*No Laughing Matter*

**Chapter 0: Origin Story**

Evening of (insert date) at a campsite on the Trade Way at the foot of the Sword Mountains, southwest of the Kryptgarden Forest, 2 days’ ride from Waterdeep.

“Why do we have to stay here,” Pussyfoot asked as she poked at the fire with a stick. “Did Aasterinian tell you that, too?”

“Brene,” Atlas breathed as he thrust his feet toward the fire and leaned back in his camp chair. “Angren has told us what she’s doing.”

“I don’t mind,” Devrion smiled as he lifted his briar pipe. “It’s nice to have a break.”

“Hmph.” Pussyfoot tossed her stick into the fire and sat back. “And you’re planning to leave me alone with these two louts, Angren.”

Steelshade grinned. “Somehow, I think they aren’t as loutish as you let on.” The two men chuckled, and the halfling snorted derisively. “Look, Lauren and her wife live out here because they don’t want people bothering them. From what I heard in Waterdeep, they aren’t very friendly to outsiders.”

“Well, that damned guy Rook wasn’t very friendly,” Pussyfoot groused. “And that towering redhead with the big ass sword was even worse!”

“Brene, you tried to take her purse, Sweetheart.” Atlas shook his head with long-suffering patience. “And her name is Elaith.”

“There is that,” Steelshade allowed. “Anyway, I’ll go tomorrow morning, and I should be back within two days. I will call to let you know.” She held up her Farspeaking Amulet.

“Great,” Pussyfoot said. “I’ll be run ragged by then.”

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The next morning, Steelshade set off for Lauren’s home. The Waterdeephavians had been reticent to give her directions, but Rook finally relented and arranged a place for them to meet. The spot, a clearing on a small hill at the southwest edge of the forest, wasn’t hard to find as Steelshade mounted it at dusk.

As she reached the top, a figure stepped out of the shadows. Her hair matched Steelshade’s own, and she moved with the lithe assurance of an experienced warrior. Her skin was the color of ashes, betraying her drow heritage. The woman walked up to Steelshade and smiled. She’s smaller than I’d thought, Steelshade mused. “Hello, I’m Angren, but they call me Steelshade.”

“I’ve been expecting you, Chenfryn of House Arkenlyl.” Steelshade’s eyes went wide as Lauren named her. “I am Lauren Matholas, also of House Arkenlyl. Come, let us sit and talk.” Steelshade followed as Lauren led her to a fallen log, where they both sat down.

“Your father has sent an envoy,” Lauren explained. “He has asked that I give you my blade, and some other artifacts that I have taken on my own quests. My wife and I no longer seek quests, so these things are now yours.”

“Did he say why? Aasterinian sent me, but didn’t explain, either.”

“The gods rarely explain themselves,” Lauren said with a wry smile, “and your father didn’t explain, either. The envoy bore proof enough of your lineage, and the need for me to pass these things on to you. You are nearly as skilled as me, and you will soon be even better.”

She passed Arkenlyl in its scabbard, a small cube, and a book to Steelshade. She briefly explained the cube’s powers, and then she tapped the book. “This is a tome of instruction about a fighting style called a Warblade. I had it copied from one I found. I think it will serve you well in your future endeavors. These are all yours, now.”

Steelshade took a moment to arrange the sword’s baldric, and to put the other two items away. “Thank you.”

Lauren hugged her briefly, and then she stepped back. “I must go back home, and you must return to your friends. Be well, Chenfryn.” She turned and walked into the forest, disappearing from sight among the ancient oaks.

Steelshade found a place to lay out her bedroll, and she rested for the night. The next morning, she arose and made her way back to her camp along the trade road.