

Prologue

In a different time, in a different place, Mornak ruled the realm of Mythos from the city of Aspiria. Besides being a king, Mornak was also the world's most powerful wizard, but you wouldn't have known it by looking at him. Barely forty, he had a young, kind face framed with thick black hair, which started as a widow's peak in front and ended in a ponytail just below his shoulders. His eyes were deep brown with specks of gold, his nose slim, and he chose not to wear a beard or mustache—the custom of most men. Neither skinny nor fat, but somewhere in between, he did not stand out in a crowd even in the way he dressed.

As the realm's ruler, Mornak's servants pushed him to wear kingly attire. However, while he would listen to them on special occasions, he preferred to wear his baggy brown pants well suited for walking; his tanned shirt that kept him cool in the sun; his many-pocketed vest that matched his pants and held all sorts of useful items; and his wooden sandals, which, though practical outside, made his footsteps echo through the palace halls. Mornak liked his outfit so much that he had several sets made and just switched from one to another. This lack of variety in wardrobe caused many people to wonder just how often he changed his clothes, since he always seemed to be wearing the same attire.

Today marked a special day in the realm. From his bedroom balcony in the great whitestone palace, Mornak looked out over Aspiria as the morning sun lit the city. Surrounded by an outer wall six storeys high, most of the buildings in the sprawling city consisted of one- or two-storey sandstone houses. Warehouses, inns, and other large buildings separated the clusters of homes into distinct neighbourhoods. In the center of the city, large white canopies hid the marketplace from view and protected shoppers from the summer sun. The main roads were laid with cobblestones while the smaller streets were of soft dirt or sand. The green of huge parks scattered across the landscape broke up the whites and grays of rock and sand; trees planted up the middle of major roads brought the feel of nature to this stony environment. The smell of freshly cut grass from the park, along with the warmth of the morning sun and the touch of a gentle breeze on his face, brought memories of picnics with his wife back to Mornak, making him smile as he looked out over the buildings across the city.

The most prominent structure in Aspiria was the one building Mornak could not see—because he was standing in it. The ten-storey circular whitestone palace contained dozens of bedrooms, bathrooms, and several other large halls such as the ballroom, the library, and the audience chamber. Five shorter circular towers surrounded the main structure by connecting hallways, three storeys off the ground. All the buildings had bulb-shaped roofs and wide windows that let in plenty of sunlight. Marble walls and floors ran through the palace; granite balconies and friezes adorned the outside. Over two hundred people worked in the wonder that was the palace or its gardens behind it, but only twenty resided there.

The palace awed every citizen with its splendor—both outside and inside—but it never had an effect on Mornak. It was simply home to him. What did awe him was his view this morning, and he smiled at what he saw: thousands of happy, prosperous people in his city engaged in festivity on this day. Mythos had known peace for nine years now, and like every other city in the realm, Aspiria celebrated. The melody of roving musicians made its way up to him, and Mornak tapped his foot to the drummer's beat without realizing it. He was focused on the smell of freshly baked bread and pies already being served somewhere below him. He leaned over the marble railing to find the source but, instead, spotted some children running through the main street, waving colourful flags and laughing. He sighed at the joy of it all, still remembering clearly the day peace had come.

Just over nine years ago, neighbouring cities warred with each other. Thieves and bandits robbed the countryside. Leaders ruled unjustly. Monsters raided villages for the sheer pleasure of it. The realm became ever more dangerous, evil spread, and Mornak knew something had to be done quickly. So, he created the Hall. He sent word out that the Hall would serve as a prison for the evil in the realm and that if the people wanted to live a good life, they should use the Hall to remove all evil. Within weeks, things changed. The wars stopped, the bandits stopped their raids, and only good, just leaders remained in power. The evil creatures, though still present, retreated back to their lairs—frightened by the goodly realm knights, by the way people now looked out for each other, and, of course, by the thought of being sent to the Hall.

It came to be known as the Hall of Shadows; it was built deep in the forest of Darkwood, which was only a day's march from the palace. People began to refer to Darkwood as Shadow Wood (sometimes just "the Wood") until, eventually, the name stuck. No one ventured into Shadow Wood anymore. Although Mornak assured everyone that nothing could escape the Hall, almost no one was willing to make sure. Some even feared that if they got too close, they'd be swallowed up by the Hall and trapped inside with all the evil from the realm. The Hall and its forest became a place of bedtime stories and parental threat. "You will do as you're told, or I'll make you spend a night in Shadow Wood!" some parents would warn. The threat always made children behave.

Shadow Wood did have its periodic visitors. Mornak himself ventured into it to check on the Hall and, at times, to reinforce it with his magic. His elite guard, the Axemen, accompanied him; the Axemen were comprised of fifty of the most skilled knights in the realm, who all used an axe as their chosen weapon. It was said that the Axemen could chop down any enemy, and it was true, not simply because of their skill but also because Mornak had enchanted the weapons of this elite guard. Each man's axe increased his best ability, be it strength, speed, accuracy, or even cunning. Since most of the men had different skills, as a team with all those skills working together, they were as yet unbeatable.

In this world of peace, some people thought the Axemen existed just for show, but every now and then, some evil creatures—ogres mostly, and sometimes trolls—would come out of hiding to see what trouble they could cause. The Axemen dealt with them swiftly and efficiently, keeping the peace in the realm.

Nine years of peace, and in that time Mornak had raised a daughter alone—a beautiful chubby-cheeked girl named Dara. Dara, who was an inquisitive little ten-year-old scamp, kept a smile on her father's face with her antics. She had hair like Mornak's—black and thick—although her long bangs hid her widow's peak and her ponytail hung down to the back of her knees. She had big brown eyes and a tiny nose—both features she had inherited from her mother—except that her eyes had her father's same gold flecks. She was so cute that when she pouted, you couldn't refuse her—a trait she sometimes took advantage of. Inheriting her mother's petite size, she didn't quite reach her father's chest when she stood up straight. While she had a slightly chubby build, it didn't hamper her motions in the least. Quick and agile, she loved to get dirty, which seemed to contradict her fondness of wearing floral dresses. After a day of play, it was impossible to make out a single flower on her clothes.

"What are you looking at, Papa?" she asked as she grabbed his leg.

Mornak jumped. He had been so lost in thought that he hadn't heard her walk up. She giggled when she realized she had scared him.

"I'm just enjoying the view, Little Rose," he answered, picking her up. She smelled like her nickname: a little rose.

Dara looked out to see what her father saw: the decorated buildings, the fancily dressed people.

"It *is* pretty," she agreed. "Look how people have decorated their houses in coloured streamers. And the parade is this afternoon. Don't forget, Papa."

"How can I forget?" he laughed. "I'm in it!" He hugged her close and bounced her playfully. "And you'll be right there with me, won't you?"

"Yep yep! I love riding on the float and throwing candy out to the other kids." She leaned in and whispered to him. "But I'm keeping a couple pieces for us to have after dinner."

Mornak pretended to be shocked. "Are you now?"

"Just a couple," Dara assured him with a wink. She looked back out over the balcony.

"It's perfect today. The sky is clear blue ... except for that one little cloud over there," she said, pointing toward it.

When Mornak followed her gaze, the smile left his face. A single dark cloud floated out there, which normally wouldn't be cause for alarm, but it hovered over Shadow Wood. And while it looked small to Dara, Mornak knew the distance deceived her perception. It covered the entire forest.

He put Dara back down. "You should go get ready," he told her as cheerfully as he could. "I have many duties to perform before the parade."

"Papa, you're always working!" she scolded. "And today's a holiday!"

"I know, Little Rose, but I'll finish as quickly as I can."

"You'd better!" she insisted before dashing off to get ready.

Mornak looked back at the cloud. *The timing couldn't be worse*, he thought.

Minutes later, he rode off on his stallion, its enchanted horseshoes letting it charge at more than twice the speed of any other animal in the realm. The Axemen urged Mornak to let them accompany him, but their horses didn't have magical shoes. Mornak didn't want to spend time or magic to make some. He might need both soon.

Despite his speedy mount, several hours passed before he arrived at Shadow Wood. His horse grew uneasy when they finally arrived—a bad sign. He dismounted in front of the first few trees, and with a smack on its rump, he sent the steed home. He'd be using a spell of recall to get home himself. Still, the journey to the center of the forest would last a few more hours. If this were anything more than a normal cloud, he might miss the parade.

The cloud hovered directly above the Shadow Wood, but only the Wood—blocking the sun and making its name hold true. Soon Mornak had walked well into the forest with a magic ball of light floating just above his hand to push back the shadows around him. His senses warned him that something was wrong. The place was too quiet—no crickets chirping, no lightning bugs sparking. The air seemed to press on his skin, and the smell of old wet leaves filled his nostrils.

His years of training took over, instinctively making Mornak mutter a shield spell without even realizing it. The area around him shimmered a pale yellow just when a dark blue magical bolt shot out from the shadows at him. It bounced harmlessly off his shield but startled Mornak, causing his light to go out and his body to break into a cold sweat. He could feel his heart beating quickly, but it felt as if it were in his throat. He swallowed, shook away the fear, and readied himself. A few quick gestures strengthened his shield, and then he readied a Net spell to capture whoever attacked him.

"The Great Mornak," he heard a voice say. He looked in the direction it came from, but he couldn't see anyone. "The Predictable Mornak is more like it."

"Do I know you?" Mornak asked, trying to see through the gloom.

"Not as much as I know you. On the Day of Peace, I knew you'd be reckless enough to come here alone. We don't want the common folk to think

something is wrong now, do we? Canceling the parade and bringing the Axemen out would have been the wiser course of action.”

“I can always go back and get them,” Mornak replied, trying to sound more annoyed than worried.

“Go right ahead,” the voice challenged.

Mornak held his ground for a while, trying to sense movement around him, trying to feel magic at work. Then he started through the trees. A giant spider web appeared between two trunks just as he was passing between them; one of his hands got stuck in it before he could stop. The strands seemed as strong as steel but as flexible as a normal spider’s webbing. He stretched away from the web so that he wouldn’t accidentally get any other part of his body caught in it.

Another bolt of magic raced toward him, breaking through his blue shield, but he stopped it with a smaller magic shield he conjured with his free hand. He quickly cast a small ball of fire at the web, which burned up like tissue paper. Then he ducked just in time to avoid another magic bolt.

“You’re quick for an old man,” the voice joked.

“Enough of this,” Mornak grumbled. With a wave of his arms, the area lit up as though the sun hovered right above them. In front of him, just to the right, Mornak saw a man’s shadow. Then he realized that the man *was* the shadow. The shadowman gestured, and suddenly three more shadowmen stood facing Mornak. The wizard-king knew the spell. The three new enemies were decoys, just illusions. When all four cast out magical beams, Mornak dived behind a tree, not knowing which beam to dodge. He jumped back out, sending a magic net flying at his enemies. It wrapped around a shadowman who immediately vanished, and then fell to the ground in a heap before disappearing as well.

Wrong guess, Mornak thought as he brought up a new shield. He expected another assault, but the shadowmen were running away. *No*, he realized, *not away, just out of the light*.

Mornak ran after them, leaving the brightened area while sending a paralyzing beam into a shadowman’s back. The man popped out of sight when the beam shot through him.

Two down, thought the wizard-king. *It won’t be long now*.

The other two shadowmen stopped briefly to cast spells. Two ghostly wolves appeared and charged at Mornak. Mornak cast a spell while running; in the next instant, a huge bear was running with him. The wolves skidded to a stop at the sight of the bear before running into the woods on Mornak’s right. The bear chased after them.

Mornak dashed around trees and hopped over bushes as he pursued the last two shadowmen. Around him, the shadows of the woods distracted him. He would dodge what looked like an arm, only to realize it was a swaying tree branch. Sometimes, the darkness at his feet hid a hole or a rock. He knew he needed more light, and then—suddenly—all the light went away. Mornak quickly realized he had run into a spell of darkness. Before he could

stop himself, he tripped over a big tree root and knew immediately why the darkness had been placed in that particular spot. As he tumbled to the ground, Mornak began to cast another ball of light to counter the darkness, but his body cleared the area of darkness before the spell activated.

He found himself sitting in a clearing, holding a harmless ball of light, which made him an easy target in the forest's gloom. On either side of him stood the shadowmen. Glowing green energy surrounded each one's right hand—a Death Bolt spell ready to cast. Mornak knew he could only block one of them, and he only had a second to decide which. But they looked exactly the same. His ball of light became his saving grace though, because only one of the shadowmen cast a shadow. Two Death Bolts raced in. Mornak brought up his shield to stop what he hoped was the right one. One green energy bolt splashed against his shield and dissipated. The other hit him in the back and just disappeared. Mornak countered with a searing beam that burned into the “real” shadowman's arm. He screamed and dashed off again. Getting off the ground, Mornak resumed the chase, only to arrive in an all-too-familiar clearing. He had arrived at the heart of Shadow Wood. It was here that he had buried the Hall of Shadows so no one would accidentally come across it.

“Well done,” he heard a voice say, but again he couldn't tell where it came from. “This was only a test, you realize. I had to see how strong I was and how strong you were. The next time we meet, I will be your better, and I relish the thought of how much you are going to worry until that day comes. And it will come, Great Mornak.”

Mornak stood in the clearing focusing on the voice. It seemed to be coming from below him, but that was impossible. He cast his magic downward. The Hall of Shadows still lay buried there, its magic still strong. Nothing could escape it. So who was that shadowman then? Why did he choose to fight here? Mornak had to find out somehow. He had to prepare for what he knew would be the fight of his life.