

Dawn came all too soon for Tara, as did her wake-up call in the form of Tindariel bashing the door down. Before Tara could even figure out what was going on, Tindariel held a small open flask in front of her face and she smelled what was probably the foulest concoction on earth. It was cheap whiskey mixed with tobacco and cayenne peppers. One little whiff was enough to make Tara scream, leap out of bed, change into something clean, and then run out the door. "What the hell is it?" squawked Tara.

That day, Tara found herself having to concentrate harder than she ever concentrated before under the keen and watchful eyes of both Tanil and Clawstaff. Tara focused on the scarecrow that stood in front of her and pointed a nimble finger at it. A tiny jet of navy blue light streamed out from her finger and struck the scarecrow. Some smoke came up from the tattered plaid jacket it wore, but there was no other damage visible. Trying again, a larger jet of navy blue light emerged from Tara's fingertips and hit the scarecrow's pumpkin head. The smell of burning pumpkin filled the air, but there was only a small hole that smouldered.

"Not bad," said Tanil, noting Tara's signature color. "You still need to go deeper within yourself to fully channel the energies." Tara felt like she was going to faint after that second jet of energy.

"Further?" she groaned. "That last one almost took me out!" Clawstaff made a noise that sounded like a wheeze and a laugh combined. "By the end of this, you'll blast that scarecrow to pieces. And you will need to improve as much as possible if you want to protect all those who live on the borders of the Tindarn-Niniel." Then hobbling around Tara, he said, "Now, remember, you have to be as precise as possible."

For the next several hours, with a few intermittent breaks, Tanil and Clawstaff continued to egg Tara on with shooting the scarecrow until it was a smouldering mess. The tiny sparks and jets gradually grew in size until the rays were about twice the width of Tara's arm. Her first few shots had been about the width of a pencil, and not only did the jets grow, but also the amount of damage inflicted on the scarecrow. Brain now buzzing and body exhausted, Tara groaned when Tanil whispered the incantation to repair the scarecrow back to its usual self. Tara had managed to incinerate all but a few buttons on its jacket just now.

"Not again," thought Tara.

As if on cue, Tanil laughed and said, "Until the next lesson." Tara breathed a sigh of relief until Tanil continued. "Tomorrow, you will learn how to fight like the shadows with Ilithara and also to be strong like the bear with Tindariel."

That night after Tara had a sumptuous dinner of mixed vegetables in delicate sauces, roasted potatoes, and earthy breads, she decided

that no matter what her mentors wanted, sleep was a priority. Her head still felt as if it was hosting a hive of bees and she could still see those jets of light that she was practicing. When she stepped into her room, though, the mirror began to glow with a faint reddish light. She was so exhausted that she decided to ignore the mirror despite her intense curiosity and curled up with the blanket on her bed.

The next morning, the foul smell of cheap whiskey, cayenne peppers and cigarette smoke caused Tara to choke and leap out of bed. "Damn! Can't you give me a regular alarm clock?" she growled once she saw Tindariel in the room.

"I bashed the door down," she admitted, smiling. "Seriously, if my tobacky-whiskey didn't wake you up, I was going to get Solothain to serenade you! Damn, even Anya wasn't such a heavy sleeper..." Anything but Solothain's singing! Rubbing her eyes, Tara got up and asked absently, "So, what's the plan for today?"

"Today, it's learning how to fight with a sword!" bellowed Tindariel, still smiling ear-to-ear. "It'll be a great break from Clawstaff making you do funny things." Then under her breath she mumbled, "Damn geezer never passed me."

Before Tara knew what to do, she had already eaten breakfast and was outside in the courtyard with Tindariel and Ilithara. There was a pile of swords in one corner, a haystack in another corner, and several scarecrows similar to the one she kept blasting yesterday.

Ilithara, now wearing a functional set of grey leathers, deftly picked up a pair of short but very slender swords from the pile.

Tindariel, on the other hand, grabbed a huge greatsword that was almost as tall as Tara. "Now this is a sword," laughed Tindariel.

"That, Ilithara, is a pair of toothpicks!"

"Perfect weapon for one of the Killer Parakeet school of fighting!" teased Ilithara. "Tara, which will it be? The school of finesse or the school of ogres?"

Looking intently at the swords, Tara hesitated. There were claymores and greatswords on one extreme, while on the other extreme, there were dirks and daggers. There were also weapons in between and of many shapes as well, with some that were straight and true while others were curved, like a sickle or a claw. After weighing and testing the various blades in her hands, Tara found herself trying to decide between a wickedly curved scimitar that gleamed coldly and a short, leaf-bladed sword that seemed to fit Tara's small hands very well. Finally, after hefting both weapons, she squeaked, "I can't decide!"

"Scimitar," said Tindariel. "You do want to hit hard, right?"

"Both," said Ilithara as her violet eyes lit up. "They're both light enough for you to do it!"

Casually picking up both weapons, Tara pretended to swing both blades at once and then started to have a mock battle with her shadow. All the while, Ilithara was beaming proudly at Tara and snickering at Tindariel. "Looks like yet another one prefers finesse over brute force!" giggled Ilithara.

"No fair!" roared Tindariel as she attempted to head-butt Ilithara, who merely stepped aside and continued to laugh. Tindariel rammed straight into a bale of hay designated for archery.

For the next several hours (and what felt like an eternity to Tara), Ilithara and Tindariel compared and contrasted their preferred attack styles, usually with Ilithara winning out. Tara found her arms growing tired quickly swinging even the relatively light blades, and after about the first hour, she could barely move. The scimitar especially was heavy for her and she found it much easier to just drop her blades when things got difficult. At one point, Tara thought she had Ilithara cornered and off-guard. Remembering what Tindariel had told her about driving in, she charged straight at her, only to find that Ilithara not only stepped aside, but tripped her.

"Ouch!" muttered Tara, stunned at having landed face-first into the mud.

"Ya gotta be further grounded if ya want to give out some frontier justice!" bellowed Tindariel as she lifted Tara back onto her feet.

"Now here's the proper way to handle a dancer like Ilithara!" While Ilithara was preparing for a sneak attack on the prone Tara, Tindariel merely charged into her and clubbed her lightly with the blunted sword. "You bash them!"

"And you have to be prepared for anything," added Ilithara, rubbing her head. "Don't ever let one success go to your head, or you might take a solid hit!"

At dusk, the bells rang, signalling that it was time to get ready for dinner. By then, Tara felt every single muscle hurting from all the drubbings she had received from Tindariel and Ilithara. "And the other thing you need to learn," started Tindariel. "Is how to eat hearty so you can get some muscles like me!" She flexed, and with her sleeveless shirt, her muscles were large and distinct, almost masculine. On her left arm was a tattoo of an eagle.

"You and those muscles," laughed Ilithara. "Honestly, I have all I need." She also removed her sleeves to reveal slender but well-defined ebony arms, which were a stark contrast to Tindariel's much fairer but heavily muscled arms. "And Tara has all she needs too. She just needs more practice..."