillowed in my lap, until at last he was too exhausted to go on sobbing.

Some while later, the warders came. With their help, I brought my Aris home.

He was no stronger the next day, nor the next. No salve, no draught or anything else I gave him seemed to ease his pain. I longed to hold him, but he would not let me. He refused food and drink; he could not speak, but wept without ceasing from daybreak until long after nightfall. I lay as close beside him at night as he would permit, watching the moon rise high above the trees until I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. So it went, day upon hopeless day.

I had thought him so strong, so brave. And he was. I had thought he loved me, and he did. But all his love, his strength, his courage, was not enough against the pain of Protection to one so long denied it.

Seven days after the Ritual—our chosen wedding day—I woke to silence. The pallet beside me was empty. When I saw this, joy filled my heart; it seemed I had been wrong to despair. He was over the worst at last; my beloved had found the strength to fight his agony and live. He would stay with me forever, and all would be well.

I found him sitting at the table, slumped across it as if asleep. I crept up beside him. I could hardly bear to wake him from his first peaceful slumber, and yet I needed to share my joy and love and hope with him. On his face was a look of peace I had not seen since our first days together, when we had shared the sight of the afternoon sun gleaming rich and golden off the walls of the elf queen's palace. And as I gazed at him, my joyfulness ebbed like a slow tide.

It was not the peace of sleep that held him. It was the peace of death.

I reached out and touched him, not wanting to believe. His cheek felt cool. As I bent over him, I smelled the too-



familiar sweetness of kenayah flowers. In little doses, kenayah brings sleep and forgetting ... but from the bitter tang beneath the sweetness, I knew that Aris had taken enough to poison himself. The pain of Protection had driven him to the madness of self-destruction.

My legs refused to hold me up, and I sank to the floor. I do not know how long I stayed there, my head resting against my dead beloved's knee. He had slain more than himself in the small hours of night; he had also slain my heart. Compared to that, the pain of the thorns was nothing.

All I have left are memories now ... memories, and the twin roses we had meant to braid into a marriage-knot. The blooms have long since dried to sweet-scented kernels





of dark red ... the very color of the blood that runs from the thorns that pierce me. I wear the roses in a small leather pouch that hangs around my neck, close to my heart. And I wonder why the heart of my beloved could not withstand the Ritual.

The Unprotected have their answer, of course. They say that the Ritual forever sundered our hearts from theirs. Some of our own people say this too ... a few with sorrow, most with pride.

I do not know the truth of it. But while I wear the roses, I can never forget the question.



The Blood Wood is a sourcebook for the **Earthdawn** game system. This book describes the vast, dark forest that forms Barsaive's northern boundary and stands as a testimony to the terrible lengths to which the Elven Court went in order to save themselves from the Scourge. Elsewhere in Barsaive, people lost loved ones or died at the hands of the Horrors; the elves of the Blood Wood survived, but corrupted themselves to do it.

The book begins with an **Overview** of the Blood Wood, including a brief description of the forest's geography and a detailed look at the Ritual of Thorns, the powerful rite of blood magic that transformed the Wood from a beautiful wonderland to a place of dark mystery. The **History** of the Elven Court and the Blood Wood follows the Overview. The next section is devoted to **The Elven Court**, which describes the Court's hierarchy, significant characters and relations with lands beyond the Wood's borders. This section also includes a detailed description of the elf queen's palace, one of the great wonders of the **Earthdawn** world. **The Forest's Heart**, **The Northern Reaches**, **The Western Border** and **The Southern Fringe** describe the history, people and places of the four main regions of the Blood Wood. The **Game Information** section includes rules for playing blood elf characters, game mechanics and statistics for the Blood Wood's defenses, and new magical and treasure items. The final section offers detailed descriptions and game statistics for the unique plants and creatures native to the Blood Wood.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The **Blood Wood** sourcebook provides gamemasters with all the information needed to run an extensive campaign set in and around the Blood Wood. Aside from the **Earthdawn** rulebook, no other materials are needed to use this product, though gamemasters may find other published **Earthdawn** products helpful. The information on the traditional elven culture provided in **Denizens of Earthdawn, Volume One**, will help players and gamemas-

ters understand the unique culture that has developed in the Blood Wood. General information on the rest of Barsaive and a brief overview of the Blood Wood appears in **An Explorer's Guide to Barsaive** in the **Barsaive Campaign Set**. In addition to the new and unique creatures presented in this book, gamemasters can find more creatures for their characters to face in **Creatures of Barsaive**, and players may want to give their characters some of the additional abilities described in the **Earthdawn Companion** and **Earthdawn Gamemaster Pack**. The **Blood Wood** also picks up on many of the events that have recently taken place in Barsaive, including the arrival of the Theran behemoth at Lake Ban and the assassination of King Varulus III, both described in **Prelude to War: An Earthdawn Epic**.

This book presents many first-person fictional accounts from characters in the **Earthdawn** universe, useful as a guide to the atmosphere of the Blood Wood and as jumping-off points for story lines. For example, the player characters might become involved in the quest of the Seekers of the Heart, the living legend cult dedicated to healing the Forest's Heart, or they might meet Nabiyen Perichus, the captain of the *Cyclone*, the doomed riverboat destroyed by the path magic that guards the border of the Blood Wood. The politics, mysteries and corruption of the Blood Wood, as well as the myriad people, places and situations described in this book can provide the backdrop or catalyst for countless adventures in and around the Wood. Many of the prominent characters in the Blood Wood have their own goals, aims and agendas, and the success of their plans often requires outside assistance—assistance that adventuring groups of player characters can provide, either willingly or not. These plans may require player characters to enter the Blood Wood clandestinely; to travel in company with blood elves outside the Wood, facing the censure and hatred of other Name-givers; to seek out legendary treasures or spells; or even to return a wandering blood elf to his home, perhaps to suffer some unimaginable fate.

Though the material offered in this book is presented as fact and should be treated as accurate in terms of FASA's **Earthdawn** continuity, remember that you are the ultimate author of your campaign. If a fact in this sourcebook contradicts something you have already established in your game, or if some element established for the Wood simply does not fit in your version of the **Earthdawn** world, change it to fit your game.

The statistics for most of the gamemaster characters described in this product are presented in an abbreviated format, especially those characters not intended as combatants. As your player characters are unlikely to slug it out with Queen Alachia or the leader of the blood warders, statistics for these characters include only the step numbers for their Attributes.

