

# Queen of Shadow

## *Chapter One*



Salmetu's form stood against the darkening sky outside the Western shield entrance to Britengate. Her body was not corporeal; it was gathered Shadow taking the form of Salmetu. Traces of wispy tendrils undulated around her frame, as she stood silent, waiting. She was Ereshkigal, and darkness was rising all around her.

Hundreds of Shadow Walkers emerged from the thickening blackness that rose from the ground surrounding Ereshkigal. Chaos came to life in the form of the Shadow and began to creep forward from the hordes of darkness-imbued wielders and transformed citizens of Aurderia. Slow at first, the murky cloud of Shadow billowed toward the shield boundary and spread out along its parameter. The boundary sparked and flashed with resistance to the touch of Chaos.

Salmetu's shadowy form turned toward the figure now standing just inside the shield. She floated forward, advancing on the familiar presence until she hovered inches away from the protesting energy separating her from the subject of her visit. "You should come outside to parlay young asipu. It is rude to speak to a guest from

behind your door." Ereshkigal was speaking with restrained rage.

Shuran gazed at his sister's likeness unblinking, as he spoke. "You are no guest of mine or any among those seeking refuge behind this shield, Gizzu'Su!" Shuran could see the rage building behind Ereshkigal's eyes.

"You think you know who you are dealing with do you? I assure you young fool, you have not begun to know the power that you face!" The fury was building as the form of Salmetu began to drift apart. "I will have my Gizzu'Su brethren freed from whatever prison you have placed them!" As the vaporous form melted away, the Shadow expanded around the city shield and began to press upon it.

Screams of fear and horror began to fill the minds of the citizens not imbued with Essence abilities. The Shadow could not enter the city, but its influence could. The feelings of dread, despair, and helplessness filled the air so thickly that the people of Britengate appeared to move about as though in slow motion. Crippled by the emotions being spread by the Shadow, most succumbed to the struggle and collapsed where they stood.

Ereshkigal's wicked laugh echoed throughout Britengate. "You see Shuran, you have no grasp on how powerful the Shadow is, and when I find my missing Gizzu'Su comrades, we shall destroy this city and claim every citizen for the Shadow!"

Shuran remained still while he watched the effects of Ereshkigal's mental attack on the less powerful in Essence among the city's population. Something was scratching at the back of his mind. There was a familiarity to the attack that he could not focus upon, but he knew that it was a ploy of some sort. With a flick of his wrist, he sent a bolt of energy into the shield and was rewarded with a moment of silence from the emotional onslaught of the Shadow. Shuran knew what he needed to do in order to stop the attack.

Calling to his Zidu'Si, Shuran moved toward the center of the city and the location of the Altar of Creation. "The Shadow uses the

influence of electric impulses to effect the people emotionally. We need to disrupt the assault with bolts of energy." Shuran instructed the Zidu'Si and any wielders with electric Essence abilities to begin periodic blasts of energy into the shield. The results were soon felt as the crippled citizens began to stir and rise to their feet in relief from the disruption in the flow of negative impulses that were previously affecting them.

"How long must we keep this up Shin'Ar?" Dara asked. "It is not currently taxing us much, but eventually we will begin to weaken."

"I believe that the Shadow will eventually give up the futile attempt to gain the shield, and as the attack wanes we can rest and resume only if and when the Shadow recommences its assault." Shuran was not certain how long the Shadow would remain outside the city. There was a reason for what was happening, but he could not yet determine what Ereshkigal hoped to gain.

The Shadow continued to undulate and spread across the city shield, attempting to influence the inhabitants with dark thoughts and intent. With every emotional charge from the murky cloud, bolts of energy flew from the hands of the Zidu'Si and the few elves in the city. The Shadow would disperse from the area and retreat for no more than an hour before renewing its assault.

The attack on the shield had continued throughout the night and well into the second before Shuran began to understand what was happening. "This is a stall tactic," he realized aloud. "Our energy bolts into the shield are not having any lasting effect on the Shadow, only gughtu would, or direct contact with the Essence."

"What do you mean Lugaldur?" Moltar asked.

Shuran explained to his bonded as well as the rest of the Zidu'Si, that Ereshkigal was directing the Shadow attack in an effort to stall while she searched for the Gizzu'Su. She was likely trying to keep the Zidu'Si busily engaged in Britengate while she searched, and doing so also kept Shuran from seeking out the Lil'Du. "We cannot all remain

here while the Shadow distracts us."

"Perhaps we can enlist more elves from Entensiama to assist in the defense while you and a few of us travel to the Highlands in search of the Lil'Du?" Orian suggested.

Shuran sent Orian and Moltar to see the Queen of the Elves while he continued to bolster the strength of the energy being sent periodically into the city shield. The Shadow could hinder travel outside the city by gate, but it could not affect the use of the Emmuku'Gu.

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Orian arrived in the center of the elfin Capital with Moltar close behind. Their abrupt arrival caused quite a stir as the elves were going about their evening gatherings.

Elves keep a different schedule than most other races of man on Ersetu. They are creatures of a more nocturnal nature and prefer the coolness of the night rather than the heat of mid-Utu. Several market-goers fell back in shocked surprise at the sudden electro-charged appearance of not only an elf but also a massive red drakkon on his heel.

Moltar took to the air immediately, leaving Orian to make arrangements for more elves to come aid in the defense of Britengate. He had been stuck within the city shield and unable to spread his wings to fly comfortably within the boundary. All of the other drakkon in the city were small enough to take to flight around the confines of the shield but due to Moltar's increased bulk, he could not follow suit without risk of damaging what had only recently been rebuilt.

Orian went straight to the Queen's tree to seek an audience when he was stopped in the court by a guard. He was unfamiliar to Orian, but he knew from his dress and sash that this elf served the Queen directly.

"Master Orian, you will not find the Queen within the palace

tree," the elf said.

Orian turned to face the guard, then bowed slightly in greeting. "I take then that you know where I might find her majesty?" Orian asked.

"She is in conference with the tree nymphs," the guard responded with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

The Dryads were known only from myths and legends until recently. Stories of the horrid faces frozen in time amongst the petrified trees were the greatest extent of the knowledge of their kind. The truth of the matter was that the Dryads were only one of the races of beings that lived upon Ersetu long before the Sumerians arrived to begin their experiments with the Essence. These races were mostly unknown or seldom encountered.

Orian did not appreciate the comment. "They are Dryads sir, and far older and wiser a people than even the ancients who engineered the races of man. You might be wise to show them the respect they deserve, especially after their magic kept them alive within those stone trees for thousands of years."

The guard opened his mouth to respond but thought better of it. He pointed out the direction that Orian should travel to find the Queen and hastened his exit back to his post guarding the Queen's Tree.

Orian set off in the direction the guard indicated and signaled for Moltar to stay nearby. The distance to the edge of the boundary of Entensiamia was normally an hour walk or more, but with the added strength and stamina afforded the Zidu'Si, Orian ran the distance in a quarter of the time without exerting himself. When he arrived at the outer edge of the elven capital, he located Florisia, the Queen, and approached silently as not to intrude upon her conference with the Dryads.

Without turning to address him, Florisia called out to Orian. "You may approach Orian, this discussion will need sharing with the

Shin'Ar."

Orian approached the Queen and greeted her with a bow and turned to silently watch the proceedings of what appeared some sort of ritual being performed by the Dryads. As he looked out at what only weeks earlier had been an empty glade, he took in the sprawling copse of new trees that filled the area. At the center, where he and the others now stood, grew a larger and extraordinary tree of a kind he never before set eyes upon.

The base of the tree was thick as houses with large leg-like roots angled up and then back down into the earth. Vast limbs stretched at opposite incline to the sky before draping back down and burrowing into the ground. The bark along the entire surface glistened with hues of green and purple and a pulsing that likened itself to the flow of blood through a man's vein. Flowers adorned the ends of branches with colors so rich and pure that Orian lost himself in the beauty that captured his very being.

Stepping up beside him and placing a hand upon his arm, Florisia drew his attention away from the splendor. "Words are few to fall from the tongue when witnessing such wonders of creation."

"It is as you say my Queen," Orian replied. "Words could not express what I am seeing." He looked once again at the blossoms and pulsing beat of the tree before continuing. "What is this activity that I am gazing upon?"

Stepping forward to answer, the Dryad nearest guided Orian and Florisia away to an area where they could sit and speak. "It is the Gisa'Ti in your ancient tongue, our tree of life as best we can translate."

"You are born from trees?" Orian asked surprised written upon his face.

The dryad barked with laughter. "Not exactly young one, we are birthed of Coosco and it is Ersetu which gives us life." Seeing the confusion upon the elves' faces, the dryad continued. "We are part of

the land as a whole being, this is why we did not die in the trees so long ago. We used the power of Coosco, the navel of the world, to contain our being until the time we would be freed by your Shin'Ar.

"Ersetu is our mother and she guides us where we are meant to best serve her and continue the cycle of life. Much of what was has gone and only now is Ersetu beginning to awaken and put things right. Your Shin'Ar is meant to free Coosco from the bonds that restrain Ersetu. It is the promise of your God Nergal."

Orian was more confused than before the dryad spoke. "Should you not be telling this to Shuran?"

"He will remember in time, the promise he made Ersetu. His mistake is his alone to undo." The dryad then turned to Florisia. "We shall do as you ask and protect the borders of your Entensiamama. The tainted workings of this Shadow are no match for the true power of Ersetu, but we will not assist beyond these lands, beyond what we promised Shin'Ar in the Frozen North."

"You were in the Frozen North with Shuran?" Orian asked. "And how is it that you now speak our tongue so well compared to our first meeting in the Stone Forest?"

"So many questions," the dryad mused. "We are all of Ersetu." The dryad gestured to its tree-like form, "This form you see is but a shape we take from the trees we tend. Other places we take to different shapes as best suited for our tasks. Once we adjusted to the freedom from the Stone Forest, we rejoined the whole and learned all.

"Before your so-called Gods arrived upon this world from the heavens, Ersetu existed in harmony with the eternal cycle of life. When Nergal and his ilk placed their ring upon Coosco they tainted the true magic of our world. This must be undone for Ersetu to truly heal." The dryad stood and walked away before turning back and appeared to melt into the earth then being replaced by a small fur-covered creature that hopped off into the woods.



