**SHADES OF DESTINY**

BY: MATTHEW J PITTMAN

**CHAPTER 1 – GREEN VALLEY**

It is hard to properly describe the beauty that was Green Valley, Oregon. A small town nestled in a valley, surrounded by towering jagged snowcapped mountains with lush green forests as far as the eye could see. The small town was split in half by the majestic Salmon River aptly named for its large biannual fishing migrations. The fall salmon run was always my favorite. I used to marvel at the calm crystal blue fall waters knowing that it would slowly begin to fade away along with the brilliant crimson, yellow and orange spectacle of autumn. With the changing of the season, the calm cool river gave way to a more powerful and turbulent winter river fueled by the rain storms of the harsh season.

The last time I was here was the spring before the war had begun. That winter had been particularly severe with vicious snow storms and late floods making the spring that followed quite possibly the most beautiful of my lifetime. The mountain meadows sprang to life with a rainbow of wild flowers and air so crisp and clean that even those with allergies braved the aroma of orange and lavender that swept through the valley. That was my home, before the war.

Now, as I stand looking out over the valley, all I can see is the black and gray remains of a still smoldering forest ravaged by a merciless assault. The ash from the forest fires has been falling since the first attack and the air that had been so welcoming was now a mixture of decaying corpses, rotting food and burnt out buildings. My little beautiful town was reduced to nothing more than twisted metal with bricks and ash scattered over the ghosts of foundations that used to be homes and businesses of friends and family. The river was no longer majestic or peaceful; it ran wild and had turned to a mixture of brown and red, stained with the blood of the dead and the chemicals that had been used in the attacks. The bones of the citizens were still scattered throughout the banks of the river and the streets of Green Valley, the attack had come without warning on the quarter millennium holiday. None survived. Eighty-two thousand souls were gone in a day and I live with the guilt that it was all because of my mistakes.

A large crash spins me around with anticipation as a nearby a small building collapses under its own weight, not able to hold up the concrete slabs on its twisted foundation any longer. A small plume of black ash rose in the air and covers my truck in yet another layer of soot. My truck was blue once, now it is as the world, a shade of grey with the color choked out. Around the corner of a burned out building came April, she was one of my closest friends. She too had grown up here in Green Valley and I could see her ash covered face streaked with tears and a look of shocked disbelief. Her caring green brown eyes were red and puffy and her long brown hair, matted with dirt and ash, was wild in the morning breeze. This was not how she liked to be seen. April was a medium height girl of average physique and, despite her unassuming stature, she was just as gifted as I was and I would trust her with my life. This was the first time the two of us had seen the destruction of our hometown. Sarah had been here about two months ago, she sat in my truck waiting for us; she could not bear to look at the carnage again. We stand a moment, locked in tear filled gazes trying desperately to wish away the overwhelming fillings of guilt we both shared. We were here for a purpose, as painful as this moment was, it was important for us to see what the enemy had done to our home. We needed to remember and honor the dead, we needed confirmation.

After a few moments we could hear a low rumble slowing growing louder off in the distance. The convoy we had come to observe was approaching.

“Find cover, quick!” I call out to April. We needed to remain hidden, we didn’t know if we were right about who was with the convoy, but this was the moment we had been waiting for. In the center of what used to be the city hall was a convoy of trucks we had become familiar with. Concealed behind a boulder, April motioned for me to come closer so that I could confirm what I had anticipated.

“Damian.” I muttered so that only April could hear me. She gave me a sad sideway glance and nodded her head in acknowledgment. We dare not speak too loud as it could give our position away.

“I will make him suffer for this, if it’s the last thing I do.” I vowed.

“I know, but Michael, this is not the time, this is not a battle we can win.” April cautioned.

She was right of course, we were outnumbered some one hundred to three, not exactly the best of odds. Exiting a truck in the middle of the convoy was a tall dark skinned man scarred from the battles of the recent war. I could clearly make out his most defining feature, the twin figured eight serpents tattooed on each arm. He calmly brushed his jet black hair out of his face to survey the site where he would continue his search for one of the remaining relics. As Damian began to order the men of Perdicium around, the midday wind began to change direction and pick up the stench of the dead sending it straight for us.

“Go to the truck and wait with Sarah, tell her that I was right about Damian’s movements and tomorrow we will go to the capital.” I instructed April. Quietly she crept away.

Damian would not find the relic he so desperately needs; the Apple of Eden was safe. Only I knew its location, as I had hidden the Apple only moments before the first strike of the war and dared not return to its hiding place until I could learn to shield my movements. I watched Damian continue to search for the next few hours, enjoying him becoming more frantic as time passed, he was certain it would be here. He was appearing to become more desperate in his quest to find the relic. He knew that he won the war a year ago in a single blow, but the next war would be upon him soon. The peace of the last three months was only to buy him time to find the relics. He knew I had found the Apple and assumed that I was still sentimental enough to hide it in Green Valley, but what he was forgetting was that I learn fast and I don’t forget my mistakes.

As Damian began to wrap up day one of his futile search, I could not help but feel a little since of pride and hope. Those were dangerous feelings to have in this apocalypse. Yet, it was time, we finally had a way of knowing where he would be, the Veil was shattered, but it still lingered enough for me to draw from its power and track Damian’s movements.

The Veil of Humanity had a simple purpose: shield the world from the realms, protect the world from those with extraordinary powers, and protect the realms from the world’s wrath. The Veil had been a powerful force put in place to shield mankind from the five realms of the world. These realms, created by God, consisted of beings with exceptional powers and abilities. Often times these beings are described in myths, legends, and biblical stories. As the world became more removed from its history, those without abilities did not understand and became frightened of the powers and abilities possessed by these super humans and their realms.

In the beginning, there were five realms that all existed in the world and each had beings of immense power ruling over them. They were Ethos, Zion, Perdicium, Avalon and Olympus and together they brought balance to the world. Avalon, the realm of wind and its leader Solomon, were the controlling power in the world during ancient times. Their capital Atlantis has become known as nothing more than myths and legend due to its destruction during the first of the Great Wars. Perdicium, the realm of fire and their ambitious leader Helel, laid waste to Atlantis in their quest to take control of the earth and eventually succeeded in the destruction of Avalon. It was this first major upsetting of the balance of the world that prompted God to intervene and halt Perdicium’s advances for ultimate power thus ending the first Great War.

In these ancient times Ethos, the realm of earth and their leader Adam, were still learning their powers and was the weakest of all the realms making them unable to aid in Avalon’s defense. Olympus, the realm of Water and their leader Dyeus had decided to stay neutral out of fear of Perdicium and their war machine. This had left only the passive but powerful realm of Zion, the realm of Aether and their leader David to intervene in the war.

After some time Helel decided to once again attempt to dominate the world and having not forgotten that Zion opposed him in the first Great War, he attempted to annihilate them, starting the second Great War. This time, Olympus sided with Zion and aided in their defense helping to stop the advances of Perdicium. Outraged, Helel and Perdicium destroyed the weaker Olympus in retaliation while they falsely had agreed to a peace treaty. Zion and Ethos both attempted to aid Olympus, but were too late.

With the second of five realms destroyed, God once more intervened in the affairs of the realms and defeated Perdicium by destroying their war machine and killing Helel, the source of Perdicium’s power. The war machine was split into three relics and hid across the world so that they could be found when the time for their use was right. This was the last time that she would mettle in the affairs of the realms. A council was created and named the Guardians of Dogma. The council was tasked with the protection of what was left of the world and its realms. The council was founded with three chosen members from each of the remaining realms. The nine members with three from Ethos, three from Zion and three from Perdicium decided it was best to conceal the different realms in light of the Great Wars and created the Veil to protect those without powers and abilities by shielding the truth from them. The council decided that it was best to only allow the world to see the realm of Ethos. It was the easiest of the five realms for the world to grasp as it was mostly ruled by the laws of nature with very few exceptions.

The modern council was now in ruins and the Veil all but destroyed thanks to Damian. The world could now see the truth of the realms and, while some embraced the change, most lived in fear not knowing how to handle their new reality. The full power of the realms was now visible for the first time since the Great Wars, before the first council was created. I had let the Veil blind me like those who were destroyed by its cloak, but now I had learned how to use its power to reverse the tide. If only I had known all this before the war.

The night was quiet and the air stood still. Much of the world was this way now that we were in the false peace of Perdicium’s rule. They took control when they used the Veil to launch an organized surprise attack on the capital, Green Valley, as well as many of our allies' main cities. April and Sarah slept peacefully side by side in the back of my truck while I kept watch. It had been hours since the soldiers of Perdicium left to their camp with their leader, but there was still the possibility of being surprised by an unassuming patrol or by hungry wild animals in desperate search of a scarce meal. There was even the remote possibility that Damian had learned that the veil was still accessible to be used as I had. “Ha!” I laughed to myself; I knew this was not likely.

The cool night brought a slight chill that forced a shiver up my spine, looking around I noticed movement without sound of something in the near distance. It seemed to slowly lurk behind the rubble, perhaps waiting for me to fall asleep to pounce on its easy prey. It wasn’t particularly large and really didn’t give off the feeling of something threatening. Nonetheless, I was ready. After about twenty minutes of this cautious dance in the shadows the creature decided it was time to come closer. It walked so carefully and silently that had I not seen its shadowy dance I would never have seen it coming. It was a dog.

Strange I thought to myself, the dogs around the valley had mostly become wild and rabid, but this dog was different. He was jet black with short hair and had the most beautiful and intense yellow eyes. He was very skinny; his ribs were easily defined in the light of the full moon. From out of the shadows I could easily watch his movements now. I grabbed a piece of jerky and tossed it away from the truck hoping to lead him away. He devoured the jerky and spun around to examine its origin. His eyes met mine and I could see that he was indeed not threatening; instead he looked up longingly at his new found source of food, begging for more. He was so gentle and afraid that he began to remind me of my dog from my childhood. I decided to exit the truck and sat on the ground holding out another piece of jerky trying to entice the dog to come closer. He cautiously approached and gently took the jerky from my hand.

“Well aren’t you a good boy?” I praised the black dog. His tail began to slowly wag; he clearly knew what that meant. He approached me one more time, but this time it was to lie beside me. He put his head in my lap and looked up with those sad puppy eyes that could melt even the heart of Damian. He was surprisingly soft and I could tell that he had been groomed sometime recently, but judging by his meager state, he clearly was now on his own, his master probably died recently. I decided that it would be good for the three of us to have a furry companion. Maybe he would even turn out to be a good guard dog; after all, even a dog deserves a chance at life.

“Hmm… Chance, what do you think boy, should I call you Chance?” I asked the black dog. He wagged his tail as though to approve of the name. “Ok buddy, Chance it is.”

The next morning I introduced the girls to our newest companion, they were more than just a little excited. Chance seemed to be genuinely happy about his new found family. I looked around one last time at the ruins of my hometown, Damian had given up on this site and decided to move on sometime in the early morning. I did not want to forget what he did. I wanted to remember every last detail. Sarah tapped me on the shoulder to get my attention. Her glacier blue eyes locked onto mine with a deep understanding of what I was thinking. This was where it all began, our home, our sanctuary, and now it was destroyed. She turned to get in the truck; her long dirty blonde hair waving in the morning wind brought back memories of our younger days when we would sit up here overlooking the peaceful beauty of the valley below without a care in the world. I watched her slowly walk over to Chance and as she gave him a pet on the head she turned and caught me watching her.

“Stop staring at me!” she playfully ordered. “I can’t help it!” I shouted back, “I’ve always admired your backside.” Sheepishly she winked at me and climbed into the truck. I put Chance in the back of the truck and could hear April, who was already in the cab of the truck, laughing at our exchange. Not many people understood the three of us and our unique friendship, how could they? We all shared powers and abilities that had been concealed by the Veil, but now that Damian had destroyed it using the knowledge stored in his relic, the Ark of the Covenant, all things have been revealed.

The war that Damian and Perdicium declared on the realms of Ethos and Zion have now become known as the Apocalypse. It had been prophesized by the councils in ancient times and there was no hiding from it. Half the world was destroyed by the initial attacks; most of the rest of the world has been locked in battle for a majority of the last year. That was until Damian offered a peace treaty to buy himself more time to find Perdicium’s ancient war machine.

The machine had been split into three relics, Damian had found the Ark which contained all the knowledge ever created, but it was nearly impossible to understand. I had found the Apple and hidden it from him. The Apple has the ability to create new undiscovered knowledge that only the one who possesses the Apple can understand. The last relic had been lost in time dating as far back as the Knights Templar and only rumors existed of its purpose and location. The most common myth was that it was the Holy Grail.

It’s truly amazing how much I have learned since the beginning of the war, a couple of years ago I was unaware of the truth to the legends and mythology of the past. It turns out that most of the legends and myths of old have some element of truth. Atlantis, Babylon, Gods versus Titans were all part of a forgotten history, one that could have saved us all. Now the mission was clear. We need to uncover the secrets of our hidden past, learn how our ancestors, with God’s help, defeated Perdicium and find the last of the great relics. Now that we know how to keep track of Damian, it’s time to use the abilities and powers we’ve been cursed with to find the answers; it was time for a long forgotten past to become our future.