



## CHAPTER 1



# A BLOODY BRIDGE

On most days, the new township of Olive Branch was a peaceful haven in the east. It sat on the western bank of the mighty Zak's River. The inhabitants of the town were mostly farmers, tilling fertile land in a place that just seventy years before was an arid desert. That was before the Chosen One, Jason Del, fought and destroyed Pure Evil in the Final Contest, a battle between the champions of the Good Lord Anton and the Evil Lord Becus. On that day, the last of the great Beasts of Becus was destroyed and all of Trinity and the Races of Lord Anton rejoiced. Once Pure Evil was no more, Jason went about the task of rebuilding the eastern lands, which had been devastated by the former Beasts of Becus for many years. In one effort, Jason found the source of an ancient eastern river. With the vast, inner powers bestowed upon him by the magic of the Wizard's Stone and the great confidence given to him by the Pearl of Anton—both of which were a part of his flesh—he made the river flow again from north to south as it had ages ago. Called Zak's River in honor of an old king who once had tested Jason's fortitude, the water's flow blossomed the land about it. The fertile ground made ideal farmland that burst each year with abundant crops of wheat, barley, and corn.

But Olive Branch was more than a newly prosperous township of some one hundred farmers. It was the site where The Binding Treaty was signed, in which Elf, Dwarf, and Man pledged to never war against each other again. It took the arrival of Pure Evil to make the Races realize that those things that united the Lord Anton's Races were far more important than the trivial disagreements that separated them. Olive Branch stood as a monument of peace. The people themselves were a mixed breed. While the northern kingdoms of Elfkind and Dwarfdom kept true to their lineage, as did the Man Race in the south, Olive Branch was a place where the blood intermingled. It was common, for

example, for an inhabitant to have the solid frame of a Man but with slender Elf ears or the stockiness of a Dwarf but with Elfin grace. Olive Branch stood for so much promise and peace.

But this was not true today.

“Send me another!” laughed the Gorgon as the massive beast tossed another dead human, its tenth, over the side of the long bridge that crossed Zak’s River just outside of Olive Branch.

The women and children of the town were locked away in their cottages as the men huddled nervously behind green foliage on the western edge of the bank just outside Olive Branch. They could not believe their eyes as they gazed at the huge creature that stood at the midpoint of the bridge. The green, scaled beast was twice the height of a man, with two thick legs and a grossly misshapen head that had huge bones protruding over its thick, bushy eyebrows. The most deadly features were its two scaled, serpentlike arms, each capable of lashing out some fifteen feet to grab its victims with powerful, teeth-lined jaws where fingers would naturally be found.

Blood from the last victim still dripped from the two serpents’ gaping mouths. The Man had been brave enough, or stupid enough, to confront the beast with the only implements he had—farming tools. These people were not skilled in war. They were certainly not the Races who had defended Trinity under the skilled defiance and mastery of Cyrus Del, Jason’s father, during the Final Contest. The ways of battle and war were a memory among most Men in Trinity. Seventy years of peace made them weak. History repeats.

“Send me another!” mocked the Gorgon again as its two serpent arms snapped before it, yearning to sink their teeth into more human flesh. “Or I’ll come to your feeble town and take them myself!”

And so the slaughter continued throughout the morning. Brave Men reluctantly went forth to face the beast and died in the feeble attempt. In one noble effort, ten farmers raced toward the beast at once to try to overpower it. But in mere moments, ten more bodies, sliced open, were tossed over the bridge and into the river. The Gorgon’s long serpent arms were no match for farmers. Nor were the few arrows that the men sent toward the beast of any use, as the Gorgon was swift to knock down most. The few arrows that did manage to plunge toward the beast’s scales simply glanced off its body.

It was curious that the beast made no demands of the town other than to send it more fresh human meat for its amusement. By midday, the bridge dripped with red blood until the flow reached the end of the

western end of the bridge and dribbled toward the town itself. Until this day, the town had lived in idyllic peace. No one could imagine from where such a beast had come. The Beasts of Becus were long gone, as the last of its kind—Pure Evil—was defeated by Jason Del during the Final Contest some years before.

Some of the peoples of Olive Branch began to pack their belongings in hopes of fleeing the town to the west. They placed goods in old wooden carts and began to pull them along the main road. But the Gorgon could see all from the bridge that looked through the center of the town.

“Run if you like!” it shouted as green saliva dripped from the corners of the crooked mouth upon its head. “But if you do . . . I’ll come for you first!”

And so the half-hearted attempt at a daring escape ended as the peoples retreated once again to their homes. If only Jason Del were still alive, the townspeople collectively thought, they would be saved. They deeply missed his wisdom. But more than that, they deeply missed his power and the safety it brought. Though few in their lifetime had ever seen Jason Del unleash his full forces, his reputation was formidable. He was the destroyer of Pure Evil! Nothing could compare to the great Jason Del. Wherever he traveled, people instantly recognized his white robe and gentle ways, which masked the intense powers that had become part of his very flesh.

But Jason Del had died a month before of old age, and now Olive Branch was defenseless. The town council had sent a messenger to the north hours ago in hopes that the runner could find Jason Del’s daughter. She was seen passing quickly through town the day before in her travels to the northern country. Some said she possessed powers similar to her father’s, but none had ever witnessed them. However, there had been no word from the messenger and so the peoples of Olive Branch grew hopeless.

The blood continued to flow for another hour’s time. The bravest men had been the first to volunteer to face the beast, and so they were dead already. Most of them included the members of the town council. Those remaining were the not-so-brave and the last member of the council, Mayor Fin, who was a shrewd, middle-aged politician. With the brave and town council gone, Fin took greater charge and began to select the men who would face the Gorgon next. His judgments were based upon politics. His political rivals went first. Anyone who disagreed with his assessments often went next, which silenced many. The weak went before the strong because he knew they could be more easily forced. Old men went before middle-aged

ones for the same reason. The crowd supported every decision he made, mostly because each among the dwindling men was glad that he had not been chosen.

“Send me another!” slurred the beast yet again.

Mayor Fin was about to choose. He never thought about how to avoid the circumstances altogether. He only knew that the beast had to be fed. His shrewd brown eyes scanned the crowd of some fifty remaining men about him. The people held a collective breath. Someone was about to be sacrificed. Each prayed silently that it would not be him. The Mayor never felt such power before. He smiled inwardly. Life or death.

“Look!” shouted a Man as he pointed toward a figure that suddenly emerged from trees to the north.

A murmur of tempered relief and excitement rose from the frightened men. The figure was cloaked in a familiar white robe. Excitement turned to jubilation.

“The Robe!” one Man shouted. It was the nickname given to Jason Del years earlier.

“But it cannot be!” said another. “Jason Del is long dead.”

Mayor Fin felt a tinge of disappointment as the attention shifted to the approach of the figure. The crowd parted and the slender, robed form entered their frightened circle and stood amongst the remaining men at the western edge of the bridge.

The figure threw back the hood. Though it was beyond reason, the townspeople hoped against hope that Jason Del was back from the dead. But it was not true. The crowd went silent upon seeing long, red hair fall upon a woman’s slender shoulders. It was Megani Del. She was wearing the white robe her father had worn nearly all his life.

Megani saw the disappointment in the people’s faces. Only then did she realize that by wearing her father’s robe, she had given them a false hope of his resurrection. She shook her head, angry at herself for donning the garment. She meant only to assure them that she carried her father’s blood. Now, she had to prove to the people that she had the right to wear the garment her father left for her. After generations of women being in the shadows, perhaps she could even prove to all within Trinity that she, a woman, could wield the power that previously had been given to male Dels alone.

“Thank you for coming,” said one young Man, struggling to turn a disappointed expression into a hopeful one.

“But can you help us?!” snapped Mayor Fin, skeptically. “You’re a woman!”

Megani gazed at the gruff Man. Though she had been in his presence many times when accompanied by her father, this was the first time he had addressed her directly . . . the first time she could recall that he actually had looked in her eyes. Before this, he only paid attention to her father. That was the way with Mayor Fin. He divided all those he knew into two groups: those who mattered and those who did not.

Megani gazed into his eyes but remained silent. She knew that she must answer his question with deeds and not words. Many generations of Del women were labeled weak and ineffectual because of one ancestor who had shamed them all. It was a cross that many women in Trinity bore, more often subjugated to lives of follower and not leader, of nurturer alone and not defender, too.

Megani turned and gazed downward at the human blood that now touched her leather boots, the red flowing from the bridge beyond. She slowly looked upward toward the Gorgon. Megani's green, hardened eyes glittered in the sun.

The Gorgon smiled when it saw her defiance. "Good!"

Megani looked upon the beast with surprising reserve and confidence. She had good reason. After all, she was the daughter of the great Jason Del, the destroyer of Pure Evil, who captured the confidence of the Pearl of Anton within his very being. She was a descendent of Matthew Del, Tempest Slayer, who merged the magic of the Wizard's Stone into his own flesh. And so Megani inherited much. The two gems, the Wizard's Stone and the Pearl of Anton, spun forever within her mind. With just one thought, she could merge the icons so that the confidence of the Pearl would access the Wizard's magic. The beast before her was not a match for her powers, she knew. But she was patient, her reserve due to her mother, Bea, who hailed from the stern and dedicated Race of Etha. While other children played games, Megani learned the uses of power from her skilled father. While other children engaged in childish pranks, Megani was taught dedication to the Races and to Trinity from her austere mother. She had much to prove . . . to her descendents and to herself. She was the first daughter to inherit the powers since the era of Pita Del.

That burden was great. After Megani's birth, her parents tried desperately to have a son, but none of the pregnancies were successful. Each time they tried, it reminded Megani that she was not considered strong or brave enough to be worthy of the powers. The disappointment she saw in her parents' eyes each time a pregnancy failed was devastating, for the true disappointment was with her gender. They were left

with a daughter as the sole heir of the responsibility for the protection of the Races. Megani knew she had to be better, faster, stronger, and braver than any male Del that came before her. It wasn't easy. Everything was a test.

With Jason Del's death one month earlier, Megani was now in charge of the protection of all of Trinity. Though in human years she was a full adult, in Ethan years she was barely a teen, owing to the long life span of her mother's Race.

How odd, Megani suddenly thought, that this beast did not make itself known to the world before her father's death. Did it believe, thought Megani, that with her father's passing it was now safe to emerge from the shadows . . . safe to battle a *woman*, a descendent of the coward Pita?

"What are you?!" Megani called as she took several confident steps toward the foot of the bridge.

"A Gorgon!" the beast replied, smiling while its serpent hands snapped at the air as though trying to consume Megani even before she was within reach.

Megani threw her mind probe forth, yet another inheritance, and brushed the essence of evil. The darkness was formidable, but the beast was flawed. The creature is stupid, she instantly knew, not possessing enough intelligence or experience to be a great foe. How odd, thought Megani as she continued to probe its mind. The creature also had little knowledge of its own creation. Its mind possessed no memories of the previous day. It knew only that it was here, on this bridge, and that it was to taunt the inhabitants to battle it. Megani was careful to keep her own mind protected from the mind probe of another, a skill her father taught her years before. She was taught to be forever on her guard.

Megani looked back into the grateful but still fearful eyes of the Men huddled behind her. Though she had helped her father resolve minor disputes among the Races these many years, Megani had never before been put to the full test. All of the great battles of this era occurred long before she was even born. But now with her father dead, she was their savior. The Races of Trinity would look to her. She had to prove she was worthy . . . that a *woman* was worthy. She could not fail her first real test as Pita had thousands of years before.

"And what's a Gorgon?" Megani asked. She took another striding step toward the beast, her feet splashing through blood puddles as she stepped upon the bridge.

The beast hesitated, then slurred, "I don't know."

Odd again, thought Megani. How can a beast not know its origin or its very essence?

A few more steps brought Megani within striking distance of the creature. She looked up towards its massive height. "Who commands you?"

It snapped, "I do!"

The Gorgon's right serpent arm suddenly shot toward Megani. She pivoted to one side and let it pass. It snapped again, but Megani easily pivoted right and left to avoid its sharp teeth. The left serpent arm plunged toward Megani. She ducked and grabbed the arm from beneath and was lifted upward as the beast's left arm jerked back and forth to break Megani's vice-like grip. The right serpent arm dove toward Megani, but just before it struck she swung from the left arm and jumped onto the Gorgon's right shoulder. Missing Megani, the serpent's right arm bit deep into its own left arm and sheared it off below the shoulder. Megani drew her sword and sliced off the remaining serpent arm. Green blood exploded from the beast and the Gorgon began to fall back. Megani jumped to the bridge as the beast crashed with a heavy thud. The armless Gorgon, now void of its serpent arms, rose to its feet and dashed toward Megani to crush her with its massive weight and force. She stood immobile for a moment as the beast hurled onward. At the last moment before impact, she ducked low and sliced her sword through the beast's legs. It fell dead upon the bridge. Green mixed with red.

"*Hurrah!*" the townspeople cheered. Only Mayor Fin did not rejoice. But the jubilation was short lived.

Two Gorgons raced from the eastern foliage toward the bridge. Megani spied them instantly. She held her sleek sword firmly. It was not as formidable as the Sword of Legends that her grandfather Cyrus Del carried when he came to the aid of her father in the final, cataclysmic battle with Pure Evil. But it would do. In no time, the beasts were close enough for Megani to use her mind probe. Like the Gorgon that was now dead at her feet, these creatures had great evil intent, but it was focused entirely upon seizing the bridge, with no memory of where they had been yesterday nor any thoughts of where they might be tomorrow. Her mind probe was useless to tell her more.

The two Gorgons arrived. They lashed at Megani with their four serpent arms. But each that came within reach was beheaded. With several more sure strokes, two more Gorgons lay dead.

Sixteen Gorgons dashed forward from the forest beyond. Megani wavered just a bit, but her confidence held. She stood her ground.



“Where are they coming from?” she wondered aloud. Why now? Why here?

The sixteen Gorgons stopped short and their serpent arms—thirty-two in all—detached from their bodies and slithered forward. The bodies paused as sixteen of the serpents went straight to the bridge while the others waded in the water and, reaching up, gained the side of the bridge next to Megani. Others waded farther west and gained the bridge behind her. In a moment, Megani was surrounded by the serpents.

The townspeople covered their eyes, certain of the outcome.

The thirty-two serpents lunged at once!

Megani jumped upward some thirty feet into the air as serpents gashed at her from below. She came down spinning like a top, headfirst, as her blade cut deep into the beasts that came for her. She landed atop a pile of thirty-two corpses. The Gorgon’s sixteen bodies charged at once. Megani raced toward them.

“Always forward!” she said to herself as she flew, a phrase cemented into her mind by her sonless mother. “Always forward!”

Megani jumped high, landed upon the shoulder of the lead Gorgon, sliced it fatally with her sword, and without ever losing her forward momentum continued to leap from shoulder to shoulder until all were dead.

“She is lucky!” spit the frustrated Beastmaker as he watched the carnage from a ridge a mile away. A massive beast that continuously altered its shape from one creature to the next, the Beastmaker was now in dragon form. It had created the Gorgons, and they were as much his pets as they were his tools.

“Not really lucky,” said an ancient creature cloaked in darkness at the Beastmaker’s side. “She’s skilled.”

“Luck!” shouted the Beastmaker, now in the form of a raging bull.

“Well then,” crackled the ancient one, “let’s see how much luck she has left. Send thirty-two Gorgons, each with two serpent arms.”

The Beastmaker stomped his hoof. The signal was relayed until it reached the eastern forest.

Thirty-two Gorgons sprang from the trees and dove toward Megani. Too many for the sword, she thought. Megani had never used her magic in battle, but there was no better moment than this one. After all, this is

why she existed in the first place. She looked back toward Olive Branch as the townspeople continued to huddle and watch in horror. Dozens of women and children had joined the men in their watch. She saw a mixture of both hope and doom. She looked back at the raging beasts. “Where did all these things come from?” she breathed.

The Gorgons came onward. The icons of the Wizard’s Stone and the Pearl spun in Megani’s mind. The combining of both—the force of the Wizard’s Stone and the confidence of the Pearl—were the sources of the power. The beasts swept closer. The ground trembled.

“Merge!” she commanded, and the icons overlapped by a quarter.

*Boom!*

White magic shot from Megani’s clenched fists and pounded into the beasts. They exploded in a fierce, sizzling ball of fire and were gone.

“Ahhhhhhh!” grieved the Beastmaker. “She has magics! I didn’t know she had magics!”

“No matter,” said the ancient one.

The Beastmaker pounded his gorilla chest. “My creatures can’t fight against magics! It’s as ancient as you are . . . as powerful as nature.”

“We are not here to fight against it,” said the ancient one. “We are here to find the magic’s limit . . . her limit.” The shadowy figure thought a moment. “Send five hundred Gorgons,” it said casually.

“Five hundred?!” shrieked the Beastmaker, now circling about the ancient one as a lion. “I won’t . . . I won’t send my pets to die . . . not by magics!”

“You’re right,” said the ancient one as if in agreement, until its voiced hardened. “Send one thousand!”

“But . . .,” began the Beastmaker as it slithered about on its snake-like belly. The ancient one cut him short, turning its hardened, blood-red eyes toward him. The Beastmaker grunted in frustration, knowing better than to disagree.

“Wooaaahhh!”

One thousand Gorgons exploded from the forest, howling as they came. The townspeople shrieked in horror and bolted westward to save themselves from the sure onslaught. Megani’s jaw dropped as her eyes widened in disbelief. But she instantly bolted forward, toward the beasts, leaving the eastern bank behind her. She refused to run away.

She could never, ever run away. She could never be like Pita, the first Del to have shamed the Royal House. She was Megani, and that meant she must move forward, and never, ever back. Megani knew that she would need the full power of her magic, but she did not know if that would be enough to thwart the tsunami of flesh before her. She knew only that this was her moment to discover its strength. If she died, Megani thought, it would be while running forward!

“Merge!!” she screamed as she flew into the horde of one thousand beasts. The icons of Wizard and Pearl fully joined within her mind.

*KABOOM!*

White fire engulfed Megani as a searing, white wave of intense magic flew before her. The Gorgons entered the massive flow and were incinerated as they screamed and shriveled into nothingness. The peoples of Olive Branch fell to their knees while the ground beneath their feet buckled and heaved. Their hearts pounded with fear, not just of the beasts, but of the powers unleashed by she who sought to save them. When the ground ceased its rumbling, the men, women, and children rose sluggishly, nervously to their feet and gazed east of the bridge. They suddenly paused, transfixed. Silence reigned. They saw Megani on her knees amidst falling ash that looked like a gentle snowfall. The Gorgons were gone, though their smoldering carcasses remained, obliterated by a force that Trinity had not seen since the day that Jason Del destroyed Pure Evil. Cheers broke out. Men spoke in whispers, finding it both a blessing and a curiosity that a woman could be so powerful. Women sensed a pride they had never felt. Mayor Fin walked away.

Megani Del, the last descendent of the Royal House of Del, was exhausted and dizzy. Sweat dripped down her face and neck. All her strength was spent. And in that moment, her guard fell and her mind was unprotected.

“Ahhh,” said the ancient one from far away. “There it is.”

“There’s what?” asked the grieving Beastmaker as the massive bat darted about his master’s head. “My pets are dead!”

“There’s her weakness . . . one among many.”

“What weakness?! She killed nearly all of my precious ones. It will take me days—weeks—to create more.”

“She has many faults,” teased the ancient one. “She’s vain, thinking herself invincible. Why else would she rush a thousand Gorgons without knowing if she could defeat them? Next, she is weakened by the

full force of her powers. I could have finished her off with another hundred Gorgons or so . . . too bad I needed them elsewhere. She also does not protect her mind fully when pressed to exhaustion, and so it can be planted with fresh memories if ever I get close enough. Finally,” the ancient one concluded, its voice crackling with delight, “the young girl is so easily fooled. She will be fun to play with!” Wrinkled lips cracked a thin smile. “And . . . she’s just a girl, after all.”

The ancient one nodded, pleased with the progress. “Go to the Valley of Despair,” it told the Beastmaker. “Tell me what you see. I need to be sure that my other plans are on schedule.”

The disheartened bat darted west. With each flap of its wings, it turned into a different soaring beast . . . first a massive crow . . . then an eagle . . . then a dragon . . . then a huge dragonfly . . .

Megani rested for several hours in Olive Branch, where grateful townspeople regaled her with food and drink in the town square. As many of the couples danced, their affection was evident. Megani was never allowed to engage in such trivial pursuits, she thought. “It’s a waste of your time,” her mother would say. Besides, Megani spent her life proving she was better than Men and had little experience trying to gain their affections. Though there was one who was close to her heart . . . more than she dared to admit. But that notion was too distant, too much a luxury, particularly now with a new danger afoot.

Megani smiled as she watched the townspeople celebrate in her honor. It felt good that in her first real test since her father’s death, she had succeeded. Her parents would be very proud, she thought. She protected the Races. She could feel the cowardice of a thousand years begin to erase from the history of the women who carried the name of Del—and from all the women in ages past who were cast aside so that their brothers would inherit the powers and the responsibilities.

A middle-aged woman carrying two pails of water crossed between the dancing couples, making her way to tables filled with food and drink. She suddenly tripped and fell hard to the ground. Her pails smashed upon the dirt and the water splashed upon those nearby. Mayor Fin was among them.

“Stupid Pita!” he spat as he raised his hand to strike the woman who was still upon her knees.

As his hand came down hard, it was stopped by a strong grip from behind. He looked back into the menacing eyes of Megani. Old prejudices are thick, she thought. She released Fin's arm and then helped the woman off the ground.

"What's your name?" asked Megani.

"Beth," she said.

Megani smiled. "My grandmother was named Beth! She was a warrior at the Battle of Meadowtown alongside my grandfather Cyrus. He was one of the few who knew her potential. She helped save the town just prior to my father's battle with Pure Evil."

"I know!" said the old woman. "I was named after Beth Del."

Megani gave her a hug. She held back tears. "Then wear the name proudly."

Megani sent her on her way. She turned to Mayor Fin. His face was a menacing red and a vein in his neck pulsated to the beat of his angry heart. She moved in close so only he could hear her words. "I expect you to treat her—and all women—with the same respect that you gave my father."

Megani then turned to the assembled town. "I must leave you to continue my travels north!" she began. "I suggest you travel to Meadowtown. They are still skilled in battle there. You will find protection and training should Gorgons still be a danger."

"Let's not be so hasty!" said Mayor Fin. "I think we can take care of ourselves."

Megani stared at him, knowing full well that it was his power, not the people's lives, he sought to save. "Recent events say otherwise!" Megani countered. She turned again to the townspeople. "Again, I suggest you pack all of your belongings and journey to Meadowtown." She then walked through the crowd to continue her trip. A cheer rose as she left them behind. It was a good feeling. She searched the forest east of Zak's River to ensure that no more Gorgons remained. Satisfied, she began her trek north once more.

Before she was delayed by the events in Olive Branch, Megani had been on her way to meet with Elf King Alar and Dwarf King Dal to resolve some sudden and urgent dispute between their two Races. There was even a rumor of conflict between them. The day before, news of the dire events had reached Zol, where Megani and her mother were lodging. It was so bizarre, thought both, that the Elves and Dwarves would even consider war when the Races were so much at peace and for so long.

Near sundown, Megani once again started north to lend what aid she could to the northern Races.

“Good travels north!” laughed the ancient one as it saw Megani leave the confines of Olive Branch. “I have an even bigger surprise waiting for you there!” The creature then smiled wickedly. “So much like Pita,” it cackled. “So much like Pita.”

It was the only creature in existence who would know that firsthand.