**Phoenix**

She is not known for her beauty, but rather she is known by her strength and skill as a warrior. She was found in a smoldering field the morning after an unholy and unsolicited sabotage. The village had been transformed from a pleasant medieval hamlet of a dozen families to piles of ashes so deep and seething that no trace of a man, woman, or dog was found in the ruins. Rumors lingered for centuries about *The Incinerated:* those families who simply vanished – traceless, nameless, rootless – erased from the heritage of Fréimhe Crann.

It was three days before anyone could even approach the town. The flames had lingered upon the tallest trees’ limbs for three days and three nights, but by the final night’s end, a curious young boy from a neighboring town ventured into the ashes. The day before the night of the surreptitious attack, his father had asked him to run to the next town to deliver news of the birth of the King and Queen’s new daughter. When Ta Suil had returned home, he realized he had lost the medallion he wore around his neck – for in those days, all people were required to wear the branding of the town in which they were born.

The next morning, the boy ran back to see if he could find his wooden insignia of a dragon. After much searching, he came upon it hanging by a tree branch. As he looked to the gods to praise them for his fortune, he saw billows of smoke reaching to the gods. Simultaneously, he heard the last shrill shrieks of humanity burning alive. His stomach heaved as it was met with the swirling smell of burning flesh and hair and bone.

When he recovered, he ran to see Fréimhe Crann seared to nothingness.

In a blur of tears and fear, he raced to his home of Arach, screaming, “The Darkness, the Dakness, the Darkness has turned to fire.” The people knew what this meant.

Each day, the Watchmen from Arach traveled to see the ruins. Each day returning with no news of life. Before the Watchmen had woken to travel to Fréimhe Crann on the third day, Ta Suil went to the ruins. He knew the final flames had relinquished their power, and searched for her. He knew there was still life beneath the earth.

Slowly he uncovered the ashen blanket that lay upon the house on the farthest end of the town. Slowly he peeled back what looked like a father’s chainmail armor from a war fought years ago. Beneath that was a tiny cave dug deep into the ground, covered by fresh tree branches – so fresh it seemed as though they had never even been cut down from the tree on which they grew. Beneath these, lay a baby girl. “She is the Phoenix.” He breathed.

Phoenix and Ta Suil spent their mornings training with the Great Master Eagna. Eagna would teach them the ways of The Light. She would whisper to them as they trained, “The Gods value wisdom above all. Look to the trees – the trees are wise. They do not run when the rain comes or hide when the wind blows or scream when one of their branches falls to the ground. The trees breathe deeply and stay steady. Look to the trees and breathe.”

One morning, Eagna did not join them as they trained. She left them a note.

*It is your time to see the trees*

*To know their wisdom*

*To rise from ash*

*It is your time to seek the gods*

*To travel the earth*

*To fight The Darkness*

She had laid out weapons with their morning breakfast, and a small bag of gold. They knew that this day would come, but they did not know it would be now.

They knew that The Darkness had taken Phoenix’s family and life and home, but they did not know how Phoenix had lived. They knew that The Darkness would come to towns as they slept and they knew that villages all over the land would offer sacrifices in hopes that The Darkness would not take them. The Gods seemed mysteriously silent. No one dared to speak the thoughts on all men’s hearts *Where are you Gods? Why are you silent?*

The two began their journey. They knew they must travel to the Mountain of Dorchadas. Once they arrived, they knew their battle would begin. Yet, they were foolish to think The Darkness would not haunt them all along their way.

As they went on their jouney, they came to the Forest of Eagla. Ta Suil grew weary dreaming of warm beds and good food left at home. As he stopped to smell the imagined loaves of bread and warm fires, a voice whispered to him, “Look down, Ta Suil. Your feet are tired, you back is weary, and there is no bread for you here. The trees don’t see you. The Gods don’t care. Turn back, the Forest has won.” And with these words, Ta Suil quietly fell steps behind Phoenix, until he finally turned to run.

Phoenix, however, knew that Ta Suil’s hope would wane and give into fear for her teacher had warned her of such. Eagna had warned her not to run and follow him, for his courage would one day return at just the right, appointed time.

Phoenix continued on. As the same whispers came to her, she repeated to herself, “My faith is not my own. The trees will be my roots; the roots will guide me home.” And she looked to the tops of the trees for guidance. When the rains came, she went on. When the wind blew, she stood strong. When the pain of loss came, she cried not. She used all the ills of the world to steal her resolve, and she looked to the trees.

When finally she reached the Mountain of Darkness, she cried out, “I am here for my family. I am here for your Kingdom. I shall not fear the death you bring because you cannot destroy what is not your to take.”

With that, she broke through the gates of The Darkness, with her blazing swords of Light.