

ruin

THE GHOST ISLE



SAMSUNLOBE

Chapter 1 - The First Scar

"It is the search that brings excitement. When you eventually find what you are looking for, there is elation, but this joy is short lived. There are also things in this world that should remain undiscovered."

- Tiam

"Good and Evil are only different perspectives. When all the facts are laid bare, that which appeared foul, may yet stand true, and that which sought the light, may actually dwell in darkness."

- Mossen. King of the Fawna.

Ruin pulled the fur cloak over his massive shoulders. He was used to the cold, but the winds that tore through the streets of his home town of Kolongor had a keen edge that seemed to cut deep into the flesh.

It had been almost two cycles since his exile from Pureia. He remembered his vow to return and destroy the corruption that currently infested the once great civilisation. He smiled to himself as he thought about his initial dream to lead a conquering army and have the authorities kneel in shame at his feet, and how far that was from reality. Rather than the glorious, golden return, here he was sneaking through the streets under the cover of darkness. He remembered the young man he had been when he had once called this place home. He was a very different person now. The world he had thought he knew was now also a very different place.

He slid into the shadows at the sound of voices ahead. Three men had just stumbled out of a tavern. The lead man staggered and his foot sank into a muddy puddle. As he tried to drag it free, his foot popped out from his left boot and he fell backwards into the street. The drunken man's companions laughed raucously as their friend tried to retrieve his wayward boot. Ruin chuckled to himself.

"Some things will never change."

One of the men looked in Ruin's direction. The big warrior bowed his head, hiding his burning yellow eyes, and slid into a side street. Rain drops started to darken the ground and he quickened his pace. He shielded his face as he looked up to the black sky. He saw a feathered flash, and then watched as a small blue bird landed on a protruding pulley block on the building opposite.

"Not far now Malone" said Ruin talking directly at the strange creature.

The bird chirped as it shook the raindrops from its blue plumage. Ruin loped down the familiar alleyways as the rain turned from a light shower to a deluge. He skidded to a stop outside a tiny door. He ducked under the porch attempting to shelter his large frame from the downpour. Malone fluttered in and landed on his shoulder. The bird flicked its wings coating Ruin's face in droplets. Ruin glared at Malone revealing one of his fangs. The blue *Syanopterix* slowly blinked its glassy eyes in a nonplussed reply. Ruin turned his head and rapped on the door. After what seemed like an age he heard shuffling on the other side.

A small peephole opened and a wizened eye stared through.

"What do you want?" came the gruff voice from inside.

"It's me, Ruin" replied the sodden warrior.

"So? I asked what you wanted, not who you were" came the reply.

"I'm getting soaked out here Uncle, just let me in, I need to talk to you" complained Ruin.

The eye behind the door scanned the scene.

"What's that thing on your shoulder?"

"His name is Malone. He is a friend of mine" replied Ruin.

There was a long pause whilst the old man inside the cottage considered the reply.

"They told me you were dead" he said finally.

"Well I'm not" said Ruin growing impatient. "Are you going to open this door or do I have to kick it in?"

"Alright, alright" moaned the old man. The securing bolts clacked and the small door creaked inward. Ruin ducked under the architrave. "Nothing but trouble your family. Nothing but trouble" grumbled the old man.

"You are part of that family" Ruin retorted.

"Nothing but trouble" continued the old man as he shuffled towards his chair next to the glowing hearth. "Make yourself useful boy. Fetch a log for the fire."

Ruin scanned the room. The logs were piled up next to the fireplace, almost leaning against the old man's chair where he sat. Ruin stalked towards his seated uncle. He reached down and tore the arm from the old man's chair and tossed it onto the fire. He stared into his uncle's wrinkled face defiantly. Laughter rang out around the room.

"Just like your father" laughed the old man.

"It's good to see you too Uncle Tiam" replied Ruin.

Tiam listened intently as Ruin regaled a potted history of his time in exile. He explained about the emergence of the Wyrms and Drakes and their intention to destroy the race of man. Tiam remained emotionless, with only the slightest raise of a grey eyebrow betraying any acknowledgment of what he was hearing.

Ruin stared into the flames and continued to tell his story. He told his uncle about his friends. Firstly about the pale skinned Efferial, who had originally presented herself as a mercenary but then had turned out to be the daughter of the King of Kanta. Then there was Kail. An apprentice sorcerer he had met in Elohim where he was barely able to look after himself. Now with the essence of the Celestial Wymr, Freymendour imprisoned within his chest, he was probably one, if not the, most powerful man in Mareta. Ruin neglected to fill his uncle in on the dual personality and irrational behaviour Kail now exhibited. Not that it would have mattered as a loud snore rattled from the old man's vicinity.

Ruin glanced at his sleeping uncle. His mouth was agape and his head had lolled to one side. Ruin shot out his foot, cracking it against the chair. The jolt woke Tiam and the old man sat bolt upright.

"So what do you think?" asked Ruin staring back at the flames.

"Um, well yes of course" stammered Tiam.

"So you agree?" continued Ruin.

"Of course" stated Tiam, still trying to feign comprehension.

"Good. I had thought it would take more to convince you. You'll follow Malone." Ruin nodded in the direction of the bird on the mantle place who was busy preening. "He'll take you to my friends and then onto the College. I'm sure the Grand Archive will have some information on the whereabouts of Lore's tomb."

"Okay, Okay. I nodded off " conceded Tiam. "But you have a very monotone storytelling voice."
Ruin chuckled.

"So what's this about the tomb of Lore? What have I agreed to do?"

asked Tiam.

"It would be ancient history, pre-history maybe. If any tales were even recorded then I am guessing they would be part of the Archive. Seeing as you were probably alive at the time I thought you could help find them."

Tiam leant forward in his chair. At one point in his life he had been well muscled and a considerable warrior. Now the creaks from his bones were hard to distinguish from that of the rickety chair he sat in.

"I'm not too old to teach you a lesson" he threatened.

"Yes you are Uncle" said Ruin without turning. "I will meet you there shortly, I have some business I need to take care of first. I'll need a weapon."

"I know that tone boy. It's what got your father killed. Vengeance is a harsh pill to swallow. If what you say is true, then we have bigger things to worry about than settling old scores. That is what you intend I assume?"

"My father died at the hand of a coward. It is not vengeance Uncle, it is justice" said Ruin sternly.

"Whose justice? Yours?"

"When all others who pretend to uphold the law are corrupt, then yes, my justice will have to suffice."

"And who judges you?" continued Tiam.

"I am sure my tide will come soon enough. Now do you have a weapon or not?"

Tiam gently eased himself from the broken chair and shuffled toward a studded chest in the corner. He opened the domed lid and reached inside. He took out an object wrapped in cloth. He handed it to Ruin.

"It was your father's."

Ruin carefully unwrapped the oil soaked rag. Inside was an exquisite dagger. The hilt was wound with gold wire and the round pommel held a large blood red ruby in a striking Asscher cut. He drew the blade. It slowly tapered into a fine point. The steel had wave pattern which showed the steel had been folded

hundreds of times. It was priceless.

"How come you never sold it? You could have lived in luxury, this is worth a small fortune" enquired Ruin.

"There are some things that have a value beyond gold my boy" replied Tiam.

"True" said Ruin turning the dagger over in his hands. "But why have you never told me about this knife before? You told me that the only thing my father left me was a necklace. Why did you keep this from me?"

"Where is that necklace now?" asked Tiam.

"It accompanied another I would have gladly called 'father' to the afterlife" said Ruin.

"I see" said Tiam clearly seeing the sadness in the young warrior's face. "Well the reason I never gave it to you is because you would probably have cut someone's throat with it."

Ruin slid the blade back into the sheath and tucked the knife into his belt.

"You know me too well Uncle" smiled Ruin bearing his fangs.

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Water flowed down either side of the street. The main routes through Kolongor were cobbled and had a well engineered camber that allowed water to run off into the open drains. A heavy storm was always a welcome event in the city as it washed the detritus and human waste from its arteries.

Ruin crossed the wide market street and leapt up the steps to the municipal hall. As he moved under the cover of the vast roof above he removed his hood and shook the surplus water from his clothes. The first light of dawn was threatening to break the night sky. Soon the area in front of him would be swarming with traders setting up their stalls for another tide's trading.

He spun in a flurry of fur and leather and pushed open the large studded door to the building. The municipal hall housed the law courts, the gaol, the city administration and more importantly to Ruin the offices of the Shadow-wards. They were the appointed keepers of law and order within Pureia. They had powers of arrest and sentencing. One such officer of the law walked towards the large warrior that had just entered.

The Shadow-ward was about to issue a challenge to the stranger when a jewelled dagger thudded into his skull. The man collapsed onto the cold stone floor. Ruin placed a boot on the dead man's chest and yanked the blade free from his forehead. He wiped the dagger across his thigh before returning it to his belt.

He continued into the building. He knew his way through the labyrinth of corridors having spent more than one occasion residing in the prison cells. He threw open the door to the office of Shadow-wards. There were three men inside. One was stretched back in his chair sound asleep. The other two were playing cards. They looked up.

"What can we do for you stranger?" asked the Shadow-ward.

"I am looking for Talweer" said Ruin.

"He is not here" said the other man. "What is your business?" Ruin smiled.

"I am here to talk to Talweer about punishment for a lifetime of crime" stated Ruin calmly.

The two men got to their feet, and one threw a deck of cards at the sleeping guard. He flailed as he woke and fell from his chair. He was about to berate his colleagues when he saw the towering figure of Ruin next to him. He slowly climbed to his feet.

"This stranger is here to be punished apparently" laughed one of the other Shadow-wards.

Those chosen to uphold the law, were mainly accomplished fighters or ex-soldiers. They enjoyed the position of power, and often abused it. In the cycles of relative peace their skills had dulled and they now relied more on their badge of authority than their physical ability to enforce the law.

The warrior that now stood in their midst was of a different breed. His cycles in exile had honed his already formidable fighting skills. His muscles twitched in involuntary anticipation and his senses strained absorbing as much information as his brain could process. He eyed his prey. He needed no badge. He was a killing machine.

Flinging back his cloak Ruin crouched low and in one swift movement drew his dagger and thumped it into the stomach of the Shadow-ward nearest to him.

As he stood, he drew the blade up through the torso of the gagging man almost lifting him from the floor. The sharp dagger tore open his chest and the man's intestines bulged out from the bloody slit.

Ruin span and ducked forward under the oncoming charge of the next Shadow-ward. As the guard over-stretched himself, Ruin dug his shoulder into the man's stomach and then forced his legs upward flipping him like a child, into the air. He didn't stop to see where the guard landed but shot forward and stabbed the remaining Shadow-ward through the hand as he was struggling to draw his sword. The power of the blow pinned his hand through his side and into his pelvic bone.

Turning again Ruin prepared to face the rising guard. He scrambled and slipped as the pooling blood from the first Shadow-ward hampered his ability to stand. He drew his sabre and rushed. Ruin allowed the strike to come. At the last moment he side stepped and parried the Shadow-ward's sword arm. As the blade chinked into the floor Ruin hammered his elbow into the side of the man's head. The blow staggered the guard and the sword fell from his limp arm. Before he could regain any composure Ruin repeated the blow but this time with his other arm pulling the Shadow-ward's head towards his elbow. With nowhere to move the blow pulverised the skull. Ruin allowed the dead man to fold onto the floor before returning to the last survivor.

The man attempted to scramble away, his arm still pinned to his body. Ruin stooped over the Shadow-ward and placed one hand around the man's neck and in a sudden movement lifted him into the air.

"As I said. My business is punishment. I am looking for Talweer. Where can I find him?" snarled Ruin as he brought the man's face to meet his own.

"I don't know" replied the man through gritted teeth.

Ruin allowed the Shadow-ward to drop onto his feet and then reached down and tore his dagger free. The man screamed twice. The first time as the pain flared in his side as the weapon was ripped away, the second as the knife stabbed back into his shoulder.

"I won't be asking you again" warned Ruin.

"He'll be here at first light" stammered the man through bloodied lips. "His shift starts in morning."

Ruin pulled the dagger from the man's shoulder and with a twist of his hips he

threw the Shadow-ward across the room. The man landed heavily shattering a wooden desk. Cleaning the blade with one hand Ruin pulled up a chair with the other and sat back to wait.

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"Not so fast bird!" complained Tiam.

Malone squawked and hopped excitedly up and down on top of two large iron gates.

"What's all the fuss?..." Tiam jumped back in surprise as two figures emerged from the shadows.

"Are you Ruin's uncle?" said the man.

"Yes. My name is Tiam. You scared the Hele out of me boy. Don't you know it's impolite to jump out on somebody. Especially a person of my age, this adventure may have ended before it had started."

The subtle humour of the old man was lost on Kail.

"Our apologies. Our name is Kail and this is Effi."

"It's nice to meet you" added Efferial. "I've been intrigued to meet a relation of Ruin. It's hard to imagine he has a family. I sort of believed he was just born in a cave to Fenwolves or something" she chuckled.

"You have no idea how close to the truth that is my dear" replied Tiam.

"Really?" Efferial's interest was piqued.

"No of course not" smiled Tiam. "He is just a man." Tiam winked. Kail moved closer to the old man and lent in.

"We all know that is a lie" whispered Kail.

Tiam looked genuinely shocked by the young sorcerer's comment. He took a moment to consider his response.

"Does he know?" asked Tiam.

"He does not" answered Kail.

"Then how do you?" inquired Tiam.

"We see that which others cannot. Let's speak of this no more. Things are complicated enough."

"Agreed" said Tiam.

"What are you two whispering about?" asked Efferial. "It will be light soon, we should get going. Ruin said that you may be able to help us?"

"Yes" replied Tiam. "The Pureian College of Arms is vast as is the Grand Archive. We should get going. I'll need a hand climbing this gate" smiled the old man.

"That won't be necessary" said Kail as he moved toward the towering gates to the college campus. He reached out his hand and placed it on the lock mechanism. Blue light flickered and wisped around his outstretched arm and the gate plinked open. Kail walked through without looking back.

The college was situated on the hills overlooking the great port of Kolongor. It had once stood separate but the sprawling city now reached its walls. The Pureian College of Arms was recognised as the foremost seat of learning for martial strategy and combat throughout Mareta. Kings and Princes from foreign shores had studied there, but its main intake was from the young men from Pureia itself. Fiercely independent, the island nation had always put great stock in its ability to defend itself from all invaders. The college was central to that belief.

The campus was old. Some of the most ancient structures in all Pureia. For a stranger the vast collection of buildings could easily have been mistaken for a royal palace, such was the grandeur of their construction. The Grand Archive was a prime example. Towering pillars supported a white marble roof. The footprint of the building formed a cross, and rising from the centre was a colossal dome. As the trio entered the halls, the interior was no less impressive.

"This place is amazing" whispered Efferial, unsure as to why she was whispering.

Tiam smiled.

"Have you not been here before my dear?" he asked.

"I have travelled throughout this land" replied Efferial. "It is just that this building is not..." she paused. "How can I put it? It is not in-keeping with the people of Pureia" she suggested.

"That is true enough" laughed the old man. "What is a race of 'barbarians' doing with such refined architecture? And in a place of learning? It is a legacy of our forebears that the typical Pureian man is perfectly suited to combat at least physically. Our forefathers also realised that brute strength alone was not enough. This place was built to train the minds of our soldiers as well as their bodies. I think that perhaps some of those early values have been lost over time."

"Did Ruin attend this college?" asked Efferial.

"He did" said Tiam.

"Then I agree" smiled Efferial. "Unless he was absent for most classes any refinement of thought has bypassed him."

Kail interrupted.

"Where are we headed? Time is short."

"What's the rush Kail?" asked Efferial.

"No amount of Pureian muscle can save them from the next invasion" replied Kail.

"They are coming here?" asked Efferial shocked.

"They are already here. We sense them"

Tiam coughed.

"Erm, excuse me. Who is already here? What are you talking about? And what's with the 'we' business?"

Efferial shook her head frantically. Kail ignored them both.

"Wyrmkind" stated the sorcerer.

Tiam laughed. He looked at the expressions on his companions faces and then abruptly stopped.

"You're not joking are you? I thought Ruin had lost his mind. They don't exist. They can't. It's just legend surely?"

"They are very real Tiam. Everything Ruin told you about them is true" replied Efferial.

"I wish I'd listened now" mumbled Tiam. "And they are here now? In Pureia? What is their purpose here?"

"They are very close. Their purpose is only to cleanse" said Kail.

"We must warn the city guard, we must...."
Kail held up his hands.

"This is one fight we cannot win. They are here en masse. Warnings would be futile and a waste of our time. Here let me show you." Kail placed his hands gently on either side of Tiam's head. Images of chaos and devastation tore into the old man's mind as Kail replayed the visions of Argonosis annihilating the city of Trakonia. "That is just one of them" stated Kail.

Tiam breathed deeply. He looked up at Kail and Efferial, it seemed he had a new spark in his eyes. His survival instinct had kicked in.

"Let's go. This way" instructed the old man.

"How do you know this place so well? Were you a student here also?" asked Efferial.

Tiam laughed.

"Yes I was. But that was some while ago. I was a tutor here my dear. I was a professor of Historical Studies for forty-two cycles."

"Did you teach Ruin?" asked Efferial intrigued.

"Well, I would have done. That's if he had turned up to any of my lessons" chuckled Tiam.

Talweer walked proudly towards the municipal hall. He was always on time. He had taken his recent promotion to Shadow-ward Prime very seriously. He had always revelled in his position of authority, and he had thought that it was due to his unwavering dedication to his duty that had earned him this new position. He had made a few decisions in his time that he wasn't proud of, but they had long since slipped conveniently from his memory. His new role saw him oversee the other Shadow-wards, rule on controversial cases and assess new recruits. His days of patrolling the dirty streets of Kolongor were over. He smiled as he thought of the comfortable office that awaited him.

His serene state of mind was rudely interrupted as he saw one of the administration assistants running down the steps of the Hall. She looked very distressed.

"What is it?" asked Talweer.

"Please, come quickly Master Prime. There's been a terrible incident." Talweer quickened his pace and leapt the steps two at a time. The main entrance way was full of people. They had formed a rough circle. Talweer pushed his way through to see the dead body on the floor.

"What happened here?" demanded Talweer. The shaking assistant stood forward and grabbed the Prime's arm.

"He is still here. The man that did this. He is waiting in your office."

Talweer shook off the woman's hands and drawing his short sword strode into the hallway. There were twelve Shadow-wards standing outside the room, all with their weapons ready. Talweer noticed the blood seeping from under the door.

"What's going on? Why haven't you gone in and apprehended this man?" demanded the Prime. One of the guards stepped forward.

"Olas and Jakob went in Master Prime. That is their blood" He gestured to the crimson liquid that had spread to their boots. "He said he was waiting for you. He promised no more bloodshed until you arrived."

"Did he now?" Talweer's heart was racing. He had not seen his men this afraid, ever. He slowly tried to push the door open. One of the dead Shadow-wards was obstructing it. He leant his shoulder into it moving the body and door at the same time. He put his hand over his mouth to stifle the rising bile in his stomach. The room was drenched in blood. He looked up to

see a mountain of a man sat at the end of the room. The man raised his head. Recognition and surprise flicked across Talweer's mind as he looked into the golden eyes.

"You! I thought were you dead!" exclaimed the Prime. Ruin stood, and flexed his chest muscles.

"A few have made that same mistake" said Ruin.

"What have you done here? You'll face execution for this. Why did you come back?" Questions raced through Talweer's mind. Ruin stalked towards his prey.

"I promised you I would return. I am a man of my word" answered Ruin.

"These men you killed, they were innocent. What have you become?"

"As you rightly pointed out to me when you had my father executed, no-one is truly innocent. What was it you said? He would repay for his sins in death. I think that was it. As to what I have become, well honestly, I'm really not sure. I guess in this situation I am judgement."

Talweer looked into the fierce yellow eyes of the warrior in front of him. He could see the hatred raging like a caged animal, awaiting release.

"I have always been a man of the law. I have upheld the position bestowed upon me as best I could. Your anger is misguided Ruin. I will not give you the satisfaction of fighting me." Talweer dropped his sword onto the sticky floor.

"Strike me down and you will never leave this building. You will be tried and stoned. Surrender to me now, and I promise you a fair trial. Your past will be taken into consideration" promised Talweer his voice faltering slightly.

Visions of lost friends swam in Ruin's mind and the fog of anger clouded any remaining compassion. At that same moment the entire building shook as if it had been picked up and thumped back down. Dust and plaster fell from the ceiling as an ear-splitting roar almost knocked them over. Ruin laughed.

"What have you done?" insisted the Prime.

"Part of me wishes you could witness what is about to happen to this city" growled Ruin. He took one step closer to Talweer. "This is your last chance to die with a weapon in your hand Shadow-ward." The building shook once again and the sound of panicked screams found their ears.

"All this for revenge?" asked Talweer.

"Justice, punishment, revenge, it matters not" said Ruin. He swiped his hand outwards and the jewelled dagger sliced through the Prime's windpipe. Talweer clasped his hands around his throat but could not stem the blood that pumped between his fingers. He sagged to his knees still holding his neck. He looked up to speak, but only blood flowed from his lips.

A dust cloud billowed in from the corridor as a loud crash made the remaining Shadow-wards brace against the walls.

"Your city is under attack" stated Ruin. "They will burn it to the ground. You can stay here and try to stop me leaving. Or you can return to your families and get them away from this place. Either way I don't fancy your chances." The big man smiled revealing his right fang.

The building shook violently as if rocked by an earthquake. Ruin sensed the shift in air temperature and dived to the floor just as a cloud of Drake-Fire burst into the corridor incinerating the Shadow-wards. Ruin climbed to his feet and discarded his smouldering fur cloak and stepped over the charred remains. He ran down the corridor jumping over the rubble and the numerous black corpses. As he approached the central reception he saw a gargantuan dark shape swoop past the destroyed doorway. The ground beneath his feet shook as the leviathan hammered into the ground outside and issued a roar which would have defied the Gods.

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Efferial held out her hand and helped Tiam climb the final steps to their viewpoint. They had managed to escape from the College just as the Wyrms had descended. It had been a laboured escape as they had to travel at the slow pace of the old man. The trio stood and looked out over the port of Kolongor. Black shapes dived and swooped above the burning city.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" said Kail.

"You are joking of course" snapped Efferial.

Kail broke from his intoxicated trance.

"Of course we are" he assured her.

Efferial chose to ignore the comment.

"Did he make it out?" she asked.

"Yes" said Kail. "He is almost with us."

She looked at Kail. She had a feeling that Kail the man was not currently in control, and that the spirit of Freymendour sought to be with her kin as they reigned down molten fire on the unsuspecting city. Kail spun as if hearing her thoughts. He looked her in the eye. Blue light washed around his iris, but he said nothing. Efferial span as she heard a branch snap. She smiled as she saw the large frame of Ruin climb the hill.

"Still as stealthy as ever" she teased. Ruin was about to reply but had to stop to catch his breath.

"You're out of shape my boy" added Tiam.

"Any more insults?" enquired Ruin as he took in another lungful of air. He turned to Tiam. "Did you find anything uncle?"

"I think so." The old man drew out a small leather bound book from his satchel. "This is one of the oldest volumes in the Archive. It is written in ancient Pureian. I am a bit rusty on the old tongue, but if we are to find anything on this 'Lore' character then this is our best bet."

"Good" said Ruin. "Let's get further into the hills. The Wyrms will surely scour the countryside around the city looking for stragglers."

Efferial and Tiam started to walk down the hill and Ruin was about to follow, when Kail placed his hand on the big man's arm stopping him.

"We would have a word" said Kail quietly.

"What is it?" asked Ruin.

"The path you tread is the road to darkness. We know what burns inside you. It is something that must remain hidden. You must control your anger."

"It is anger that has kept me alive this long" smiled Ruin. "Besides are you really lecturing me on the road to darkness? You are not exactly the same person I first met in Elohim."

"Yes, we have changed. But we know what we are. We are at peace. Our decisions are not clouded by fear or anger" suggested the sorcerer.

"Careful Kail" warned Ruin.

"We mean no offence. It is your fear of failure to which we refer. You also know how anger sways your hand. How many did you kill back in the city? How many needed to die? As this world falls apart it is you that will lead the resistance. We would make sure that you are fit to do so."

Ruin felt the rage starting to boil inside him. He saw the knowing look on Kail's face. He stifled the feeling.

"I'm sure you and your shadowed passenger will be there if I step out of line" said Ruin. He turned and ran after Efferial and Tiam.

"We will" Kail said to himself. "We will."