



CIRCLE OF FAITH,  
LIGHT'S PROPHECY

"THE ETERNAL WAR FOR YOUR SOUL"

WRITTEN BY  
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## Introduction

What started off as a routine archeological dig, on a small, insignificant island in central Europe, turned into one of the most profound discoveries in human history. Tucked deep within a crumbling underground ruin, preserved for untold centuries, rested a tattered ancient text. It's taken me a decade to translate *Circle of Faith, Light's Prophecy*, but my labor has produced the sweetest fruit. Who could have imagined that the language that is described in the book as *Elvish* is actually a derivative of Latin and, more importantly, the primer for every language on the planet. As you can imagine, scholars everywhere are questioning the origins of everything. At the same time, staunch dogmatists are doing everything they can to debunk this find. However, no chink has been found in this tome's authenticity—astounding as that may seem to all the skeptics.

The book appears to be a synopsis taken from thousands of journals still yet undiscovered. I've tried to remain objective in my translation. However, I believe you'll find, as I did, that it is impossible to stay dispassionate about the topics discussed in the book.

Linvindal, the author of this text, and self-described immortal being, has selected specific journal entries and woven them together like a fine tapestry. I'd like to offer a quote from the only other text discovered to date and even that is partially destroyed—*The Journal of the Three*, which describes three prophesied heroes set forth to reforge the spiritual bond between God and Man:

*“There are times when dreams and aspirations are nothing more than fruitless desires; childish fantasies that do nothing but give false hope and stroke our ego. However, there are some dreams that are not only purposeful and noble, they are destiny bound; such is the case with three people who know not of one another, but whose fate and success is inexorably tied.*

*They're strong, but power without focus is weak. They're smart, but intelligence without wisdom begets ignorance. They're cunning, but even the most clever fox is easily trapped by its primal desires. No, it will take more than blood, sweat, and a sharp blade to stare down destiny and force it to submit. It will take abandonment; abandonment of their self-willed design, desire, and power...abandonment to their faith in a prophesied promise. It's a concept so foreign and so paradoxical that it couldn't possibly be empowering, yet it is indomitable.*

*Can 'The Three' shed their pride and embrace their faith? Will it be enough to overcome the Shadow Horde about to be released upon Man? Only time will tell.”*

Many may think this is high fantasy, an ancient fairy tale, or worse yet, a hoax, but I tell you it's real—ignore it at your own expense. I found the story exciting, and the lessons insightful and relevant, especially today, where time has become a helpful veil for Shadow and deceit. It challenged my rational, moral, ethical, and spiritual principles, and it forced me to conclude that the motivation and form behind the eternal battle between good and evil is indeed truth. But don't

let my opinion sway you, read the book with an open mind and heart and judge for yourself. In the end, we all must answer for our choices and actions.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Escape**

#### **Journal of War—Volume 10, 12<sup>th</sup> month, 99 AD (After the Deception)**

##### **Concerned**

My brother eyes the Erovalis and my position of power. I can't possibly let him live, yet for some odd reason I can't bring myself to be his executioner.

Perhaps I'll send him on a meaningless battle whose outcome can only bring misery, pain, and death. Or maybe I'll just discredit him and have him exiled.

Azrael, why do my insides churn when reason tells me what to do? For all my brother's failings and jealousy he's still the most proficient commander I have. Thus I can't risk his demise before I bring the wrath of the Infernum down upon those Deo lovers.

Take heed, little brother, for your time soon approaches.

**Linvindal**

Fifteen hundred years have passed since the Great Deception, but its treachery still stains the very fabric of reality. The darkness that was spawned waits, building strength, growing more cunning every day. But evil is more than a memory, or a fairy tale, or an uneasy chord; it is tangible, and it wears a metal gauntlet and wields a malevolent blade. It has joined itself, body and soul, to The Deceiver, and their combined force is too terrible to imagine.

Yet Light is ever-present, even in the darkest times or when we refuse to acknowledge its presence. However, at the moment, it's unfocused. One person, Linvindell, a redeemed one, the unlikeliest of champions, seeks to change that. Having walked the world for centuries, he searches for three who have the spiritual fortitude to combat this scourge. He tires and in his weakest moments he wonders if the Lord's words are nothing more than veiled promises. And just when he thinks he can't take another step, a glimmer of hope emerges—such is the way of things. We never think we have enough; enough skill, enough courage, enough endurance, enough of anything that matters, but if we really need something we realize we always had it, or thankfully, learned that which we never thought we could grasp.

It matters not, for as this world's evil has married itself to The Deceiver, so too has Linvindell pledged his last breath to the Lord.

“Have you found them?” Varnegar asked.

Linvindell held a small mirror in his left hand and gulped down the contents of a glass vial with his right. “For all our sakes, I pray to God I have.” He peered into the mirror and the ancient Elf spoke firmly, “*To the Odotho River!*” and with a flash of light he vanished.

Bryn lay in the dew soaked grass of the forest floor, peering up at the streaks of new morning light that beamed down through the canopy of trees. Butterflies fluttered, birds sang, and squirrels scampered. A thin veil of mist still hugged the ground, a reminder of the night's chill. She inhaled the sweet scent of a patch of frost white lilies that she lay next to. This place was her paradise, and all Wildwalkers were drawn to it like salmon to their spawning ground.

She smiled at a cardinal perched on the limb of a pine tree, and chirped at the bright red bird, “Hello Mr. Cardinal. How are you today?” The bird bobbed its head up and down and chirped back, acknowledging her melodic voice. She sighed in contentment, “Why can't everything be this perfect?” She tossed what was left of a crabapple to a passing chipmunk and closed her eyes.

She quickly dozed off—the beauty and tranquility of her surroundings dissolving into a dark dream. This was nothing new for Bryn. For months she had been having foreboding thoughts that never bloomed, but were persistent enough that she felt the specter of uneasy anticipation breathing on her neck. A man in black armor, a blazing sword, an undying city, a feeling of despair, misshapen creatures, and the cold embrace of evil were all too familiar visions. Her body twitched as images she could not place or fathom cascaded over her consciousness. Just as a ray of light pierced the dank darkness of her nightmare, she woke to a commotion above.

She stood; stiffness gripped her limbs, a result of her uneasy sleep and the cool air. She scanned the limb of a nearby maple tree. A red-breasted black bird squawked anxiously and then took flight. Bryn cawed back, “This better be good, or it's the pot for you!” Still bothered by her dream, she wiped the sweat from her brow; ran her hands through her long, auburn hair; and took a deep breath to steady herself. She picked up an ivory walking staff, which bore a beautifully detailed carving of a raven on top, snatched up a water skin and a small backpack off the ground, and slung them over her shoulder. With a final sigh, she gazed over at the lilies, saddened that she

had to leave. But discipline and purpose overcame her desire to stay. She turned and faced in the direction the black bird flew. “*Mecum Feles Spiritus!*” The words evoked a natural power and her body began to change: Her leg muscles bulged, stretching her soft calf-skin pants; her pupils grew larger and her vision sharpened. She naturally began to crouch, and as she did, her face began to take on a feline appearance. Bryn’s heart began to thump within her chest and its pace quickened. Her mouth opened subtly as she began to pant. Within the blink of an eye, her image blurred and she sprinted forward at a phenomenal speed, kicking up dirt behind her.

Blazing a path through the Ethereal Woods, on her way to who knows what, she followed a trail of animal messages which spanned the gamut of birds, squirrels, rabbits, and deer. Hoots, squawks, peeps, and harried movements led Bryn further and further west until there was not much left of the forest.

After sprinting for just over an hour, and traveling almost 45 miles, she stopped to rest. The breeze from the mighty Odotho River, which hugged the Ethereal Woods, washed over her as she panted, trying to catch her breath. As she sat and drank, she realized that she was only a few minutes from the forest’s northwestern edge. She snarled, “These damn animals better not have me chasing ghosts.” She knocked back a few more draughts from her water skin and stood. As she did, the power she had evoked diminished, returning her to normal. She took a couple of deep breaths and prepared to move on.

However, Bryn still couldn’t shake the uneasiness she felt from her dreams. They had become almost like unwelcome friends whose obnoxious persistence brought both encouragement and warning and, today, her stomach had a knot in it. She knew without knowing *why* that danger was just around the corner.

At that moment, her sensitive ears picked up a low rumble. She placed her cheek to the ground. “A caravan...what’s it doing on this side of the river?”

She continued on, jogging and listening as she went until there was nothing left of the forest. She stopped just prior to the clearing and hid behind a tree. Once again she issued arcane words and waved her arms in a rhythmic precise pattern, “*Mi Spiritus...Scorpus Spiritus...Singulatum!*” Bryn’s form shrank and shifted, transforming her into a large raven. She flew skyward and pierced the treetop canopy. The sun was brilliant and warm now and as the wind rustled her feathers she cooed as a raven would coo. If she didn’t have a beak she would have smiled and for a moment she lost sight of what she was doing and soared higher. The raven was the only animal form that Bryn took on a regular basis and she relished every moment. There was a freedom for her that was not just physical but mental and emotional as well. The dark dreams that threatened to swallow her whole dissolved under the piercing radiance of the sun. Bryn had not even realized how tense she was until that feeling ceased.

But as soon as this feeling came it evaporated under her devotion as a Wildwalker. She swooped down and spotted the river and her objective. Her keen vision clearly revealed two, large, horse-drawn wagons, each guided by a cloaked driver. At the back of the second wagon was a small group of Humans, chained together, marching single-file. Flanked to either side were two hulking creatures. A chill went through her body, rustling her feathers. “Xanyre! What in the name of Ellenwyn are Shadow beasts doing here?” She had seen them somewhere before, but she knew for a fact that she had never actually seen one. It could have been her rigorous studies of all things unnatural or her disturbing dreams, but at the moment it didn’t matter. To her recollection, not since 100 AD (After the Deception), over 1500 years ago, had Xanyre been seen openly—a sure sign that something ominous and foreboding was at hand. It was close to sunset, and her

raven form was becoming a physical burden. She glided back to the safety of the forest, changed back and followed on foot.

The night crept over the world and Bryn kept up her vigil, shadowing the dark intruders as they continued their trek northward along the river's edge. The caravan finally stopped, and the cloaked drivers jumped to the ground to stretch their lanky bodies. Pulling back their hoods and veils, they revealed their bleached skin. Their faces slim and highly refined were oddly half black, creating a stark mask-like look—jet-black hair further accented their sinister features. Her eyes widened, and in her mind the word 'Melbreene' erupted—corrupt Elves of unspeakable dark power. She ducked her head back around the tree, "This is getting worse; first Xanyre, now Melbreene'. Only a fool would stay." She grinned, "Hello *fool*."

Bryn couldn't comprehend what the Melbreene' were saying, even though it sounded like a derivative of Elvish. One of them pointed in her direction and a Xanyre began to walk toward the forest. He then commanded the other Shadow beast, and it sat down near the back wagon.

Bryn had to act fast. She feared discovery. With wondrous fluidity, she thrust her hands straightforward, palms turning away from one another and whispered, "*Camelios!*" She faded into the background, perfectly camouflaged.

The Xanyre that was ordered to the forest sniffed the air and looked in her direction. It was eight feet tall, with twisted, bandied legs, and a huge, muscular upper body. It walked hunched over, and as it turned, she could see part of its spine protruding through its leathery, chalk green skin. A disproportionately small, bald head sat atop a thick veiny neck. As grotesque as it was, Bryn found it odd that the creature gave off no scent. With concentration, her breathing slowed to almost nothing, making her that much harder to find.

The creature's chest slowly and rhythmically heaved up and down, as if its breathing was labored, which produced a sort of nightmarish panting. Its head swiveled, scanning the area and then abruptly it let out a ghastly, guttural bark that echoed through the dense forest. It caught Bryn by surprise and she almost screamed out in fear. She shut her eyes, clenched her jaw and tried to calm herself, drawing on her 20 years of druidic training. With a bull-like snort, the creature's curiosity seemed satisfied. It took a few steps forward, reached up, and pulled dozens of branches off the nearby trees. Bryn was confused, but apparently it had what it came for and walked back out of the forest, moving to the opposite side of the wagons. Between the lead horses' legs, she saw the Xanyre rip the leaves from the branches, and lay them on the ground. When it finished, it walked back to the forest side of the wagon and plopped down parallel to the other Xanyre. The Melbreene' sat on the leaves and chatted.

"What vain wretches," she thought.

Bryn tried to formulate some kind of battle strategy that would not only defeat her enemy, but also preserve the Human captives. She thought of ways to use the Odotho River to her advantage, but nothing seemed plausible. The wise Wildwalker concentrated on every point of the Melbreene' camp. She then noticed something at the back end of the camp. "What's this?" One of the prisoners stared at his left shoulder. She could see something, but couldn't make it out. The prisoner glanced toward the river. The other prisoners became agitated. The Xanyre in the back barked an unfathomable word, forcing immediate silence. Both Melbreene' stood and looked back at the prisoners. They mumbled something in their twisted, guttural tongue and sat back down. Fatigued, the Melbreene' ceased their conversation and stretched out on the leaves.

"Finally...about time they went to sleep." She turned her attention from the Melbreene' and sniffed the air like a bloodhound, "Sulfur?" She zeroed in on the source of the odor. It was coming from the lead prisoner but she couldn't see anything. Bryn pursed her lips and stepped



back with barely the crackle of a single leaf and quietly spoke, “*Bubonis Conspicari...Luminos Luna!*” Her irises became bright yellow and her pupils elongated like an owl’s. All around her became brighter, and every object glowed with a specific heat pattern. She smiled with approval.

Bryn moved back to her former position. It was now perfectly clear. She could see a very small amount of smoke rising from the chains of the lead prisoner that was previously staring at his shoulder, and next to him was the dim aura of some humanoid. She also heard faint, undecipherable whispers—whispers only someone like her could hear. The aura of the humanoid figure disappeared behind the wagon, and several seconds later a Melbreene` stepped back into view. However, this Melbreene` looked different than the other two; she shook her head, “Great...a Shape-Shifter.”

The Shifter grabbed the prisoner in question by the left arm, his bonds already burned through, and they walked toward the river. After only three steps, the Xanyre in the back stood and grunted. The sleeping Melbreene` stirred but didn’t rise. Seeing their circumstance, the prisoner and the Shifter stopped in their tracks, and reversed their course 180 degrees. They walked straight through the line of prisoners and up to the Xanyre.

As the imminent conflict approached, Bryn was somewhat apprehensive about the Shifter, but more curious about the prisoner—once again something was familiar about him. He was a well-built man of 30, with flowing, sandy blond-hair. She guessed that he was either from the southwestern region near the city of Setting Splendor, or from one of the barbarian tribes just across the Odotho River. She conjectured, “Probably not a barbarian, he has no woad.” Bryn was sure that the Shifter and the prisoner were about to die. She didn’t know how noble their cause was, or for that matter if they were ignoble. However, she knew of nothing more evil than Melbreene` and Xanyre. She stepped out past the forest’s edge but remained camouflaged.

The Xanyre in the back looked at the Shifter, confused by the doppelganger. The other became curious as well, looking over at the sleeping Melbreene` and then back at the Shifter.

Throwing caution to the wind, she gathered her nerve, became visible, and shouted, “Hear me!” Everyone turned toward Bryn, shocked by her presence. “You have violated the forest and for that you must pay!” Her left arm quivered with impending power, as she raised it toward the sky. Her slender, arched eyebrows furrowed under intense concentration, and when her mood was set, she yelled, “*Tempest Vindicarum!*” She pulsed with energy and took on a faded green aura. The clouds rushed together and drew black. Her dark, auburn hair crackled with static electricity as she called forth her vengeful tempest.

The Xanyre, Melbreene`, and prisoners looked skyward, caught off guard by Bryn’s bold move. The Shape-Shifter took immediate advantage of the distraction, and barked one word in the Elven tongue, the language that Bryn used when she channeled her powers, “*Luscus!*” A stark metamorphosis began, and within two seconds he transformed into a fifteen-foot tall, heavily muscled Cyclops. Without hesitation, the Cyclops snatched up the Xanyre in front of him in a bear hug, took three large steps and pile-drove him into the back wagon, knocking him out. The horses at the front bucked and brayed and broke free of their bridal, running off at a break neck speed.

The prisoners were in shock and screamed, “By Zeus protect us!”

The Cyclops stood, looked at the two Melbreene` and sneered. “Your time is coming! Now, be gone!” The Melbreene` stepped back with caution but they did not flee.

The blond-haired prisoner that the Shifter freed darted to the back wagon. His eye caught the glint of his sword’s pommel; unfortunately the unconscious Xanyre was partially on top of it. “Get off!” he shouted, moving the creature just enough to free his blade. He flipped the scabbard

into the air with his right-hand, and caught it with his left. The ornate long sword gleamed in the moonlight.

He sized up the situation. The Xanyre in the front growled at him, but jerked its head around and charged Bryn. Seeing the imminent danger to the woman, the blond prisoner sprinted to intercept. In mid stride, a bolt of lightning called down from the sky and struck the Xanyre. It dropped to the ground—smoke rising from its corpse.

“Hurry...this way!” Bryn yelled, motioning toward the forest. She looked down at the smoldering creature, and curled her lip up in disdain. “Now you smell.”

The blond-haired prisoner was taken aback by the display of power and impressed with her grit. However, instead of heeding her command, he moved to help the other prisoners, but he was too late.

The Shape-Shifter, using its brutish strength, snapped the main chain holding the captives and yelled in a deep voice, “Run! Run to the river and swim for your lives!” Huffing and puffing, the Shifter ran toward the forest, “Come Danaas!” As he ran, he transformed into a white-haired Elf.

Danaas momentarily hesitated but followed. Just as they were at the forest’s edge, something tripped him. Protruding out of the ground was a bone that magically wrapped itself around his ankles, holding him fast. He tried to sheer the bone with his sword, but it was no use.

Bryn focused her attention on the two Melbreene`. Their arms were extended, their gaze fixed as they concentrated on the dark spell they cast. She thrust her staff skyward and snapped it down, pointing at the two evil Elves. A flash and a thunderous burst of sound engulfed them. As her eyes cleared, she saw the Melbreene` flattened by the concussion. Thankfully, it was enough to break the spell that held Danaas. Concurrently, the Xanyre that had been driven into the wagon was rousing, and the storm clouds dissipated as magically as they appeared.

“Let’s get out of here,” the Shifter said and the three of them bolted into the forest.

After a short time, Bryn heard pursuit, stopped and turned. The remaining Xanyre snarled in anger as it barreled toward them. Right behind the Shadow Beast, the two Melbreene` darted like phantoms around the trees. Bryn looked in a bit of shock, surprised that the Melbreene` were still alive. “I can outrun them, but you can’t,” she said, the first sign of nervousness in her voice.

Danaas stood by her side, ready for battle. “We can take them!”

“No!” said the Shifter. “I’ll get us out of here, but I need Bryn to slow them down.”

“How do you know my name?” she asked, not taking her eye off their pursuers.

“Never mind that now...just slow them down!”

“*Implicarum!*” she shouted. Roots, twigs, trees, grass, and anything living in the area came to life at her command, entangling the evil wretches, completely halting their advance. The Xanyre roared, flexing its massive physique, trying to break its bonds, while the Melbreene` were mute; their mouths sealed shut by grasping vines. “Umm, now would be a good time to do what you are going to do; otherwise we better run.”

Holding a mirror in his hand, the Shifter replied, “Time to join the third. Danaas look into the mirror and say ‘Goldstrike.’ When he is gone, you do the same, Bryn.”

Hesitantly, but without much choice, Danaas did so and immediately vanished. Bryn knew there was a town called Goldstrike, but did not know if that was their destination. “Where does this take us?”

“Quickly, look into the mirror and say the word!”

“What...”

“There’s no time for this, you have to trust me!”

With apprehension, Bryn did so, and disappeared just as Danaas had.

The Shifter glared at the Melbreene`. Just as they began to break free, he looked into the mirror and smiled, "*Goldstrike.*" He disappeared, and the mirror fell to the ground, shattering into 1000 pieces.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The Gathering**

#### **Journal of Shadow Knowledge—Volume 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> month, 1AD**

##### **The Infernum**

I'm falling out of control, torn from this reality, hurled into the depths of Shadow, to the twisted lair of the Shadow Lord, Azrael. My senses are assaulted by smoke, ash and fire. Despair, agony, desperation, fear, and longing are palpable. I gasp, trying not to be sick.

Through my blurred vision and the pounding in my head, I see what looks like a malformed Human. Wings? A tail? The sweat on my brow stings my eyes. I can't be sure.

As I inhale, sulfur burns my throat, but in an instant it's all gone. The vile surroundings transform into lush fields and horror to content; standing before me is the most beautiful Human I've ever seen: Azrael!

"Yes my servant. Let us discuss the future."

Is it a dream or an illusion? Whatever it is takes power and control, and that is satisfying. I care not for this place but what this place and its master can give me.

**Linvindal**

Danaas and Bryn rubbed their eyes, disoriented from their hasty retreat. Before they could focus, the smell of pinesap surrounded them. The white-haired Elf quipped, “You happy? You’re still in the woods.”

Bryn regained her senses and realized that they had indeed arrived in a forest or at least a large stand of trees, “I imagine it’s better than being eaten by a Xanyre, but my question still stands: where are we?”

“We are at the edge of the Horseshoe forest, near the town of Goldstrike.” The white-haired Elf sat down with a fatigued sigh and pulled a silver flask from inside his cloak and drank to refresh himself. “*The Potion of Change* is a strain, especially at my age.”

“*Potion of Change?*” Danaas asked, keeping his sword at the ready, using it like a cane to steady himself. “What is that?” The Elf didn’t answer back, but he did indeed look weary. Danaas sized up the Elf. There was something familiar about him. But perhaps that was because he was an iconic looking Elf: white flowing hair, ice blue eyes, a long frost white beard, with a slim, above average height frame. And although he didn’t look exceptionally old, his presence gave off an aura of ancient wisdom that gave one a feeling of reverence and respect.

Bryn sat across from the Elf, keeping her eyes on him at all times. “Ah, so you are a practitioner of the arcane arts?” she asked.

The Elf gathered himself and took a deep breath. “Not precisely...I’m an alchemist and a fair enchanter.” He took another draught from the flask and offered it to Bryn and Danaas.

“No thanks...I have my own,” she said, pulling a water skin off her shoulder.

Danaas accepted the flask and took a hardy swig. “You have much explaining to do.”

“I know.” The Elf sighed still trying to regain his strength. “You have many questions, but at the moment, I will only provide a few answers.” He dipped his head in greeting, “My name is Linvindell, and although you saw me take many forms, not the least of which was the talking moth on Danaas’ shoulder, I am what you see now: a humble servant of the Lord.”

“*Lord?*” Danaas asked. “What god do you speak of?”

“You know there is only one...don’t you?” he responded.

Danaas sheathed his sword and sat down, less apprehensive after that response.

“Here,” and Linvindell handed Bryn a small empty flask. “If you smell it, you should be able to recognize some of the ingredients I used for the potion.” Linvindell stared at Danaas with an intense but friendly grin, “That was two months of work! Suffice to say I am not here to harm either one of you.”

Bryn’s shoulders finally relaxed, bringing a smile to Linvindell’s face. “I know your name, my dear, because I have been seeking you for some time. I couldn’t figure out why I would lose track of you so easily, and then I realized it was due to your own shape-shifting abilities.”

Danaas turned toward Bryn, “You’re a Shape-Shifter?”

“Hardly,” she quipped back.

Danaas stared back at Linvindell confused. “You look familiar, as is your name.”

“I should, but we can talk about that later. Don’t you want to know why I brought you here?”

Bryn laid her staff on the ground. “I want to know many things, but yes...that would be a good start.”

Danaas nodded his head in agreement. “Sorry. By all means, carry on.”

“We’re here to pick up a Dwarf named Urrod, whose path mirrors both of yours.”

“And what...,” Bryn started to say before she was cut-off by Linvindell.

“And no, I will not tell you what that path is yet. But let me ask you something: do you both feel in your heart of hearts that something is missing in your lives that something gnaws at you when your thoughts are still, but you can’t quite place your finger on it? I have that answer.”

“What is it, man...tell me!” Danaas chirped, anxiety and anticipation thick in his voice.

“I will, but we must first gather Urrod.”

Danaas and Bryn both looked stunned and irritated by Linvindell’s answer. “I suppose we don’t have much choice. I will follow,” Bryn responded.

“As will I,” Danaas replied. He suddenly realized he was half naked, and turned away from Bryn, “Sorry about my appearance, but...”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” Bryn said with a gentle batting of her eyes.

“Hmm...,” Danaas hummed back, flattered by the compliment.

“Are muddy pants and a bare chest befitting a Paladin?” Linvindell asked.

Danaas straightened up and again felt his embarrassment return. “No, they are not.”

Placing his hand in a small pouch, Linvindell pulled out clothing that could not possibly fit within a container that size. Danaas accepted the clothes, “That’s a pretty handy trick. How did you manage that?”

“It’s not important,” Linvindell answered. “Take them. I think you’ll find that they fit you well.”

Danaas shook his head in almost a comical disbelief, moved behind a tree and donned the new clothes. “I have never had much use for arm wavers and spark throwers, but after today, I will have to rethink that.” As he straightened himself up, he pulled a large coin from his pocket and emerged from behind the tree. “Don’t suppose you have a sword belt?” flipping the coin in the air.

“No,” Linvindell responded, “but I did bring a leather strap.”

Danaas pocketed the coin and then threaded the strap through the loop on his scabbard. “Thank you.” He sat and took another long draught from Linvindell’s flask. “Ahh!” he proclaimed, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. He swirled the contents around, and realized the container was still full. “More of your trickery I see.” Conceding his short-term fate, Danaas raised the flask to toast. “To my liberators, may I be able to re-pay the favor someday!”

“Think nothing of it,” Bryn said. “Orserel is a better world with one less Xanyre.”

Danaas cocked his head to the side, “Xanyre...that’s twice you used that word. Is that what you call those ugly beasts?”

“Yes,” she replied in disdain.

“Where I’m from we call them Grunts, but I have only seen them one time before and that was ten years ago. Like then, they were marshaled by those evil Harleq.”

“Now you have me at a loss. What’s a Harleq?” Bryn asked.

“You know...those black and white faced Elves.”

“Why do you call them that?” Bryn asked.

Danaas removed the sword from the sheath on his back and placed it on the ground. “Harleq is short for Harlequin. One of the soldiers that served under me named them that because it looked like they were wearing a mask. Over time it became a common term in my kingdom.”

“Interesting...” she commented.

“Not to break up the conversation,” said Linvindell, “but I brought some dried beef, honey, and wheat bread. I’m sure you’re hungry, Danaas. You need to regain your strength. We have much to do tomorrow.”

“God, I was hoping you brought food!” Danaas exclaimed. However, even though he was starving, Danaas retained a modicum of chivalry and offered the food first to Bryn, “Have some?”

“Thank you,” she replied, smiling at his courtesy.

They ate and Danaas mused. “Only on one other occasion has a woman stood by my side in battle. Never has one saved my life.” For the first time since they met, he took a good look at Bryn. She was quite beautiful, approximately 5’10” tall, shapely, with long, dark, auburn hair. She wore a combination of cloth and leather, dyed a drab brown and green. “If my Order knew you saved my life, they would never let me live it down.”

“Women don’t get much of a chance or you’d be toasting them more often,” Bryn spit back.

“You may be right. Still, it is an honor, dear lady, to be in your presence,” Danaas replied, tipping his head, saluting her, and passing the water flask.

Bryn grinned, pursed her lips, snatched the flask out of Danaas’ hand and took a swig. When she finished, she handed it to Linvindell. As he drank, Bryn stood and looked at their surroundings again. “When is the Dwarf supposed to show up?”

Linvindell raised an eyebrow, realizing the comment had a hint of prejudice—interesting considering she had just leveled a criticism at Danaas about the same thing. “*Urrod* is not coming here specifically. We are meeting *him* in Goldstrike tomorrow afternoon,” Linvindell said. “The sun is setting. We best get some sleep, but before we do, is there anything you can do to hide us, Bryn?”

“Just some simple ranger tricks I learned but nothing magical. I *could* call a guardian animal to alert us if trouble approaches.” Bryn placed the edge of her hand to her brow, cutting out the remaining light, and turned, looking at the nearby trees. She stopped, fixed her gaze, and began making a peeping sound. After a minute, an opossum arrived and snuggled up to her leg. “He’ll keep watch while we sleep. In return, we’ll give him some food so that he doesn’t have to hunt.”

“Oh my God, you want me to trust my life to a big rat?” Danaas exclaimed.

“Ignorance is your strong suit, isn’t it? This creature is far more capable of hearing and seeing something approach at night than you. So have some respect!” Bryn barked.

“No offense intended, druidess.”

“There is no such thing as a ‘druidess’. The title is simply *druid*. Remove any thoughts of female weakness from your mind. And how did you know I was a druid?”

Danaas rolled his eyes in frustration. “I can’t say anything right,” throwing up his hands in defeat. “I am going to bed.” The noble Paladin rolled over and closed his eyes. The sound of crickets and the light breeze rustling the pine needles put him right to sleep.

Linvindell smiled at Bryn. “You made the right decision to help us. Much will be answered in the coming days...just be patient.”

“Melbreene` are evil and they defile nature, that’s reason enough. The real question is *why* were they there? Sightings of Melbreene` are rare. Sightings of Melbreene` and Xanyre together have been almost unheard of for centuries.”

“A great question...one that I don’t have an answer to. But it was a bold statement to make such an open trek. Usually when evil stops skulking, it’s time for all Men to become wary,” Linvindell posed.

Bryn was somewhat uncomfortable around strangers and sharing personal experiences was not her forte`, but given the bizarre circumstances, she felt compelled to ask Linvindell a pointed

question. “I’ve had visions of something dark and ominous. Are the Melbreene` the cause of my concern?”

Linvindell returned a comforting smile. “I can’t read your mind; nor am I a seer. Only prayer and self-reflection can tell you specifically, but it very well could be. Our meeting was no coincidence. Our paths have crossed for a reason. It is my hope that after tomorrow, potential will become destiny.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Linvindell said nothing and continued to smile at her.

“I know...be patient,” she retorted with an exasperated huff.

“You better turn in,” she said. “I’ll make sure we’re safe.” When Bryn was satisfied, she curled up and dozed off, but as usual her sleep was anything but sound. It was filled with dark images that chilled her to the bone. However, unlike the past, a warming light caressed her, easing her body.

The next day, Danaas woke to Bryn saying something in the Elven tongue. He knew it was Elvish, because when he was a boy, an Elven man would occasionally visit his father. And Elvish had a stark precise pattern to it. He rose and brushed aside bits of branches and leaves that Bryn had placed on top of him for camouflage. “I forgot you were going to do that.” A small spring of water bubbled up from the ground next to her. Her opossum friend sipped from it, as did other animals that had gathered around her. She beamed with joy as the menagerie of creatures took advantage of her kindness.

“Eat something, Danaas; you must recover your strength,” Linvindell said, offering more of the dried beef, bread, and honey.

Danaas stretched his arms, shoulders, and neck. “I’m sore,” he yawned. Even the smell of dry, cold food made him salivate, “Those wretches only gave us enough water to stay alive.”

“Tell me something of our attractive lady friend,” Danaas asked, raising a nonchalant eyebrow in Bryn’s direction.

“Her story is hers to tell but what I can say is that she is a Wildwalker, which is a person with druidic abilities but whose purpose is not the same,” Linvindell responded.

I guessed she was a druid just by her display of power, but I have never heard of a Wildwalker,” Danaas said.

“They are a rare breed,” said Linvindell, “but again, she can tell you more.” Linvindell eyed the sword at Danaas’ side, “That’s your father’s sword. Is it not?”

“How would you know that? Did you know my father?”

“I knew General Nirion well—commander of Setting Splendor’s army. He was a good man, God rest his soul. The sword was passed down from his father, Darras. The design is Elven, but it was forged by Dwarven hands. And I know *you* because we’ve met before, on several occasions. You were a boy, but I knew then that something was special about you,” Linvindell responded.

Danaas smiled and his lips straightened, “I thought that was you.”

“I knew I was right,” Bryn declared, joining them.

“About what?” Linvindell asked.

“The first time I saw Danaas, I thought he might be from Setting Splendor. If that’s so, where were you captured?” Bryn asked.

“Where I travel is my business.” Danaas looked back over at Linvindell. “Finish your story.”



“We can finish that discussion at another time, but I too am curious why you were so far north,” Linvindell questioned.

“Let’s just say I was on official business. I was taken by surprise during the night as I bedded down to sleep, and then heaped together with those other prisoners. *Why* I was captured...I do not know,” Danaas replied.

“You might have avoided capture if you had a ‘big rat’ protecting you,” Bryn needled.

Linvindel burst out laughing, “HAHAHA! You have to admit, she got you there!”

Danaas forced a straight face, “Whatever.”

Bryn wanted to make a point and pressed her verbal attack. “How was King Beznol, Danaas?”

“How did you know I visited him?” Danaas responded, shocked how Bryn could know that fact.

“Simple, you just said you were on a mission to the far north of Setting Splendor. You suggested that the information was secret. Last night you briefly pulled a brass token from your pocket, and I noticed that it had the symbol of the Glecian Kingdom, which is ruled by King Beznol. Lastly, by the way that you fight, the command in your voice, the articulation of your words and the lavish sword at your side; I pegged you for a high ranking soldier. After that it was easy to put all the pieces together.”

Linvindel smiled at Bryn, impressed with her deductive reasoning.

Danaas was embarrassed by his sloppiness, but he too was impressed. He pulled out the coin, flipped it in the air and caught it. “You are correct, friend Elf. This token was given by Beznol himself to secure safe passage throughout his kingdom. I will have to be more careful around you.”

Bryn grinned back, acknowledging the compliment. However, her demeanor abruptly changed, “I’m a half-Elf. Why did you call me Elf?”

“Did I offend you *again*?” Danaas replied.

“No, in a strange way it’s a compliment, since both Humans *and* Elves have shunned me. It’s just nice to be thought of as something other than *half-breed*,” she responded with a smile.

“I wasn’t sure, but it matters not. We are all the same under the skin.” Danaas peered at Linvindell and then Bryn. “You both seem to know something about me. Linvindell insists on being mysterious, but I would like to know a bit more about you, Bryn. When you were away from camp, Linvindell told me that you are a Wildwalker. What is that?”

“That’s a long story.”

“Well, according to Linvindell, we have time. Indulge me. I am sure it’s an interesting story,” and he went back to eating.

Bryn frittered with a twig. “You were right. I’m a druid but am outside their political hierarchy.”

“What’s that mean?” Danaas asked.

“It means I studied and became one but am no longer affiliated with them.”

“That’s interesting...”

“You gonna let me talk?” Bryn barked.

“Sorry,” Danaas replied.

Bryn cleared her throat. “As I was trying to say, there’s not much to tell. My father forced me into druidic training at a young age, telling me it was for my own good. Before I knew what was happening, I was learning about all sorts of lore, plants, and philosophy.”

“That doesn’t sound *too* bad,” Danaas said.

“*That wasn’t too bad, but what was very tough was being ridiculed for being a half-breed. I was brought up in a loving environment without prejudice and to have it thrust upon me was overwhelming. The elders worked me twice as hard as the other Human and Elven students, trying to force me out of school. I wanted to leave, but my father wouldn’t let me; I hated him for that. But a funny thing happened: the harder they pushed, the more determined I became.*”

“Sounds like it was rough,” Danaas said between bites.

“It was, but it got better after the first year. They realized I wasn’t going anywhere and that I actually had quite a bit of talent.” Bryn leaned back and smiled. “But everything changed in my second year. I found an ancient tome, in a hidden section of the main library, which predated every text I had ever seen. A young girl named, Ellenwyn ‘The Wildwalker’, wrote it. It intrigued me. I told no one about my little treasure, hoarding it, and absorbing its knowledge.”

Linvindell perked up, “Did you say *Ellenwyn*?”

“Yes...what about her?”

“Nothing, please continue on,” Linvindell said.

Bryn seemed a bit flustered from the interruptions. “Where was I now?”

“You were talking about Ellenwyn,” Danaas replied.

“Right...those that follow her teaching call themselves Wildwalkers.”

“What’s that mean?” Danaas asked.

“The druidic community believes that there is a spirit that resides in all things. They also believe that nature’s spirit is separate and pure, unlike Man’s. Wildwalkers also believe that a spirit resides in all things. However, we believe that this spirit is derived from a greater source, and that this spirit and the source are one. Humans call this spirit *God or the Lord*.”

“That’s a big difference,” Danaas blurted out.

“Yes...so big in fact that after twenty years of druidic training and being elected to Hierophant Druid—one of a ring of ten, I turned down the appointment and left as abruptly as I first arrived. They were happy though because they didn’t *really* want to elect me, but circumstance forced them. I couldn’t in good conscience adhere to a teaching I didn’t fully believe in. I packed my bags that night, visited my mother for the last time, and have roamed this land ever since, trying to embody and fulfill what Ellenwyn’s book has taught me.”

Danaas smiled, comforted by Bryn’s story; they not only shared a like philosophy but were single-minded in their conviction about it. Whatever was ahead of them seemed fated. There seemed little more to do than to march forward and meet destiny face-to-face. “Then we walk a similar path, my dear lady.” He looked over at Linvindell and dusted his hands off. “Well that was mighty good after not eating for days. I feel much better. Is it time to go?”

With a sense of satisfaction on his face, Linvindell responded, “Yes, my good man. Let’s meet Urrod.”

When they moved past the forest’s edge, they were greeted with acre upon acre of grape vines. A magnificent ruddy colored mountain range rose in the background, accenting the bright green of the vines.

Danaas looked up at the sun, “Warm day.”

“Beautiful,” Bryn replied.

“The town of Goldstrike is just to the west. It shouldn’t take us more than a half-hour or so to reach it,” Linvindell indicated.

They strolled through the grape fields, soaking up the beauty of the day. “I’m well traveled, but where are we exactly?” Danaas asked.

“We’re in the central portion of the continent, at the base of the Aeralath Mountains, home to the Dwarves. However, the town falls under the domain of the Selistan Kingdom, whose capital city is Jarest.”

“I know Jarest...the eastern kingdom,” Danaas said.

“That’s right. Goldstrike was founded several centuries ago and flourished when Man began to use gold, silver, and platinum as a medium of exchange. The Aeralath Mountains are a rich source, but the Dwarves had already claimed them as their own. For several years, Humans and Dwarves fought for the rights, until a treaty was finally signed, allowing Humans to mine the very top of the mountains.”

“Top of the mountains?” Danaas replied. “How can you mine on the very top of a mountain?”

“You can’t, which is why Dwarves became known as *shrewd* businessmen. The town still attracts treasure hunters, but is renowned for its fine wines and port.” Linvindell pointed off into the distance. “The town is over that hill to the right.”

As Linvindell guided them through the grape fields to the trade road, Bryn became uneasy. “Stop...something’s not right.” She sniffed the air, knelt, gently placed her hand on the ground, and closed her eyes. “I can’t place my finger on it, but something is out of balance here.”

“I’m sure you’re right. Let’s all stay alert,” Linvindell warned. The ancient Elf’s eyes darted about looking for potential trouble. He had been watching this area for many months through what many common folk would consider “magical” means and found the actions of some of the locals to be odd. Bryn’s warning was further proof of his findings.

After five minutes, they reached the trade road. Bryn noticed a lack of residual traffic. “If this is the trade route, then there should be more new foot prints, hoof tracks, and wagon wheel marks.” She turned around and plucked a grape to refresh herself. Her mouth puckered, “EWWW! It tastes like hemp!” she gasped, spitting it out.

Linvindell popped a grape into his mouth and grimaced. “Wow, that’s bad,” and he too spit it out. “Have you ever had wine from this area, Danaas, if so, how long ago?”

“As a matter of fact, I have. Last year, one of my men confiscated two crates of ‘Goldstrike Ruby’. It was excellent, especially for a young port,” Danaas replied.

“Good. The grape tastes different than its fermented cousin, but tell me what you think,” Linvindell said.

As Danaas tasted, he critiqued, “A bit dry and sour...and you were right, the after-taste is like sucking on a rope. They will have to plow these fields under and start fresh next year.”

Linvindell untied a flap on his shirt pocket, pulled out a golden monocle, and looked at the field of grapes. “It’s as I feared.”

“What is that and what are you talking about?” Danaas asked.

“This is a very special lens. It allows me to detect when Shadow has been subverted. It might be that Azrael’s forces have somehow poisoned the grapes and that they are distributing this poison via Goldstrike’s wine. It’s all speculation, but the lens has never lied.”

“It’s just a bad crop,” Danaas stated, “and what is Shadow?”

Linvindell ignored his question.

“It’s not ‘just a bad crop’. No grape that I’ve ever had tastes like this,” Bryn explained.

She wandered off to the side of the road. Her uncanny sense of smell was picking something up again. It didn’t take long. “Danaas, Linvindell, come here.” She was standing next to a scorched circular patch. Upon further examination, Bryn found footprints. Although she was not an expert tracker like a ranger, it was obvious to her that whoever made them was running

around frantically. She poked the patch with her staff. “If lightning struck here, it would have started a large fire.”

Danaas knew that something was wrong because Linvindell’s head was on a swivel. Danaas grabbed him by the shoulder. “What’s wrong? Do you know who or what did this?”

“This confirms my worst fears. A gateway was opened to Azrael’s domain, and from the deepest recesses of his Shadow kingdom, the *Madmen* have been let loose! We must not waste any more time,” and he walked with a determined stride toward Goldstrike.

Danaas and Bryn didn’t understand Linvindell’s connotation of what a ‘Madman’ was, but his fear was palpable which caused them to become even more uneasy. They followed the ancient Elf, making note of anything unusual.

Along the way, they saw farmers turning soil and picking grapes; with friendly ‘hellos’ and ‘how do you do’s,’ nothing seemed to be out of place. As they reached the top of a small hill, they spied their objective. However, between them and the town was a man in his later years fixing a broken wagon wheel. The man didn’t seem to notice them since they had just crested the hill and were still about 50 yards away. The old man picked up the rear of the wagon with one hand, and slapped a wheel back in place with his other hand. Linvindell extended both of his arms and pushed his two companions back out of view.

“Did I just see what I think I just saw?” Danaas asked.

“As I feared, things are not what they seem to be. When we pass the man, act like nothing is wrong,” Linvindell instructed.

“But what about...” Danaas said.

“There will be time enough to discuss these things. Right now let’s find Urrod and get out of here,” Linvindell demanded.

They passed the unknown threat on the side of the road, and they all smiled and said ‘hello’. The gray-haired, medium built man, with large muttonchops, responded, “Hello there, top of the morn’ to ya’. Come to sample and buy some of Goldstrike’s finest?” He looked directly at Bryn and Linvindell. “Elves—a rare sight indeed, especially two. Must be a special occasion huh? My name is Kendell. What be your names?”

Danaas looked concerned. However, Bryn smiled and in her airy melodic voice replied to the curious local. “Yes, we’ve come to sample your renowned wine. Have a great day!” They continued their march toward the town hoping for no further *incidents*.

“Excellent...may the wine brighten you,” Kendell replied.

When they were out of earshot from Kendell, Danaas commented, “That was quick thinking. I was an inch from having my sword do the talking.”

“Luckily, cooler heads prevailed,” Bryn responded.

“Yeah, no one ever accused me of being subtle,” Danaas chirped back.

Bryn smiled at the self-deprecating comment.

Danaas really liked Bryn. Her personality was almost dipolar to his, but that dynamic was strangely compelling—like a moth to a flame without the adverse result. He gave her a light squeeze on the shoulder and smiled back.

During Bryn and Danaas’ playful banter, Linvindell was fixed on what Kendell said: ‘May the wine brighten you.’ Never had such simple and inviting words brought such an ominous chill down his back.

Bryn noticed Linvindell’s changed demeanor. “You OK?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” he responded as they entered Goldstrike.

Nothing had physically changed since the last time Linvindell visited the town. Goldstrike was almost idyllic with the surrounding beauty of the grape fields coupled with its simplistic yet grand design. Except for the blasphemous statue of Dionysus, which guarded the front of the city, Goldstrike reminded Linvindell of a time long past. However, there were still remnants of older, more boisterous mining times tucked away in the back of the town, and that was where they were headed. The rear section of the city was also where some of the less fortunate merchants stayed. “We’re meeting Urrod at the *Hammer and Anvil*, Goldstrike’s oldest inn. It is not uncommon to see an occasional Dwarf there since they live so close. Some have even acquired a taste for Goldstrike’s sweet wine; it complements the heavier stout beer that Dwarves are known for.”

Danaas licked his lips. “I could use a beer right about now. I’ve only had Dwarven Bok Stout twice, but there is nothing like it after a battle. Do you think Urrod will have a bottle on him?”

“With all that’s going on, and you’re asking about beer?” Linvindell replied.

“Why not?” Danaas responded.

Bryn was warming up to Danaas as well and she grinned at his reply.

When we reach the *Hammer and Anvil*, just follow my lead,” Linvindell directed.

“Maybe Bryn should stay outside,” Danaas contemplated. “If there is any trouble, we will have more options. Plus, it would appear that two Elves in these parts are somewhat of an oddity.”

“Learning from me already?” Bryn sniped.

“No, strategy and battle tactics are *my* strong suit. Maybe you can learn from me this time,” Danaas glared back.

“Sorry,” realizing she had gone too far. “I’ll stay out here.”

As they entered, Danaas took note of the building’s interior design. The structure was T-shaped. Windows lined the outside walls, giving the old inn a surprisingly open feel. Although it was still early, thick pipe and cigar smoke hung in the air, creating an aromatic haze. Danaas inhaled deeply. “Oh how I’ve missed a good pipe or cigar.”

Linvindell reached into his pant pocket and pulled out a coin. “Here, see if they have any cigars for sale.”

Danaas was overjoyed at the prospect. He maneuvered around several tables and addressed the barkeep. “Have any cigars?”

The grungy barkeep sized Danaas up. He moved his cigar butt to the corner of his mouth with his tongue. “I do for those that have money,” he replied in a hoarse voice.

Not knowing the value of the coin Linvindell gave him, he palmed it and rested it quietly on the bar. “What will this get me?”

The barkeep quickly pocketed the silver coin, reached under the bar, and handed Danaas a box. “These should suit you. They’re the best I got.”

Danaas opened the small pine box and stared down at his new tobacco jewels. He pulled one from the case and sniffed its length. “Yes...these will do fine! Got a light?”

“Help yourself,” the barkeep replied, pulling the glass casing off a small oil lamp, exposing the flame.

Danaas walked back toward Linvindell like a proud parent, puffing his cigar, and cuddling the cigar box under his left arm.

“Are you happy now?” Linvindell snickered.

“Yep...that’s two things I owe you.”

As Danaas moved past the bar, he noticed an archway to his right leading to a kitchen. Across from the kitchen was a set of stairs leading down to what he figured was a wine cellar or

storage. To the left was another room with more tables and stairs leading up to a second floor. The tavern was half-filled, and they scanned the tables looking for Urrod.

Linvindell found him. "That's him in the corner with his back to the wall, and it looks like he brought friends."

They casually made their way to his table. Urrod and his two Dwarven friends were dressed in worn leather and steel chain, each carrying a smallish war hammer at their side. They appeared to be less than five feet tall, broad of build, sporting long, reddish brown hair.

"Greetings, may two weary travelers join you this fine morning?" Linvindell asked.

Urrod was guarded, not expecting Danaas, "Please...sit and be comfortable. May we get you something to drink?"

"You wouldn't happen to have any Dwarven Bok Stout on you?" Danaas asked.

"Danaas!" Linvindell scolded.

"What?"

"You like that?" Urrod inquired. "Not many Humans like the bitter taste."

"There's nothing like it in my opinion."

Urrod smiled, "Ornos, take care of our rugged friend."

Ornos reached into a leather sack underneath the table, and pulled out a large bottle of the bitter, black nectar. He held the bottle by the neck and popped off the metal and wood cork with his thumb, a feat that would have been very difficult for any Human. In a scruffy, deep voice handed the bottle to Danaas. "Here, lad, drink hardy."

Danaas raised his glass for a toast. "How does that go...oh yeah...may you squeeze water from a rock!"

Ornos slapped Danaas on the back, "And you know Dwarven toasts too. You can't be all bad!"

"We have a companion outside," Linvindell said. "Maybe your friends can keep her company for a bit while we talk?"

Urrod nodded his head. "Please wait outside. I won't be too long." They understood and walked out.

Urrod stared at Linvindell. "I wasn't expecting guests. I would feel more comfortable if we could talk alone."

Honoring Urrod's request, Danaas stood, but Linvindell tugged at his shirtsleeve. "Stay."

Danaas felt a bit uncomfortable and rocked back into his chair, drank his brew, puffed his cigar, and stared aimlessly out the window, trying to pretend he wasn't there.

"Your destiny is tied to Danaas and our friend outside," Linvindell explained.

"Then why isn't he here with us?" Urrod asked.

"I am afraid that is my fault," Danaas replied. "And it's a *she*, not a he."

The stout Dwarf sighed, contemplating his actions. He stared at Danaas and his eyes pierced his soul. "You are noble and honorable." Urrod knocked back what was left of his stout and continued where he left off with Linvindell a year ago. "Our last conversation struck a nerve. It's been hard to think about anything else since then, which is why I am here. Tell me more."

"I know I told you that we'd discuss your future, but we can't do it here. Something evil haunts the area. Discussions are not safe. We must leave without delay," Linvindell responded.

"Go where?" Urrod asked.

"My castle, and after the discussion, if you wish to return home, I will bring you straight back. Does that suit you?"

Urrod stroked his long beard. “I’ve never ventured far from I’Nok. I, like the rest of my people, am a creature of habit, comforted by repetition and isolation. The upper world is vast. But I must know why I feel the way I do, so I’ll follow.”

Danaas offered Urrod his hand in friendship. “We are in this together, my friend.”

Urrod beamed a smile back at Danaas and firmly shook his hand. “Thanks. That means a lot.”

With Urrod’s decision made, they gathered their belongings and moved outside to rejoin Bryn. When they arrived outside, Ornos and Forstag, Urrod’s companions, were squatting down, smoking strong tobacco from long stone pipes. Bryn was opposite the Dwarves—her lip curled up in disgust from the smell of the smoke. “About time,” she said, looking Urrod over. Bryn pointed toward the entrance to Goldstrike. “We may have trouble. I’ve seen some flashes of light that I can’t account for.”

“That’s not good news,” Linvindell replied.

“What are you talking about?” Urrod asked.

“Never mind. I’ll fill you in on the way if we have time,” Linvindell responded. “But before we go, let me see your sword, Danaas.”

Danaas freed the sword from its scabbard and handed it to him. “What are you going to do?”

“Just watch.” Linvindell removed a small metal-corked vial from his shirt pocket. “Glad I brought this.” He braced the tip of the sword against the ground and poured its contents down the length of the blade. It oozed out like honey. He stared intently at the sword, held his hand over it, and evoked, “*Protestum!*” The thick, silver liquid became one with the blade, causing it to glow a faint blue. Linvindell offered it back to Danaas.

Danaas stared at it with curiosity and wonder, but that was short lived. He craned his necked around, flared his left nostril, and sniffed the air like a bloodhound. His expression changed and his face became grim. “Something evil approaches,” he warned.

“Of that I have no doubt,” Linvindell replied. “Hopefully we can avoid it.”

Urrod spoke with his Dwarven friends and let them know that he would not be returning to the great mountain. They seemed to take the news in stride, hugging and wishing each other fair travel. “I’m ready,” Urrod announced. “Let’s go and see where the ground leads us.”

“We’ll be traveling via mirror again, but we must first get to a secluded location,” Linvindell said.

“Mirror...what does that mean?” Urrod asked with a hint of a quiver in his voice.

Bryn, knowing that Dwarves feared travel, needled him. “Don’t worry; it will all be over in an instant. One minute you’ll be here safe and sound, the next, a thousand miles away, whisked in and out of existence by Linvindell’s magic.”

A look of dread came over Urrod. He froze and started sweating. “What?” he stammered.

“Stop acting like a cat that is about to be given a bath,” Bryn said.

“That doesn’t help us,” Linvindell scolded.

Danaas put his arm around his new diminutive friend. “Fear not. You will be fine.” He looked over Urrod’s head at Bryn, and winked, acknowledging the joke.

Finally able to speak, Urrod stuttered, “Bath? Bath? I have to take a bath on top of all of this? Gah...what have I gotten myself into?”

Danaas, Bryn, and even Linvindell couldn’t help but crack a smile at Urrod’s innocent response. They consoled him, patting him on the back and the top of his head. Relieved, they continued on.

As they reached the edge of town, they saw intermittent bolts of lightning arcing down from the sky, and heard a woman scream in agony. Danaas' face became resolute, and he bolted toward the source of the scream.

"Danaas...NO!" Linvindell yelled.

"I am a Paladin of the First Order. My life is pledged to help *all* those in need!"

"Damn it! Follow him!" Linvindell commanded, desperation on his face and voice.

Danaas ran with purpose, but Bryn easily caught up to him. "Oh God," Bryn gasped, stopping abruptly right behind Danaas.

A chalk-white skinned old man: with tattered clothes, long spiky white-hair, blue and red flames dancing over its skin, and of course, the distinctive and characteristic 'crazed' eyes. The creature hovered over the body of a young girl—her skin dried and shriveled.

The creature looked up from his kill at Danaas and Bryn, and she stepped back, repulsed by its aura. When she did, Urrod and Linvindell arrived.

"That's a Madman. Leave now, you fool. I can't afford to lose any of you!" Linvindell pleaded.

"No! This evil dies here and now. I shall not let it pass," Danaas boomed. In a calm voice he demanded, "Step back and give me room!"

Danaas' mouth was bitter, something that happened whenever he was around true evil. The creature focused its attention on him, and appeared to realize that he was a Paladin. Danaas could feel the malevolent pulse of the being's aura. Without warning, a bolt of lightning arced down from the sky, striking the creature and charring the ground. It startled Danaas but he held firm. "Your time here is forfeit! I shall send you back from whence you came, knowing that a fleshy mortal has bested you!"

The creature charged him, issuing a scream that sounded like fingernails on a blackboard. Everyone but Danaas grabbed their ears in pain to blot out the sound. The Madman swung wildly, but Danaas easily sidestepped the awkward attacks. Instead of countering, he measured its movement. The fiend whirled and charged him again, but this time Danaas' sword found its mark, piercing the Madman's breastbone. His sword made a disgusting crunch as it tore through its chest and out its back. For a moment, peace seemed to come over the crazed being, but then its eyes lit again with a raging fire. With the quickness and grace of a conductor with his baton, Danaas yanked his father's blade from the beast's chest, regrouped, and uncoiled, decapitating the evil wretch. As the body fell to the ground, the Madman grazed Danaas' left arm. The noble Paladin howled in pain, and dropped to his knees, continuing his cry of agony. A multicolored vortex formed around the Madman and it vanished.

Danaas' companions rushed to his aid. "We need to get back to my castle!" Linvindell urged.

"Wait, maybe I can help a bit," Bryn said. She removed a purple root from a small pouch on her belt. "Rip his shirt and expose the wound." The affected area was gray and dried, like the young girl the Madman had killed. Bryn gently placed the root on his arm, "*Valtudum!*"

The pain subsided enough for Danaas to catch his breath. "Please, Lord, do not let me pass into the darkness yet."

Linvindell was already holding a mirror. "We must go! Look into the mirror and say 'to the Keep of Linvindell.'"

They disappeared, one by one, transported to Linvindell's castle. Danaas appeared and immediately slumped, his sword falling to the ground. Urrod caught him before his face hit the stone floor. "Stay here with him. I will get help," Linvindell ordered.



Bryn was not as disoriented this time around, but Urrod felt the effect, falling on his butt, still holding Danaas. “Now that’s a ride!”

A few moments later, four men burst into the room, with Linvindell trailing. They positioned themselves around the courageous Paladin, hoisted him up, and carried him out of the room. Bryn and Urrod followed.

They arrived at an infirmary and laid Danaas on a bed. “I will care for him. Between Bryn’s healing, and something I keep on hand, he’ll be sharing morning breakfast,” Linvindell said.

“I have the elixir he requires, Linvindell,” said a beautiful Elven woman, turning the corner from an adjoining room.

“Ah...this is Velrinia. She is a skilled healer. Danaas couldn’t be in better hands,” Linvindell said.

Bryn raised an eyebrow and smirked. “It would appear.”

“Aye, I think I’m coming down with something as we speak,” Urrod joked. “What have you got for me?”

They all chuckled, relieved that Danaas was going to be fine.

Linvindell motioned to an attendant. “Daron, please escort our guests to their rooms, and make sure they get anything they need.” He placed his hand on Bryn and Urrod’s shoulder. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

As Daron led them through the castle, they noticed something unique: Humans, Dwarves, Elves, half-Elves, and half-Dwarves were all working harmoniously together. Somehow Linvindell managed to break 1200 years of isolation and prejudice—a remarkable achievement and inspiring to see. When Bryn and Urrod finally retired for the night, they were alive with anticipation.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Discovery**

#### **The Erovalis—(Unknown Time)**

“I never tire of the stars; they’re awe inspiring—bright and powerful, yet soothing and supple, and they never end. Fon’s love and creative passion knows no bounds.

Yet I cannot help but wonder why He places so much importance on these beings called Humans. Of all the creatures He has whisked into existence, of all the worlds that solidify from a mere thought, of all the stars that are born from a single smile, Humans garner more passion and love than all of them combined. Why?

Are the Azheron not enough? If Fon were to sire a son, would I not be the mold? The answer must lie in Shadow, and that is where my new journey will begin.”

**Azrael**

The next morning, after a comfortable sleep, Danaas woke to a lovely vision. “How does your arm feel?” Velrinia asked.

Danaas yawned, made a fist, and moved his arm around, “Feels good as new. Thank you for your kindness dear lady.”

Velrinia brought clothes over to Danaas’ bed. “No, it was an honor for *me* to treat *you*. Your friends have gathered for breakfast. Let me know when you are done changing, and I’ll escort you to them.”

Danaas was confused by the comment. “You are?” No reply came. “Where is my sword?”

She returned, her eyes diverted down in case Danaas was still indecent. With both arms outstretched, she offered it to him. “I kept it safe for you.”

“Thank you again. It rarely leaves my side.”

Cracking a smile, her deep brown eyes penetrated Danaas’. “If you are ready, I will escort you.”

He bowed his head to her and extended an arm in courtesy. “Lead on.”

Although Danaas was not an artisan, he was a Captain in Setting Splendor’s Army and the King’s foreign emissary, which gave him a certain perspective on art and architecture. He marveled at the seamless integration of Human, Elven, and Dwarven civilizations. “Linvindell has a flair for design. Interesting how he melded art, tapestries, fixtures, pottery, and architecture from different regions and cultures—really quite appealing.”

“Linvindell is an amazing person, but all the credit cannot be given to him. All who live, and have lived here, have contributed design, objects, or labor, making this castle what it is,” said Velrinia.

“I meant no offense,” Danaas said.

“And none was taken.”

Danaas also noticed that all the inhabitants of the castle were overtly wearing a golden clasp around their neck—three concentric circles inside a triangle. He knew the symbol; it was something his father first showed him when he was a boy. He knew what it intimated but had never seen common folk wearing it.

Before he could ask, Velrinia stopped. “Your friends are inside. Eat hardy. You need to regain your strength.” She smile at Danaas and quickly walked away.

“Thank you!” But again there was no reply.

Danaas noticed that the door was made of granite, which was in stark contrast to the oaken doors throughout the castle. He twisted the metal knob on the two-inch thick door, which easily opened, defying logic. Inside, Bryn and Urrod sat at a highly polished, green, stone table, feasting on a bounty of food.

“Good morning!” Danaas said.

“Morning, lad, sit and share in this fine food,” Urrod responded, extending a cup of ale.

“Yes, do sit and join us,” Bryn said. “It’s good to see you’ve recovered...any lingering problems?”

“There doesn’t seem to be any. I feel great thanks to Linvindell and Velrinia...and you, of course,” he smiled, filling his plate with the wonderful smelling food and pouring himself a goblet of ale.

“It’s good to be appreciated...but I think you enjoyed Velrinia’s healing *more*,” Bryn jabbed.

Urrod lifted his face up from his plate long enough to comment. “Aye, Velrinia is very beautiful. You sure you weren’t fakin’ some of that pain?”

“You too, huh?” Danaas responded.

“Me too, what?” Urrod replied.

“Never mind, I’m dying to hear what Linvindiel has to say. I can’t tell you why, but I feel a need to be here rather than fulfilling my orders. For a soldier, especially one like me, that is saying something.”

“I too, feel a pull, but I’ve felt it for as long as I can remember. The past two days have only served to make that feeling stronger,” Bryn said.

“Agreed,” Urrod responded, cleaning the last bit of meat off a turkey leg and washing it down with a large gulp of ale.

They ate and made chit-chat all the while waiting for Linvindiel. And although they were excited to learn why they felt the way they did, there seemed to be an uncommon weight of nervous anticipation hanging in the room.

Linvindiel entered the room and stood at the door. Three attendants walked past him, cleared the table and left.

“Blast!” Urrod bellowed. “Did they have to take *all* the food? I was just getting warmed up. Ah well, at least they didn’t take the ale.”

Bryn and Danaas shook their head in amazement at their stocky companion, impressed by the sheer volume of food he devoured.

Linvindiel locked the door behind him and sat at the head of the hand carved gypsum table. He stared into the eyes of what he hoped were *The Three*—prophesied heroes that would rekindle the faith bond between Man and the Lord and completely drive Azrael’s evil from the face of the world. However, couched within that optimism was anxiety. He had been down this path before, only to have his hopes dashed. To make matters worse, he would once again have to reveal his past life, something he was not proud of. The slender, white-haired Elf poured a cup of sweet Elven mead. “Hopefully you all slept well.”

Urrod picked his teeth with a polished stone toothpick. “How do you people sleep on that thing you call a bed? It’s so soft, but, aye, the floor was cool and comfortable.”

Bryn and Danaas answered in kind, “Fine, thanks.”

Linvindiel buckled down to undertake the long story ahead. “No doubt you’re anxious to learn why I’ve asked you here, and I’m eager to tell you. However, before I can do that, you must know the truth.”

“What truth?” Danaas asked.

“The truth of it all: creation itself, the birth of Man and his place and purpose in this world, and finally the truth of your destiny.”

Danaas, Bryn, and Urrod looked taken aback by the answer but quickly focused, ready for whatever Linvindiel had to say.

“Do you know what separates you from the majority of mankind?”

“What?” Danaas replied, biting at the obligatory question.

“You all *believe* in one God. You know what separates me from you? I *know* there is one God. And that is where your angst is born...that is where you fail. None of you have taken the next step when it comes to true faith. You doubt providence and only believe your eyes. You want to believe, but in your deepest trials a sliver of doubt remains. Faith is not a sometime thing. We don’t use it *just* when we need it. Love of the Lord creates an unquenchable desire to always embrace your faith, during good times and bad.”

“And what do you know of faith?” Danaas fired back.

“I know that you chase the specter of your father’s legend rather than glorifying what he stood for, Danaas. And you, Bryn, I know you believe in the Lord, but focus on protecting His worldly creations, rather than bringing His people back in harmony with nature.” Linvindell turned and glared at Urrod. “My humble Dwarf, before I coaxed you out of your mountain, you were content with just protecting your own—hardly faithful to the ultimate will of the Lord.”

There was a thick silence in the air. *The Three* were deeply affected by Linvindell’s comments. They each turned their eyes down to avoid his condemning yet truthful gaze, and their expressions changed from one of curiosity to that of embarrassment. “I’m sorry to be so blunt, but time has worn on me.”

After a tense moment, Bryn responded, the flush still on her face from Linvindell’s statements. “You may be right, but that still doesn’t answer why we are here.”

“Before I reveal that, you must have some background. You think you know the truth about creation. You believe you understand why the world is the way it is. You don’t. The truth has been purposely hidden so that Man remains vulnerable to Evil’s intent.”

Linvindell had their attention, and with a sigh he carried on. “So it has been witnessed...so it has been handed down...so it has been recorded...”

Before Orserel came into being or the sky above arched over our heads, there existed a bright, all-encompassing, white light whose presence was pure and balanced—perfect in every aspect. Over time, this being realized that in order to give His perfection substance, He must first define it. And thus He wove into His being, Shadow. Shadow highlighted His goodness and radiance, giving Him form and creating what we would consider the cosmos. All was beautiful and harmonious, but a Voice was lacking to give this beauty purpose.

He cleaved a small part of His essence and created the Azheron, beings of Light, immense power, and independent thought. The Azheron reverently named their creator Fon, meaning *The Source*, and they acted as His companions and stewards. This relationship existed and grew for countless millennia, but still something was missing. Fon reflected, peering into His bottomless, ever-renewing soul, and saw what He had been looking for. He called forth Azrael, the leader of the Azheron. Fon handed him a huge, three-tined pitch-fork, and outstretched His great arm, saying, “Pierce my vein and let my essence flow over this small world.”

Azrael hesitated, “For what purpose, Fon?”

“On this day I shall conceive Man. Their strength shall flow from their weaknesses. Their hopes buoyed by their determination. They will know perfection and truth when they look inwardly and embrace the pureness that I have given them. They will see Shadow but be bathed in Light. They will master their environment but not be masters over it. They will see the differences between themselves but not *know* the differences. They will be diverse, yet their diversity will be a perfect complement to one another. All will be harmonious, as long as they have faith in Me.”

Azrael’s expression changed from curiosity to stoicism. “Fon, you have created the Azheron, the greatest beings in all the cosmos, surely nothing is more perfect than we.”

“The Azheron are a part of my being and thus no more perfect than any other creation. However, man will not see or know my physical form. Not being

able to gaze at the infinite and *know* the Truth will require a special quality...something that no other creature will possess—*faith*. This aspect of Man makes him unique and powerful in a way unknown before this time. My love for all my creations is no less than it was yesterday, nor will it wane one sliver in the future.” The Lord paused, understanding the totality of Azrael’s questions, acknowledging the birth of a single concept that would reshape the course of mankind—*Pride*. “What I do today can never be undone. Faith’s temper will be stronger than any steel and burn hotter than any star!”

Danaas interrupted Linvindell, “Let me stop you for a moment. You say this is the truth, yet you are telling the story of something that happened before Man was ever born.”

“Yeah,” Urrod blurted out. “How could you know all this?”

“This can be nothing more than legend,” Bryn mused.

Linvindell took a sip of wine. “Knowledge of Man’s creation, his role, and his place in the world has been passed down from the Azheron, Jurien, *The Keeper of Knowledge*. It is inviolate. Time cannot erode it, nor can it be altered. It is no different than if God himself spoke it. By acquiring the Erovalis, supposedly one of Azrael’s diaries, I was able to chronicle his journeys, actions, and thinking during that time. Given the supposed source, I can’t verify its accuracy, but it appears correct. The rest is from personal experience.”

“*Experience*,” Urrod questioned, “how could you experience something that happened 100 generations ago?”

“It’s quite simple really because I am that old.”

“What?” Bryn asked.

“I’m getting ahead of myself, but Man used to be immortal. After *The Great Deception*, future generations of Man were cursed with mortality, a punishment handed down by the Lord for not remaining true to our faith.”

Danaas stood, straightened his back, and his gaze pierced Linvindell, and he invoked *The Lord’s Conviction*. “Do you swear that what has passed over your lips is the honest to God’s truth?”

Linvindell knew the power that Paladin’s wielded in such matters, and although Danaas’ words affected him, they had little relevance, since he was telling the truth. “I swear it!”

Danaas was astonished by the answer. He had expected Linvindell to recant his story. “He *is* telling the truth.” Danaas sat back down. He was both exited and overwhelmed. His pupils dilated, and his vision blurred for a moment, and a bead of sweat ran down his forehead.

Urrod looked over at Danaas. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” is all he could squeak out, a stark contrast from his normally commanding voice.

Urrod knew how Danaas felt. He too was feeling the effects of the moment. A knot formed in his stomach. For a year he had waited for answers, and now they would come. Not soft and gentle like a lute but overbearing and unstoppable like a volcano ready to erupt.

Linvindell continued. Although Azrael was a bit confused and shaken by Fon’s words, he did what was asked of him. And so, on that day, Man was born.

Man humbly and reverently referred to his creator as Deo or Dominus, meaning *The One or One Lord*. They recognized each other's differences and found value and pleasantness in it. They all had unique qualities and gifts but all shared a common soul. Man became abundant and enjoyed abundance. He grew and lived in harmony with his environment and himself. Man's faith grew, just as the Lord foretold.

The pride that Azrael hatched was also growing, becoming a driving force to the mighty Azheron. He journeyed to the dark corners of existence, seeking out Shadow. He believed that within its construct, all questions would be answered. Finally, after years of searching, he found it. It wasn't what he expected. Shadow was indeed powerful, but it was benign—just as a sword is neither good nor evil. However, once intent is placed and purpose is given, then the *action* is evil or just. It is at this moment that Shadow has true power. In essence, Shadow is a manifestation of choice, and that choice has repercussions.

Linindel paused for a moment and took a sip of wine.

"Go on!" Bryn urged, excitement lighting her eyes.

Azrael now thought he knew why Man was being sheltered from Shadow. He mused, "Fon must doubt Man's ability to choose. Thus, He hides Shadow's true potential. This *weakness* gives Man power? Bah!"

But Azrael didn't understand what the Lord had told him. He only found what pride wanted him to.

"I don't understand?" Urrod asked.

"I think I do," Bryn said. "You're saying Azrael went in with a closed mind, and because he wanted to see a flaw in Man, he did."

"Yes. Logic does not always lead to truth. Many times, logic has an agenda. Now, where was I?" He paused for a moment to regain his train of thought, "Ah, yes."

Azrael was incensed. "Puny, blind, and foolish Man. With *my* will I could sweep you out of existence, and yet you are as perfect as *me* in Fon's eyes."

But Azrael bit his lip, marked time, and served Fon. As time passed and more service was dedicated to Man, the greater Azrael's bitterness grew. He felt like a spurned son. Except for five other Azheron that thought as Azrael did, he drew further apart from the other Azheron. They happily served Deo without question, with joy in their hearts. It began to disgust him.

Azrael's pride peeked, and he devised a plan to prove Man's inferiority. He would give Shadow intent, and use it to cloud Light rather than define it. He would prove once and for all that Man's weaknesses would beget weakness, and that his so called *faith* could not overcome the onslaught of true diversity.

Azrael fully embraced Shadow, intertwining its existence with his own in an attempt to conceal his intentions and plan. He marshaled the aid of the five other Azheron that thought as he did. He then concentrated, distilling Shadow into physical form, infusing it with his deceitful intent. Thus he formed *The Shard of Pride*. He struck the Shard with the Trident used to create Man, breaking it into five crystals:

Pure intellect

Despair  
Fear  
Power  
Greed

All were unique, but all were ruled by their progenitor—Pride. Azrael was pleased when he pondered the possibilities, and a smile erupted that he could not quell.

Unbeknownst to Azrael, the Lord could not be deceived by any means. He knew that only Azrael's actions would unlock Man's true potential. Faith through fire was the only route to Man's pure soul. The Lord thought, "So shall the struggle begin, but those who heed my words will be redeemed. I shall also have justice. The Weavers of Shadow—Deceivers of Man—shall not go unpunished. Shadow shall be their living tomb, and they shall be twisted and deformed. Never again will they tread upon my cosmos."

Believing that the stealth of Shadow cloaked his actions, Azrael traveled to that small speck of a world where Man lived—Orserel. He made his presence known to the tribal Elders and presented the crystals.

Linvindell reflected on the past, "It seemed so innocent to us. All he asked was for us to look into the crystals and see the truth." Linvindell cleared his throat, realizing his demeanor had changed. "Sorry about that."

"Sorry about what?" Danaas asked.

"I shouldn't be reminiscing. I should be telling you the story dispassionately, so that your choice is not colored."

"Before you go on, answer one question: were you one of the Elders?" Bryn asked.

With a pained expression, Linvindell responded, "Yes."

Linvindell continued on. At first the Elders were hesitant, but Azrael was persistent. We brought all the people together. With Azrael standing behind us, we explained that the crystals held knowledge and truth. Azrael was trusted and his words carried much weight. Although there didn't seem to be anything overtly wrong, most of us had a feeling of dread. Many vocally opposed, but their opinions were quickly dismissed. Our curiosity was peeked, and at least half of us peered into the crystals.

Then a voice thundered through the sky, "NOOOOOO!" Azrael bellowed, as he vanished from sight. Deo's will was fulfilled. The beauty that Azrael had come to know and appreciate was gone. Shadow stretched and strained under his deceitful will, creating a kingdom devoid of Light (Truth), which he named Azgaroth. His deceptive cohorts: Morghast "The Blood Lord", Erikorl "Lord of Despair", Xevenluck "Lord of Greed", Melfritius "Lord of Fear", and Vaggroth "Lord of Intellect", all joined in the Deceiver's punishment. Azrael embodied the elements he sought to deceive with, and separated Azgaroth into six distinct regions: The Sea of Burning Turmoil, The Mire of Desperation, The Chasm, The Weeping Wastes, The Plane of Dying Visions, and The Infernum, which he ruled. He had dominion and power over all within his new kingdom.



With Azrael's cruelty and malice, he forged a new race of beings from the unremorseful souls of fallen Men and called them Xanyre—named after its Human Queen, Xendra, who showed an undying devotion and love for him. He rewarded pride and power and destroyed the timid. As the mortal plane became more corrupt, the ranks of the Xanyre swelled.

Azrael was insidious, using deception as his weapon since he could no longer walk among Man. The twisted Shadow Lord used every means at his disposal to corrupt Man, proving he was correct and Fon was wrong.

As he pined and plotted, his deceptive act against Man took shape. The new thoughts and emotions that Man were given were too powerful and confused him. Man developed pride and not only *saw* their physical differences, but also created a perceptual difference. Man separated into different tribes—differentiated by outward appearance, and they moved to different regions of the world in order to retain their new *superior uniqueness*. They developed different cultures and different languages. Before this time, the people of the world called themselves the Deum, which meant 'People of the One'. However, when they separated, they gave themselves new names to further accentuate their differences. Thus the names: Human, meaning 'one's self' (interestingly The Elves translated it to mean selfish); Dwarf, meaning 'of the world' (curiously Humans refer to Dwarves as 'Dirt People'); and Elf, which means 'rare air' (humorously the Dwarves translated that to mean arrogant). As Humans began to dominate the upper-land of Orserel, and the original language of Man, which is now known as Elvish, faded away, Deo became known as the 'Lord', meaning *The Almighty*, or 'God', meaning *The One Light*.

Linindel paused again, caught up in the story telling, "Then the unthinkable happened, I murdered...I mean..."

"What was that?" Danaas asked in shock.

With a defeated voice, having told the story a half a dozen times over the last 1500 years, each time becoming no easier than the previous, "Before I knew what I was doing, my rage piqued, and I killed a man." Linindel pounded his hand on the table. "In retrospect, I was so stupid and selfish...but once the first drop of blood was spilled, the rest flowed like water. I organized those that had looked into the crystals, and we became 'The Minions of Shadow'. We plotted, hunted, and killed all those that opposed us. It seemed logical, *to us at least*, to eliminate all that might threaten us. Luckily, the meek and gentle people that worshipped the Lord learned how to defend themselves, and their faith overcame our savagery."

"Go on," Urrod said.

Three children—Ellenwyn, Granak, and Abron—whose faith and trust in God was the purest were sequestered—protected from my fury. However, they would not remain silent. They began traveling the countryside, instilling hope and buoying resolution. Legend of their faith grew, and it catalyzed The Children of the Lord. In my eyes, they were my number one threat, but they avoided capture by constantly moving. My tenacity increased, and I doubled my effort. I burned whole villages to the ground, tortured the innocent, but the faithful remained valiant and the children remained safe.

I received information that the children were to be moved to a village near the town of Trinity, and I sent a battalion of Men and Xanyre to wipe them out. They stormed the village, killing everything in their path. It is said that the children had to be forced not to enter the battle. The Xanyre found the house that they were hiding in—but when they caved in the walls and cleared the rubble, they were nowhere to be found.

Shortly after the children disappeared, three devout followers—Coryn, Lethia, and Mikhel—rose to prominence. On a divine wind, all of Man heard the Lord’s voice say, “*Have faith my children, for there will come a time when three of equal faith will rise, and we shall be one again.*”

History is unclear as to the children’s fate, since the Lord’s words were a bit ambiguous. The devout feel that the children’s *Circle of Faith* remains intact. The forces of Shadow interpreted His words to mean they died.

No one really knows what happened to them. I can tell you that Coryn, Lethia, and Mikhel became the foremost champions of their time: their faith, strength of will, and battle prowess, beat back The Minions of Shadow, driving most of them away from the followers of the Lord. Along the way, many people who were thought to be irreconcilably corrupt, like myself, had their pure souls restored; demonstrating the truth of God’s word. However, over time, the *old* ways have been lost and forgotten, replaced with superstition and ignorance.

Linvindell sat back and gulped a goodly amount of wine, his cheeks flushed from nerves and the inevitable embarrassment of revealing his part in Man’s subversion. He took a deep breath and braced for the barrage of questions he knew he’d be assaulted with.

The practical side of Bryn took over. “Before I delve into some of the more important issues, let’s tackle the easier ones. You said Man used to be immortal, and then was cursed with mortality. Explain that.”

Everything has a consequence. Would you agree with that?”

“Of course.”

“Although we were tricked into looking into the crystal, it was our choice. We felt something was wrong but didn’t listen to our hearts,” Linvindell answered. “That action had a dire consequence. All of the first generation of Man remained immortal. We could be killed, but death by old age or disease was unknown to us. Although Man’s immortal spark was removed, his soul is of the Lord, and therefore, can never die. Thus, we are all *still* eternal. I am of first generation descent and since my task is to find *The Three*, I suppose it was necessary for me to be long lived. I do, however, find it ironic that the Lord would have the original servant of Azrael be the catalyst for his undoing. Just as Azrael, The Lord’s first servant doesn’t understand that his cruelty is Man’s primary wellspring of faith. The more punishment he inflicts, the more Man is forced back to the Lord. It is our inner nature. Some will invariably fail, but for everyone that does, five will succeed and be an example for five more. Azrael is strong. Shadow is powerful, but nothing can overcome the power of faith—unless we allow it to.”

She continued on, “I suppose an even more basic question would be, why is the Circle of Faith symbol the way it is?”

Linvindell looked to Danaas, “Would you like to tell her?”

“Three concentric circles enclosed by a perfect triangle: the circles represent the original three children; the triangle represents us completing the prophecy,” Danaas replied.

“I like how you said ‘us’,” Linvindell retorted. “It shows your true belief in the prophecy and your part in it.”

Danaas smiled and when he heard no questions forthcoming he asked, “Tell me of Shadow.”

“Shadow is part of the Lord and as such is benign. Shadow is all around us right now. It’s what highlights and brings glory to all of the Lord’s creations. It’s intent that makes it good or evil. Tapping into Shadow is what produces all extraordinary abilities. Before the time of Man’s subversion, we used Shadow for many purposes. However, our intent was always pure, and as such, the *magic* produced was always helpful or benign—never harmful. Like Granak had the innate ability to manipulate rock, others could change their form, float, converse telepathically, create fire, or cause a water geyser to spring forth. My abilities come from my understanding of how things interact with one another.”

“Given what you have told us, who are these beings like Odin and Zeus who call themselves gods?” Danaas asked.

“That’s a bit more complex. Some that peered into the crystals didn’t follow Azrael. They sided with the followers of the Lord to fight against him, but they inevitably placed too much faith in their own abilities. They began to believe that it was *they* who would make the difference, and fought for the glory of victory, not for the glory of the Lord. Their deeds became legend, and they helped the legends take on a life their own. With the power that many of the first generation wielded, future generations began worshipping these men as if they *were* gods. Therefore, even though they fight evil, their deception is blasphemy, and thus, in many ways, are no better than evil itself. The same thing happened with the first followers of Azrael. As he promised, he rewarded power and those that opposed the Lord. With Shadow, Azrael deceived future generations into believing that first generation Men were gods. To this day, almost nothing is known or spoken of Azrael, except by his followers and those like myself. This deception is what increases Azrael’s power over Man. He creates havoc without any specific causative factor. This shakes any residue of faith Man may have left. Once a person’s faith is unseated, they are at the mercy of his deception.”

“That’s pathetic,” Urrod commented. “I feel sad for these ‘gods’.”

“Why?” Bryn asked with a look of disbelief.

“Can you imagine being so poor of spirit that you have to raise yourself up onto a pedestal for worship? I couldn’t imagine being so desperate.”

“You’re right...I guess I couldn’t.”

Urrod’s response struck a nerve in Linvindell, and he smiled at the burly Dwarf.

With a serious look on his face, Danaas asked the pressing question, “Your acts against Mankind were vile and heinous. You were a sadistic tyrant, plain and simple—and yet here you sit an example of virtue and benevolence. How can this be?”

“The war with The Children of the Lord was going against us. Those three warriors that I spoke of, Coryn, Lethia, and Mikhel, wielded what we euphemistically called ‘*The Fists of the Lord*’—fierce weapons that had no equal. They defeated us at every turn. The Minions of Shadow had one chance, an all out assault on their forces. In one cataclysmic battle, which took place on what would become known as the Crimson Plains, I led the attack. But I was felled, pierced near the heart with an arrow. I lay on the ground dying. The battle had ceased and I looked around, bodies were strewn everywhere. My head reeled from the loss of blood and the pain. But out of the corner of my eye, I could see someone moving on the ground. I dragged myself to him. His face was turned away from me, but I could clearly tell from his battle gear that he was one of the

opposing forces. I reached over his body; ready to choke the life out of him with my dying breath, when I saw who it was...my youngest brother Errolel.”

Linvindal wiped a tear from his eye and gathered himself. “My brother choked out, ‘*I forgive you and I love you. Remember, it is never too late in the eyes of the Lord*’;” and then he passed on. I lay there clutching him. All my malice and anger was gone. I felt remorse so deep that I felt as though I were falling into a bottomless black hole. Through my sorrow and humiliation my prideful veil dissolved. I heard the sound of horse hooves. I looked up and saw what I thought was Mikhel, his flaming sword drawn. My vision blurred. I thought my end was at hand and instinctively put my hands together and prayed for forgiveness, preparing for death.

I drifted off, but my sleep was disturbed. When I woke, I was lying inside a white tent with Mikhel standing directly over me, Lethia to my right, and Coryn to my left. Mikhel’s sword, which he called Faith’s Temper, burned with a white flame, and I shielded my eyes. With a single holy word, I felt my health return. All my wounds were healed. It didn’t make sense. I asked him, “Why have you done this? Why would you save me?”

Mikhel replied, “We are all children of the Lord. We all share the same soul. Deo promised redemption to any and all who would faithfully ask Him, and so you asked. You have been given a second chance to help make things right. The task before you will be long and hard, but that is your penance. If you truly have regained your faith, you will gladly accept the will of the Lord and serve in any way He sees fit.”

“To make a long story short, I was charged with finding *The Three*, and for the past 1500 years, I have done just that. I have also searched for the original children but that has come to naught.”

“I ask again, what does this have to do with us?” Bryn asked.

“I have been drawn to you. I believe you to be *The Three* that the Lord spoke of. There have been others before you, but none have been as pure of soul or rich in spiritual potential as you three. You have been searching. You all feel incomplete. I believe this is why. The journey will be dangerous, but the reward for us all is beyond measure.”

*The Three* didn’t look as surprised as Linvindal would have thought. He gulped the last bit of mead down and then stood. “I need to step out and get something. Talk amongst yourselves, and I’ll be back shortly.” The ancient Elf strode out of the room and closed the door behind him.

“So what do you think of all this?” Danaas asked. “As amazing as it is, he speaks the truth. He still has much to explain, but I’m willing to see what he has in store for me.”

“He was right when he said that we Dwarves have hidden ourselves away to preserve ourselves. It has always felt wrong. We have much to offer and much to learn, but we’ve become stubborn. Maybe, I, along with you two, can help change that,” Urrod said.

“One thing’s for sure, his words strike hard as steel,” Bryn said. “His observation of me was dead on, and that makes me a bit uncomfortable with my conduct. If there is a way to mend my ways, and fully embrace the path of the Wildwalker, then I must do it.”

“His words ring true with me as well,” Danaas said. “My father told me of *The Circle of Faith* and its importance. But as the days ground on and the battles continued, I focused on myself and the here and now. I fight the good fight, but sometimes I forget what I’m fighting for. To be revitalized with purpose, for a Paladin, is like giving a starving man a banquet. I welcome a new challenge.” Danaas checked Bryn’s and Urrod’s expressions. He wanted to make sure they were as convicted as he. “So is it agreed? We stick together and see where this takes us?”

“Count me in,” Urrod replied.

“Same,” Bryn responded.

Upon pledging their resolution to one another, the door swung open; in walked three men carrying large, black, metal boxes. They rested them on the table and departed. Linvindell trailed and laid down three golden cloak clasps. The clasps were identical in appearance to what all the occupants of the castle were wearing—a triangle with three concentric circles in the middle, signifying The Circle of Faith. To wear that symbol, meant to fully embrace Linvindell's story, and station oneself as a child of the Lord.

Danaas wasted no time. He quickly snapped up one of the clasps, undid his own, and placed the new one in its rightful spot. He smiled and seemed proud to wear it.

Conversely, Urrod carefully examined one of the boxes. He brought his face close, looked at its texture, and ran his hand over its length; his eyes grew wide like saucers. "This is adamantine! Where did you get this and who crafted it? Only the *Old Ones* had the gift to work such a hard metal."

Linvindell smiled, "You are quite right, and his name is Varnegar."

"No!" Urrod said with astonishment.

"What is it?" Danaas asked.

"Varnegar was known to my people as *The Keeper of the Flame* and the only other person aside from Granak that could manipulate this metal. But he sided with Azrael and was killed in battle. Are you saying he still lives?"

"Yes, my skeptical friend, just as I was redeemed so too was Varnegar. In fact, all that live in my castle are redeemed souls. We are known as the *Fidelin* or 'Faithful.'"

Bryn was oblivious to the banter. She focused all her attention on the clasp. To put it on meant a departure from her past, and she didn't take that lightly. Finally, with calm conviction, she palmed it and switched it with her own, breathing a sigh of relief.

Almost in lockstep fashion, Urrod equipped his clasp, and all three stood next to one another. Linvindell pulled a black key from his pocket and undid the locks on the boxes. "When you are ready, you may open them."

Bryn and Urrod hesitated, but, as usual, Danaas leapt at the opportunity. He swung the lid of his container open and his jaw dropped. He looked over at Linvindell, "Is this Faith's Temper?"

Linvindell merely smiled and nodded.

Although impressed with the sword, Urrod and Bryn focused their attention on their boxes—inside laid a staff and a shield.

"These are the *Fists of the Lord*," Linvindell said. "The Staff of the Wildwalker, Glendorin, which in Dwarven means Ward of Hope and Faith's Temper."

*The Three* stood paralyzed with wonder. Like young birds perched atop a branch waiting to take their first flying lesson, they looked over at Linvindell with an expression of, 'You've got to be kidding me'. "It is said that only the most pure of soul and righteous of purpose can wield The Fists," Linvindell said.

"So these are the fists?" Urrod choked out, in a voice several octaves higher than normal.

Danaas dropped to one knee and looked to the sky. "With the innocence and faith of a child I go forth, Lord. Guide my path." He stood with a determined look and pulled the three-foot long, silver blade from its case. Two large gems adorned the metal pommel. The sword, unlike all others, seemed to be one large, exquisite piece of mithril. It was remarkably light for its size, and he surmised that the edge was of such quality that it could cleave stone. He innocently tested his theory by tapping the stone table with the edge of the blade. As he suspected, it easily marked it.

"Be careful with that!" Linvindell barked.

Startled, Danaas jerked the blade up and brushed the adamantine box, scratching it.

Urrod leaned over to make sure he was seeing what the sword had just done. “Unbelievable!”

Danaas held the sword aloft and it became engulfed in a brilliant white flame. When his eyes adjusted, he could see runes. Linvindell moved closer to read the ancient symbols. “It says ‘Justice Bringer’,” and the flames dissipated.

The awe-struck paladin removed a nicely appointed scabbard from his box and sheathed the weapon.

Bryn lifted the staff from its box. It was made of a hard, dark wood, approximately five feet in length. It appeared to have some kind of venal system running along its length. Nestled at the top, a perfectly smooth, emerald green gem, the size of a large hen’s egg, pulsed with life. So perfect was its symmetry and polish as to be unnatural. Upon closer examination, she discovered that the wood was treant bark. She touched the base of the staff to the floor, and the gem and veins began to glow a grass green. The radiance was soothing and renewing, almost as if there were more air in the room. As the radiance faded, Bryn made out a small inscription on the gem itself—Elvish words that meant ‘Truth Bearer.’

Still hesitant but none the less filled with anticipation, Urrod removed the ebony shield from the case; its mithril inlays glinted under the light that shone through the windows above. It was extraordinarily light and its shape was unique. He became emotional and could only choke out one word, “Incredible!” The edges of the shield shimmered, and in an instant, his entire body was clad in adamantine armor and he was holding a two and one-half foot long, adamantine war hammer—whose handle and head were adorned with mithril. Danaas, Bryn, and Linvindell jerked back from the transformation—expressions of mystical wonder etched on their faces. Urrod turned to face his companions, and when he did, they could see an Elven word glowing in the center of the shield.

“It says ‘Hope,’” Linvindell said.

A soft vibration emanated from the shield and the armor and hammer vanished.

All three champions looked at one another in amazement and smiled. “There you have it: Hope, Justice, Truth—three main ingredients that embody faith. Separately, Ellenwyn, Granak, and Abron epitomized those qualities, but together they formed a force of faith...a force, which 1500 years later, is still strong.”

“So what do we do? How do we go about fulfilling The Lord’s prophecy?” Danaas asked.

“You have just taken the first step. With their action, the artifacts have chosen you. We now know that you have the potential to be *The Three*, but only time will tell whether or not your faith is strong enough to sustain you. But more specifically to your question, we will erect a temple in God’s honor...the likes the world has never seen. It will stand for all time, marking the spiritual renaissance that He prophesied.”

“I’m no builder,” Bryn commented.

“You don’t have to be. Varnegar and I have created an object that will, after you have consecrated it, become the temple. But...”

“But what?” Urrod interrupted.

“But we are missing three key ingredients,” Linvindell said.

“I knew there was a catch,” Urrod replied.

“There is only one Quatl living today,” Linvindell explained. “We believe that it lives on the peaks of the Guardian Mountains, behind Lake Orias. I also require the promise of someone who has never been able to keep their word. I will give you a specially treated parchment on which

they must sign their name in blood. Lastly, you must retrieve the remaining Shard of Corruption, which is held by Mar’Nai.

“Who is Mar’Nai?” Bryn asked.

“He is the Melbreene` ruler. They are a splinter faction of Elves that worship the Shadow Lords. He is also my older brother. When I was redeemed, he took command of Shadow’s forces and moved his followers to Galanoth, an island off the northern shore of Un’Orium. This leg of your journey will be the most difficult, but we will tackle it at the appropriate time. When the collection is complete, we will travel to the heart of the Crimson Plains and erect our temple.”

*The Three* looked at one another. The magnitude of the moment, their task—and more importantly—their destiny brought them to their knees in prayer.

“May The Lord smile upon you; may you find it within yourselves to summon the faith necessary to fulfill your destiny,” Linvindell prayed.

After a short vigil honoring all the valiant souls that came and fell before them, they retired for the night. Linvindell peered out his bedroom window. His heart swelled with optimism. He nostalgically envisioned the world as it used to be those many centuries ago. Although he knew that Man would never return to those simple times, his trust and belief in the Lord filled him with enthusiasm.

While they slept, the two Melbreene` that were bested in the Ethereal Woods were just now arriving at Galanoth to deliver the unpleasant news of their failure to Mar’Nai.