

# Chapter 1



Soft whispers of late summer air licked the underbrush in which Dugan lay sleeping beneath a mid-afternoon sun. His dreams were awash with fire, blood and revenge. Years of slavery, abuse and combat reflected back at him as a prism, a kaleidoscope of death and carnage. It was from these nightmares he sought escape, but instead they hounded him during the day, and hunted him in his slumber.

Dugan wasn't aware of the date. Time had been erased for him in terms of days and years-only moments mattered now. He devoured them as they came, like a ravenous dog with his fallen prey.

He was Telborian, a race of humans that dominated most of the central and eastern lands, called the Midlands, of Tralodren. They were a fair-skinned people, tall and robust; with light- to medium-shaded hair. To most other races, the Telborians represented the only form of human they would ever encounter, but they were only one of four forms of humans populating the wide, diverse planet.

The figure of Dugan was different than most of his kin. He was ripe with muscles and battle scars, stood slightly more than six feet in height, and looked to have been chiseled out of stone. Even as he slumbered, there was a certain sternness, a dispassionate grace about him. He was more animal than human; being trained to fight on command and for no other reason than sport. Compared to the normal Telborian, he was something of a savage.

The breeze rustled the leaves above his head, softly caressing his blond hair. The Telborian awoke with a jerk. His movements were sudden and swift as he scanned the surrounding forest. His

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eyes moved with his head and, at some intervals, it appeared as if he were sniffing the air.

He occasionally cocked his head, exposing an ear to the breeze, hoping to catch the smallest sound, perhaps a snapping twig or lone shout or cry of discovery. His training had served him well in the arena, where he slew beast and man at the end of a chain and whip. Now those same skills would be used against his former masters.

From his position he could see for a good twenty feet in each direction, his body somewhat camouflaged by the blooming undergrowth where he'd hidden. His muscles tensed, causing a myriad of scars to appear on his bare upper torso. Chief among them was a deep branding mark in the form of a stylized eagle, which was emblazoned on his flesh like a cattle iron to a cow. It was seared into his left shoulder to serve testimony to his service in the gladiatorial games of the Elven Republic of Colloni.

The Republic used slaves for all manner of services. Those who could work did so, while those who were suited for more sensual occupations became engrossed in those. So, some slaves found themselves as gladiators, fighting for the glory of the court and society.

A gladiator's only possessions were the scars they suffered in their bloody toil. The more marks a gladiator had, the more battles they could claim to have survived, increasing their popularity and thereby ensuring a longer life in the Republic. Those who couldn't claim battle scars found their lives ending in the grave. Gladiators who performed well were allowed to accumulate profit for their owners and in theory themselves. While their owners were free and gained great wealth from their suffering, they were allowed to remain slaves and gain fame to keep it as long as they could survive the rigors of their martial occupation.

Those who failed to meet expectations were either killed within the arena or spared the quick death by the Master of Ceremonies, so they could provide another form of entertainment; a slow and torturous public execution.

The Republic of Colloni was the homeland of elves, who called themselves Elyellium or Elyelmic. Once, they had the

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largest empire the world had ever seen. It dominated three-fourths of Tralodren-but countless wars, rebellions, and the loss of one great leader after another caused the nation to dwindle to its present size, which consisted of a more feudal status with satellite colonies in nearby islands and continents.

Remnants of a once mighty and powerful, echo of glory are all that remained. It held great influence within the Midlands of Tralodren and was often involved in various matters of trade with the Telborian kingdoms and cities to the south and west. However, none of these cities or kingdoms looked favorably on the gladiatorial games (at least in public). Such barbarous acts had evolved in Telborian lands to jousts and contests of honor; though many still relished such blood sport as the elven games.

A hawk screeched off in the distance. Dugan was well aware elven hunters often used hawks to aid them in tracking their prey. He also was aware he was their prey. Hunters seemed to have an affinity for the avians; some had even jokingly speculated they shared the same disposition.

Upon hearing the hawk cry, Dugan began running further into the forest, his massive legs pushing him onward. He'd been running from the hunters for five days now, and knew they would never give up on finding an escaped gladiator. As long as the gladiator was on the island of Colloni, he was fair game to hunt, and retrieve for a bounty.

The amount of the bounty was usually dependent on the fame of the escaped gladiator. In Dugan's case, he would fetch a fine sum. He was a deadly fighter, and drew in large crowds, much to his previous owner's delight. Dugan's escape meant he'd lost a great money-making opportunity.

To the Telborian, it meant he would have to get off the island or be killed. He was surprised more hunters weren't after him, but understood why as well. The manner of his escape, and the reputation he had earned in the arena would chill even the most avarice-inflamed heart.

Whenever a gladiator escaped from the coliseum he was treated as both stolen merchandise and a thief. His owners made money off him through crooked betting, and fixed games. They

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would often try to prevent his escape through harsh rules and penalties. By escaping, the gladiator had broken the rules of the Republic, and once recaptured, the former owners could still make money one final time as they charged admission to watch the offending slave get crucified in the coliseum.

The more popular the gladiator, the larger the crowd, and money purses gathered for the final event. Even in meting out justice, the Republic sought to turn a profit while it taught its bloody lessons.

Dugan knew he was nearing the end of the island from conversations he had heard in the coliseum. Another day or so of running westward would get him to his destination, along the coast. It had taken him longer than he had thought to cross Coloni. Although it was the smaller of many continents that made its home in the Midlands, Dugan was finding it really was much larger than he had first thought. He knew if he kept heading west, he'd come to the coast, as the city of Remolos, from which he fled, was in its center.

A carpet of new growth and decomposing matter was crushed beneath his booted feet as he ran. The Telborian was naked save for a lion hide loincloth adorning his waist, and a pair of well-worn leather boots. His titanic limbs continued to thrust him forward at a rapid pace, making pursuit difficult, but Dugan knew the hunters were out there. They were relentless in their pursuit of the money, and for having caught him.

He didn't want to waste any more time than he had to. He wasn't even slightly skilled in the wood lore these hunters practiced from childhood, so he felt his greatest advantage was in speed, not stealth.

He leapt over a fallen tree.

He thought he heard a hawk cry again.

Not only was it hard to maneuver through the dense brush, but he left a trail so clear even a child could find it. He thought he had chosen the right path of escape. It was certainly the quickest route as far as leaving Remolos was concerned. The path had let him hide well, until he crossed the hills and into another deciduous forest some two nights ago.

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He had no idea, until his escape that the whole of Colloni was spotted with large forests, but he could understand why. The Elyellium, in general, were a nature-loving race, and liked to be surrounded by it. Even their building style reflected this. They would build towering columns and huge, spacious buildings with openings in every wall so they could take in the beauty surrounding them. However, their love was for ordered nature. Gardens had replaced much of the natural flora of the land, and even the forests surrounding cities and towns had been hand-planted long ago and pruned to the whims of the elven emperors. Even leaf litter was cleared at regular intervals.

Dugan stopped suddenly in his tracks. His fiery green eyes squinted as he strained his ears. He thought he heard a barking dog in the distance. His face cringed for a moment as he saw movement in the underbrush behind him.

They were much closer than he'd thought!

Dugan ran for about thirty feet, and then jumped as high as he could up into a thick collection of oak. The colossal muscles in his legs gave him enough of a boost to reach the first branch of a tall tree. Using his great strength, he pulled himself up into the foliage and further cover.

Within moments, two tracking dogs ran out of the underbrush. They stopped for a moment beneath the tree where Dugan was hiding, sniffed around the mossy base for what seemed like an eternity, then began to growl fiercely. Their brown, sleek bodies clawed and pawed the tree as they spied the escaped slave from below. Their jaws salivated with delight as they barked their find to their masters.

Dugan's heart began to beat like a war drum. His muscles tensed and his eyesight began to take on a reddish tint. To a gladiator, these were tell-tale signs the body was preparing for a fight to the death. Dugan had learned this soon enough in the coliseum, and had used them to test himself before each battle. Without these cues he wouldn't have survived as long as he had.

The first sign was reddened vision. Indeed, the whole world seemed to become awash in a spray of blood as the rage boiled from within. The second was the great bursts of energy surging

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though his veins and muscles like small explosions of lightning. The third was the feeling of eerie calm, though his body was a raging engine of war. Together, these skills of the arena, if understood correctly, would put victory into the hand of whoever heeded them. After feeling the signs wash over him, Dugan understood that the warlust was with him, and he could now safely handle any threat.

The mighty Telborian closed his eyes and drowned the growling dogs from his mind, effectively dismissing their loud snarls so he could focus on his plan. It had to be timed just right or his life was forfeited. Straining his hearing beyond the frustrated hounds below, he sat as still as a jungle cat waiting for the arrival of the hunters.

Dugan easily caught sight of the first patch of movement amid the forest growth from his high vantage point. The patch was moving faster toward him with each passing moment. Soon he could hear excited voices and running feet approaching, pounding the ground with no apparent desire for stealth.

Though he spoke the Elyelmic language, known as Elonum, he didn't understand much of the conversation due to their rapid excitement. All he could glean from the yelling was something about rexiums (an elven form of currency), and enjoying his death. Drawing in a breath, he poised himself for the attack. There could be no second chances; no mistakes.

Elves were beings not far removed cosmetically from humans, though to Dugan they always seemed to look like children or weak feminine creatures. They were fair-skinned, but had a smoother, younger look about them, possessing straight medium to dark hair and thin eyebrows. Neither sex could grow body or facial hair (which Dugan found amusing and added to his thoughts of them being childlike) they all displayed pointed ears.

These points weren't that dominate, being little more than half an inch at best above the top of a traditional human ear, but easily noticed from some distance given the 'wolfish' or 'teardrop' shape to the formation of the rest of their ear. The two hunters also followed Elyelmic tradition by keeping their hair cropped

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short and combed forward into bangs resting slightly above their slender eyebrows.

As his final thoughts dwindled down to concentrate on the task at hand, Dugan saw the first figure move out of the forest's undergrowth. He was tall for an elf, about six and a half feet. He wore the leather armor common to all elves engaged in the hunt as it was called; the pursuit of escaped slaves. It was bleached slightly to a dull wheat-brown, instead of the common tree-bark color standard for all hunters Dugan had seen during his years in captivity. Observing this, he realized he was dealing with an experienced hunter, as the discoloration could only have been caused by constant sun exposure. Taking out a skilled hunter would be harder but he was confident he could do it.

A second figure then emerged from the undergrowth. He too wore the armor of a hunter but it looked newer, almost freshly-made. Though it is almost impossible for any human to guess the age of an elf, due to their long lifespan, Dugan surmised the first figure was the other's superior by the way the second carried himself around the first. So, with only one real threat presented to him, the golden-haired slave prepared himself for a fight.

The hunters' reached the tree within seconds. Their senses were heightened as each drew his gladii, a favored weapon of the Elyellium. This weapon was a hiltless blade a little more than two feet in length and half a hand's breath in width.

Both of the hunter's weapons appeared to have seen action in recent days, nicks and other subtle signs of conflicts shimmered from their steel surfaces. Dugan could spy such details even from his vantage point as such details had to be learned in the fights he'd seen— any advantage one could gain over their opponent was greedily hoarded. Dugan could also smell their aroma of sage, nutmeg, and pine sap as it mingled with their sweat and leather dress. Known as the hunter's scent, which was thought to aid them in blending in with their natural surroundings, and keep them from being sensed by animals. Dugan, however, had yet to prove the validity of those claims.

As they neared, Dugan watched closer, not even blinking, should he miss the split second which could serve him as his

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moment to act. The older elf proceeded to move forward with an even gait as the younger one stayed behind him, wary and observant of what was around him.

Seeing his opportunity, Dugan leapt from the tree.

His mighty frame crashed down on the older elf like a lightning flash, knocking him unconscious. The older hunter's body was smashed to the ground, leaving Dugan standing on top of him. The older elf had been pushed face-first into the earth while the gladiator straddled him as if balancing on a log. Dugan's face then took on the scowling look of a wild animal that had found its prey. The younger hunter rambled off something in Elonum as he swung his sword at Dugan. Using his reflexes and years of fighting experience, Dugan dodged the blow easily.

Rushing to charge him head on, the hunter yelled an old elven chant of protection to Aerotription, god of the elven race. This did little good as Dugan grappled the young hunter's blade away from him by crushing the hunter's wrist with a crackle of tendon, bone and flesh.

The gladius fell harmlessly at Dugan's feet.

The young hunter reeled away in pain and horror, grasping his wounded wrist with his opposite hand while rattling off a stream of Elyelmic curses.

It was at that moment the dogs bit into Dugan's tanned flesh. They were trained to take down their prey with the least amount of damage, for 'the better the prey, the better the pay,' went the old hunter slogan. Most of the time this was achieved by attacking the legs, which caused their victim to fall. Unable to move, the prisoner could then be easily captured.

Looking down at the furry pests, Dugan picked both of the beasts up by the scruff of their neck. The vicious snarls and saliva splattering attempts at biting his hands and arms didn't even faze the Telborian. He had fought fiercer beasts in the arena and lived. This whole episode was nothing but a temporary distraction to him at best...and he had grown tired of it.

With a throw that could only be accomplished by the strongest of men, he hurled the protesting animals into the nearest tree. There was a thick thud, a shrieking bark followed by a small

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whimper, then silence. The only thing remaining was a smear of blood trailing down the thick, mossy trunk to the forest floor. At the base of the blood smear the two dogs lay still, their heads bent at awkward angles, their bodies already growing cold.

Dugan then turned his attention to the final threat.

The young hunter looked in panic at Dugan's advancing massive frame, then at the older, unconscious hunter sprawled out beneath the Telborian.

Panic washed anew over his pallid features.

Dugan paced forward, his face full of malice. The elf began to seriously doubt his survival. Everything seemed so surreal, so wrong. In desperation, the young elf charged headlong into Dugan, fists flying like bees on a rampage. It was the final effort of a man who knew he was doomed. The youth was met with trained blows striking his smooth skin.

The young hunter was unconscious in a few seconds.

With the setback overcome, the Telborian stopped a moment to catch his breath, release the warlust, and think...to listen. For a moment, he stood silent amid the fresh carnage, his eyes taking in the whole scene, all his senses in rapt attention. Confident he was once more alone in the wood, he bent down to snap the necks of his would-be captors.

He cracked them as if they were simple twigs rather than sentient flesh. Better than they deserved, but the Telborian didn't have the luxury of time to do much else.

Following this, he quickly began to go through their belongings. Knowing the leather armor was too small for him, as it was often fitted only for its wearer, he picked up the two gladii. They seemed to be relatively new, despite their recent use, and in good condition. He spun them both in a clockwise motion, creating two circles of steel in front of him as he tested the blades. A grim smile crossed the Telborian's lips as he surmised they were workable.

Dugan preferred a longer edged sword himself, but was familiar with all manner of weapons to a certain extent. He'd been introduced to different weapons to add variety to the games. At least now he was armed again, and could face whatever else came

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his way; since he'd lost the weapon he had used to escape, among other things...

Pawing further through the elves' belongings, he found rations that could easily last him a week. He was glad they were elven rations, as they were well-balanced between meat, grains, and sweets. The variety would help him remain healthy while also permitting him to make them last longer than normal rations he'd been accustomed to in the coliseum.

Hastily gathering up his findings, Dugan checked his surroundings once more, then was off again. Confident of his greater safety now, at least for a while, he settled into a comfortable jog. Looking around as he ran, he noticed he was getting very close to the ending of the forest by the thinning of the wood. It had begun to slowly recede, and had grown more delicate, as if one were walking out into a great garden. Thin plants, and bushes began to appear as the tall, massive pines, oaks, sycamores, and maples started to disappear.

The Telborian could only guess at what lay beyond here. It could be plains, or more forest, or it could actually be the long-awaited coast. As Dugan had been a gladiator for most of his life, he had never traveled anywhere beyond the coliseum, or his cell in its darkened bowels. To run through the unknown of the island nation where they called him slave was an adventure undreamt of by all his imagination...and frightening.

For years, Dugan had known only enclosed spaces as home, but as he was confronted with miles of open space and a real sense of unlimited freedom growing fast upon his soul and spirit, a strange sense of dizziness and weakness absorbed him. In his old home, he was the champion and master of his domain. Even if he had been a slave, in the places where he could rule and reign: his cell, the arena, he was lord and master. In the lands he now roamed, however, he felt small and insignificant, as a bird in flight is lost when compared to the sky it inhabits.

Dugan grew more cautious. If he was reaching the end of the forest, he would be that much easier to catch. In the open field or even hill country, hawks and other hunters would find him that much easier. Over the next few moments of his jog he drew closer

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to a green barrier which seemed to be comprised of vines naturally arranged to form a curtain of sorts before him.

From his past days of travel he had discovered this was a common occurrence with the vines along the edges of all the forests. It was the elven way of using nature to close off one section of terrain from another - a means of ensuring control, keeping order, even amid the randomness of nature.

Dugan knew beyond the vines lay greater freedom, but something held the Telborian back. It wasn't the fear of being in the open, and therefore easily detectable, nor was it the thought of dying as soon as he stepped through the stringy green curtain before him; skewered by elven blades and arrows.

What held him back was a sharp point in the upper right portion of his back. A point reminding him of an arrow tip. Dugan cursed himself for a fool, for not thoroughly watching his back as he had let his confidence get the better of his disciplined senses. He didn't hear him approach until it was too late. If it was another hunter, he knew he was a dead man.

"Turn around...slowly," a voice spoke Telborous, the language of the Telborians, from behind him. It had a strange quality which Dugan couldn't place. It was a medium-ranged tone made to sound lower than what it might be, and had the ring of a strange accent with which the Telborian was unfamiliar with as well.