

A Kingdom Forgotten

Book 1 of



By Charles W. McDonald Jr.

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Credits:

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Dedicated to:

Cauner Iain M'Donald, my firstborn son;
May he be richly blessed wherever he goes. Dad loves you.

& the Living Memory of:

Paul David M'Donald (1945-1986)
Jo Ann Scott (formerly Jo Ann M'Donald) (1955-2016)
Hoyt C. DeArmond (1934-1997)

Charles W. M'Donald Jr.

Preface: A Reader's Guide to A Throne of Souls

I know what you're thinking... *Holy crap! He's giving me a reader's guide! This can't be good!* Relax... It took twenty-one years for *A Throne of Souls* to reach escape velocity to find its way to you mostly because of my perfectionist standards. If I'm right, men and women across a multitude of genres will absolutely love the story that follows. And don't worry, it won't take twenty-one years (or even twenty-one months) to release the next book in the series. *Black Mirrors of the Soul* (Book 2 of *A Throne of Souls*) is already published and available. I'm currently writing at a pace to complete a full-length novel every eight months or so.

The complexity of weaving the intricate plot lines of this story required the breaking of a lot of rules to bring this product to you. Some of those rules involve capitalization and emphasis strategies. So, for example, there are many reserved words in this story (Humanity, Creation, Hate, Hope, etc.). Those reserved words will be consistently either capitalized or emphasized for this story and you might think *hey that word shouldn't be capitalized*, but I assure you everything is done with deliberate intent. Other uncommon standards involve handling of scene breaks. So, for instance, you'll see the following types of scene breaks in *A Throne of Souls* to which I'll try to stay as consistent as possible:

* * * *

The four-star mark (above) will be used denote a scene break of a brief period of time without switching locations, or switching locations (roughly the same time) but staying on the same planetary body.



The elegant curly bracket mark (above) will be used to denote a scene break of a large time difference and/or a planetary body shift in location.

A simple carriage-return of white space will be used to denote a shift in perspective within the same scene. For example, in a large battle sequence, it's important to understand the perspective of multiple key players as they are engaged in the fight—to see the same event from multiple camera angles if you will.

Finally, and I want to be as assertive as possible here, *please* pay careful attention to the time and location markers when and where they are provided. It will greatly help you as the timelines begin to cross over one another, and I promise it will contribute greatly to the whole story making perfect sense to you. I'm not saying you need to take notes, nor have an eidetic memory. I'm just saying it will greatly help you deduce the clue drops and important 'ah hah' moments I've woven into the story. I've tried my best to standardize the following format for the time/location markers throughout:

(Specific Place, Planetary Body, Specific Time If Applicable, Timeline)

If you look in the glossary, I provide specifics on Time Stream examples and what they mean in this story. For example, I give a specific window of time for the terms 'Near Future,' or 'A Long Time Ago.'

You would have figured out all of the above as you read the story, but I thought it would be nice not to exhaust your effort figuring out mechanics of telling the story. Now, we can get to *A Throne of Souls*—Book 1...

When all that is left of great miracles are the waning memories of distant accounts, now questioned by men, shall I come to you in the one undeniable breath of God that your tattered faith be renewed. For in the final moments shall you need it.

Herein lay the first breath of God. Woe unto he that is unworthy.

The inscription read on the rough-hewn gold scroll case, housing the First Seal as discovered off the Isle of Fate, by the famous adventurer, Royvan Miral. His was the first expedition to the Bay of Wrath in more than a hundred years, yielding one of the greatest relics the world has ever known—The Scroll of Carnac.

Terrified by his thoughts, Royvan Miral began carefully, reverently running his weathered fingertips over the ominous warning in floating script on the gold outer casing—contemplating the disastrous. His senses coming about him, he brushed aside thoughts of just the slightest peak, slipping the relic into his leather satchel before casting the tent flap aside to exit. A stiff easterly breeze met him head-on as he faced the elements, whipping his long, brown locks against the sides of his chiseled, road-worn features. Time had come to leave, though he knew not where. *East*, he felt as he peered in that direction—his eyes seeing beyond the horizon, perhaps towards the oldest of the Nine Kingdoms.

Walking to his mount with his pack in tow, Royvan Miral never looked back at the words he had etched into the dirt floor with a wormwood branch...

And there shall be but seven trumpets, bearing seven messages,
For all the worlds to hear, and all men therein.
And each message shall be sealed up in itself.
And woe unto the men of the worlds, for once the first is uttered,
What will be will be swiftly, and nothing in Creation shall hinder.

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Maps:

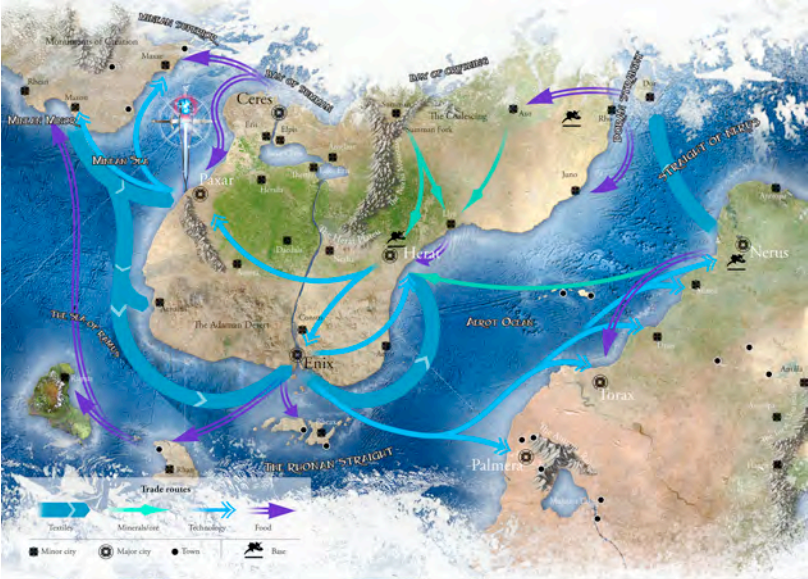


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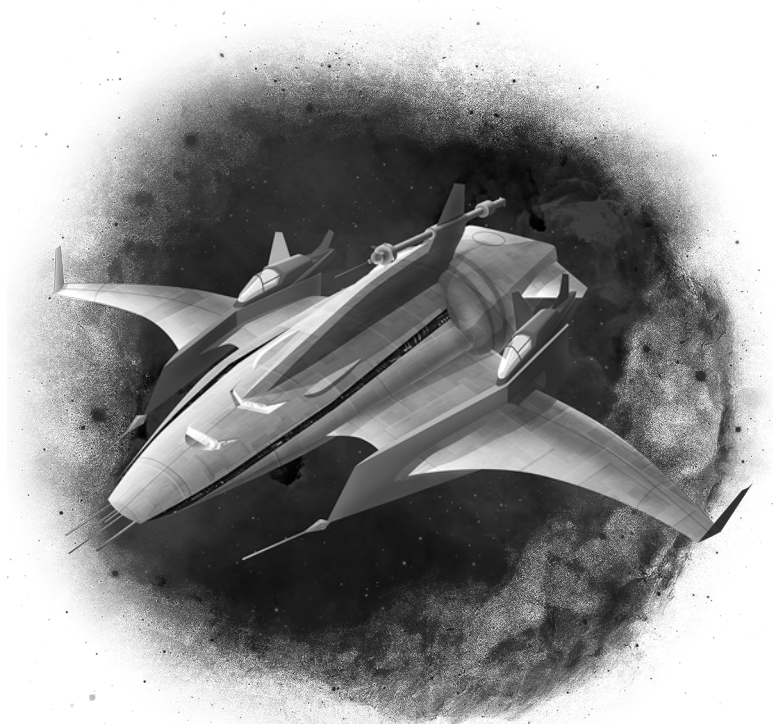
Kaleion

Charles W. M^cDonald Jr.





Damon of Baprat, The Dark Knight of Magic



Prologue: The Unspeakable Memory

(Damon's Manor, Kaleion, A Long Time Ago)



soft, transparent orb, floating just over his head and forward of his right brow, produced a pale but substantive candleless flame, seemingly burning inside its oxygenless environment, whilst he feverishly worked on something he truly feared successful. No pen nor inkwell adorned his desk, yet words and symbols appeared on the lambskin parchment before him as he gated his terrifying plot through his right index finger, now traversing the page left to right, down, then left to right again, and again—each fingernail like unto living, liquid gold dust. Each character seemed to burn itself into existence from nothing. Talented was not the right word for him. Unique. Dangerous. Ruthless. God-like. Those were all far more fitting descriptions for this...what one might call a man.

Damon sat shirtless at his desk; his muscular torso radiant from the arcane light brought into existence by his own thought. Ever-so-faint scaring

Charles W. McDonald Jr.

became visible about his chest, shoulders, and back as his light orb began traversing from his right brow to a spot just to the right of his face, responding to his will. His charcoal, herringbone silk pants clung more to his sweat than his lean, hard, caucasian body. Black bangs hung down across furrowed brow and the black irises of his eyes—black mirrors of the soul.

He recalled others telling of spells they had created—spells that had taken months, years, and even most of their adult lives. This was but night one, and it was nearly finished. One might call it inspired work, but only if they knew nothing of its intent or true impact. Far from inspirational, this was something that would reshape the world, making it in his own image. No smile, nor frown, crossed his face or lips—only a thin pressed, hard line of focus and most lethal gravity.

Now gating the last symbol into the parchment, Damon did something he had not done in hours—breathe. Sitting back in his chair, the light orb still hovered to give him light, yet did not move with him as he sunk into his chair seeking a level of comfort. Suddenly another symbol began burning itself into the paper, at the top of the spell; a symbol he knew far too well, but had not, himself, instantiated. Looking around his secret study, not expecting to find anyone or anything, he took another heavy breath. The symbol was more than calling card enough—the seal of Banthis. *Her acknowledgment perhaps*, thinking to himself. Now, even more certain it would work when he tested it tomorrow, Damon did fear that possibility—*no* that probability. Yet he wanted it too. His future with Banthis was worth risking all now that the love of his life lived no more. That thought—more than any other—justified the *hate* born in this spell.

Slowly tracing the name of the spell at the top of the page, then Banthis's seal, Damon contemplated the fork of consequences before him and where this would all lead.

It had all started with an enemy of course, as most things do. One couldn't walk through life without making a few here and there, unless one's life proved inconsequential. Chara had been a thorn, and an imminent threat in his life, for far too long. He had allowed the escalation of his war with her to cost him great treasure, blood, and toil. And the most precious cost of all in Dallia. It had to come to an end. And, an end it would soon find.

* * * *

Dawn came fast, even without sleep. Damon needed something for his test that wouldn't be available till morning—moreover, he needed *someone*. There, sitting on a pale stone bench just outside the citadel's walls. She might not yet have been ten years of age—*still prelude the age of innocence*, he believed.

Beautifully delicate, curly golden bangs hiding the brightest green eyes, with full and radiant cheeks; she was so very full of life. She bore the hallmark of being well cared for—not royalty, but certainly not commoner either. She had eaten recently and eaten well. Her cream dress, with hearts of fire, passed her knees in elegant pleated folds of childhood. Pulling her precious doll into her hands in a loving embrace, it quickly became the sole focus of her attention—and her distraction.

She's the one, Damon committed to himself, walking closer but non-threatening. Not close enough to harm, or so she must have thought—if even her innocence allowed her to think of threats at this age. Walking towards the gate of the great citadel of Basrat, the girl bearing slightly off to his left, he cast. Without a sound and just the slightest motion of his right hand, the beautiful little girl was gone, leaving only a small symbol of ash, in the shape of winged female, where her feet would have been—the seal of Banthis. He felt a sharp, pernicious crackle in the air all around him, traversing the ground with him as the terrain split under his feet with a small crack he knew would soon grow. Calmly walking through the gates of Basrat as if nothing had happened—nothing of concern—Damon could hear the father's calls, off in the distance, for his little girl. She would never be seen again. Her sweet name, Lis, would fall ill-fated on the destiny she had just been robbed.

A familiar, sensual voice, carried on the wind, whispering in Damon's ear, confirmed the success of this monstrous spell. Banthis in receipt of the young child's soul no doubt. No smile crossed his face or lips—only that thin pressed, hard line. *Damon's Damnation* had worked on its first attempt. It was one thing to kill or to sacrifice a body, quite another entirely to permanently condemn a wholly innocent soul to the possession of anyone of his choosing—this one to Banthis. This was the very definition of perniciousness—malevolence most unfathomable. This was the start of it all—the first rock cast into the water of life itself. This was the very first ripple in the pond of Creation undone.

His name was feared already, by almost everyone, long before this. Every living creature, on every world, would fear him now. He feared himself. Already, those ripples cascaded toward oblivion, carrying Damon atop their waves of immeasurable destruction.



(Damon's Manor, Kaleion, Present Day)

Looking back through his many lifetimes as he contemplated his Master Plan, that was the one inerasable moment for Damon. Many moments

stood out, of course, but none like that. He was a condemned man, caged in a prison of his own making. There was no saving him since that moment. *That* unspeakable memory and *that* banned spell had set him on an irrevocable path destined for a justice purpose built for *him*. *Damon's Damnation*, he contemplated all these lifetimes later. 'Twas a fitting name for that heinous spell, not for what it did to its victims as much as what it had already done to his own soul.

Creation stood on the edge of a knife, and those waves from that pond he'd set in motion so very long ago, with the redirection of that little girl's soul, threatened to cast that knife into the Abyss allowing imbalance and chaos to rule. It was now or never. Damon had reached the tipping point of his very long life, and he had to commit one way or the other. His Master Plan, years in the making, would execute tactically the strategic outcome of his decision. Phase One of his Master Plan would start right here. Right now.



(Graelon Colonial Outpost, A Very Long Time Ago)

Just brought into the make-shift O.R. on a floating platform, the tall, brooding and handsome man of stark and straight Brunette hair, starry-bright-blue eyes, and chiseled features had a none-too-subtle look about his face as if to warn his medical staff to get on with it or suffer the intensity of his disappointment. Already incredibly powerful, this man sought to be the greatest of all time and if cybernetic enhancement was the path to achieving that end, then so be it.

Made of out of a decommissioned cargo ship, the hull door to the O.R. closed with a great and deep metal clang as the medical staff circled him—doing final staging and prep-work for his dangerous and unlawful operation.

"I'm going to put you out now," the aging, renegade neurosurgeon—well past his middle years—informed his wealthy and overly-talented patient, bringing the compressed airgun with a cartridge of anesthesia cocktail closer to the patient's carotid artery.

"Don't disappoint me, Doctor," the tall and serious patient warned, raising his right index finger causing the doctor's throat to constrict as if compressed by great and powerful unseen hands. "And, don't even think about taking advantage of my body being unconscious."

The neurosurgeon gasped trying to clear his airway as the patient finally released the doctor's throat after making his point quite clear. He wasn't sure how far-reaching this man's power was, but he didn't feel like testing it today. *Just get him done and get him out of here, before someone finds out.*

Motioning for his medical staff to proceed, he drove the compressed airgun into the patient's neck, delivering the cocktail that knocked out the patient's body immediately so the delicate procedure could begin.

Moments later, a shaved cranium replaced the patient's long and perfect black hair as the amber light produced from a finger-length silver, metal instrument began cutting subcutaneously then through bone into the cerebral and pre-frontal cortex.

A male nurse in his forties with already graying stubble positioned the implant circuit board on a bare steel tray where it was delicately plucked into position by the fine-grain, robotic operating arm by the renegade surgeon.

A second robotic arm began reaching into the meat of the patient's cerebellum to retract the pre-frontal cortex for an exact placement of the implant held in position by the first robotic arm. Operating both robotic arms carefully, the doctor barely had time to react when the hull door was blown from its iron hinges into the O.R. smashing his male nurse against the far metal wall with a giant thud, blue-green blaster fire chasing the blown door into the room in a violent surge of the law.

Three great, tall, and menacing robots floated into the room single-file through the blow-open bulkhead doorway—their metal having the appearance of being anodized and war-ridden with deep blaster-fire scarring and pitted wounds that didn't faze their movement or abilities.

"WAIT," the doctor protested immediately dropping to his knees, then prostrating before them. "I BEG FOR MERCY! PLEASE..."

More blue-green blaster fire erupted from the lead metal Sentinel marred by the most scarring and pitting of its alloy—its weapon directly attached—seemingly fused—to its humanoid-like right-arm. It had legs too—sort of—and could walk when and where required, but they mostly floated via gravitational propulsion giving them great range, speed, and agility. A product of tens of thousands of years of evolution, it was vastly superior to Humanity in every way measurable.

Now, looking down at the burn wounds that went all the way through the doctor's eye sockets out the back of his skull, it knew they had work to do. Dropping the implant from the robotic arm into its alloy left hand, the lead Sentinel crushed the microscopic implant to dust as the Sentinel behind it produced an even smaller implant from a storage unit hidden within its abdomen. Plucking the new implant circuitry with the robotic arm, the lead Sentinel began operating the retractor exposing the frontal cortex—not the pre-frontal—as it delicately inserted the *Instrument of Humanity's Hate* into the patient and quickly began the process of closing the patient.



(Isle of Romney, 100th day of The Great War, Perion, A Thousand Years Ago)

Pristine, yet menacing, stillness suppressed the inner corridors of the mighty keep—an atmosphere broken only by the movements of two powerful knights, brilliantly gleaming in silver armor with a crest of a golden, fiery sun, a silver moon eclipsing, and a red eagle crossing in front of the eclipse. The great golden crest and red eagle, accented by red and black tabards, marked them as Eldrac's men. Pacing to the edge of the great hall, then back to the matte sheen onyx double doors, the two coolly scrutinized every particle within view. Their two counterparts remained stationary under a massive cathedral arch, just in front of the imposing onyx double doorway. The doorway itself bore no hint of any mechanism of entry—only emitting a deep-black hue glow around the doors' perimeter.

The blood-red and black tabards and gold fringe adorning the knights indicated they were of grand regard. Their beautifully embroidered tabards roused this way and that beneath their two front waistguards as two of the knights continued their patrol—a tour that took them through a vastness of onyx and deep blue marble that made up the spectral passages of Eldrac's stronghold.

Snowy white fissures throughout the deep blue marble tiles allied with elaborately-hued knife-oil paintings in a futile attempt to bring *hope* into the heart of Eldrac's stone antechambers. Or, perhaps it was an attempt at the taste and elegance expectant of his newfound position in life. Radiant colors flashed, hither and thither, reflecting off the knights' finely handcrafted armor as they neared the end of the corridor. Pausing at the edge of the hallway, breaking the unison of their pacing, one of the warriors suspiciously examined something only a few paces away. Raising his visor for a better look, a hushed creak of well-oiled metal shattered the silence. The great veteran soon dismissed his suspicions away as nothing, though the fire in his eyes only burned hotter as he slowly lowered his visor—its highly polished metal making a smooth, precise click as it met with its metallic mate. Again, they marched off—to their judgment.

Carefully working the mechanical components of the spell with his hands within his *Web of Mirrors*, the comely man of auburn hair and muscular build concentrated, and, with visible determination, cast. Needlelike shards of stone and fire exploding from hidden hands that had, only seconds ago, been turned palm-out at his sides, a look of regret briefly crossed his face as he brought down an anvil of judgment upon Eldrac's men. A judgment previously unseen, yet nonetheless...final.

Only now resuming his watch, in sync with his partner and not even having enough time to turn to face the threat that instantly exploded in mid-air, Hollis was scorched alive by the blinding fire that ripped through his body. Horrific pain shot up his spine, setting every synapse in his body aflame, then...nothing. No trumpets. No standards. Just gone. All four great knights, brave and honorable in their own respect, were just another memory of war. Likely soon, not even remembered by any bard, nor sage, nor written account of this siege.

Tiny metallic and organic residue quietly floated to the cold marble floors in moats of immutable mortality. Where there had been four of Eldrac's best, now there were only a few specs of blood and meager scraps of shredded bone and flesh. An absolute stillness returned to the corridors of Eldrac's Keep. Talemar's spell lasted only an instant, yet left almost nothing that could be discerned as a corpse. It had to be that way. He could not afford the attention that would come from their ability to cry out in their final moments. Any announcement of their presence would surely put their mission at risk.

Within the *Web of Mirrors*, Talemar, dressed in a regally embroidered grey and red shirt with grey wool pants covered in robes of charcoal-blue, visibly embedded their memory into the deepest chasm of his mind. Turning to look at Xaldran's silver pools—eyes that glimmered in the darkness beneath his hood—Talemar sought an end to all this destruction and hate. Now entering the dim light of the corridor, Xaldran swept back the hood of his purple robes for a better look around. A full hand shorter than Talemar and of a slender, fragile frame with graying thin hair, Xaldran returned his friend's look with one of respect and friendship, somewhat fighting the morbid and natural human urge to look upon the scant remains before them. He had seen enough death for several lifetimes, and this was only the beginning. Talemar's senior lamean, general, and advisor, Xaldran looked into the steel blue eyes of his trusted friend wondering how much harder and colder he would have to become. *What fate would their victory bring if all they knew was killing and hatred? Slay thine enemy...* Was it really so unmistakably righteous? Nothing was ever so clearly murky.

Now a hundred days into this war of hate and hope, this would be the first truly significant assault since the very first days of the war, which now raged beyond any measure of control, threatening an end to everything and everyone. No, the war was just now under sail, powered by the winds of men's ferocity. There would be far more killing and destruction to come. Maybe even an end to all things. After all, this was the war prophesied to end Creation itself, or at least some had thought...

Talemar's eyes grew colder, harder, as he thought of battles past and those yet to come, while Xaldran considered the battle now raging within his young friend. War was hideous, putrid, and without glory or pageant. And in the struggle to win, the battle to keep one's heart pure, with Humanity intact, fell casualty—tainting each victory one by one. Warring with his Humanity, Talemar turned his icy glare from Xaldran to each of his friends and allies in turn, until his gaze fell upon the young woman they held captive—a woman Eldrac would most certainly torture to a slow and painful death if the full of her betrayal were known. At this moment, neither the woman nor anyone dared question his mettle to do what had to be done.

This long-awaited offensive, costly as it was, appeared to be going according to plan, but Talemar knew that would soon change. *Any plan for war was obsolete with the flight of the first arrow. War feeds itself and heeds no plan.* Thoughts he struggled with as an answer he sought kept returning to him without change. *You cannot jeopardize everything for a woman you don't even know! She must die. NOW!* It was not well known what Eldrac could do to a Human—the kind of slave, the kind of spy, he could unwillingly make of you—but *he* knew, and that was enough to place the burden of responsibility for what would happen after these crucial moments squarely on his shoulders. *It was enough of a risk using her to get this far,* he reflected—visibly struggling with the decision, tormenting himself, he looked upon each of his friends—not for consensus but for understanding.

Seven others had come with Talemar this day—lameans all save one, who was a bard of great renown—Aeriel. Xaldran, Raghvin, Badril, Kiervan, Esaul, and Mirak the names of the others, and well known they were. He wanted to bring more, at least a few warriors with crossbows for close combat and protection of the lameans, but it would have complicated the mission. This was supposed to be a quick, lethal strike at the heart of their enemy—the world's enemy—Creation's enemy. There was a great deal more to it than just that, but the others did not know the full of Talemar's plans. Today he would bring enough firepower into the heart of the Wyrms to loose even Eldrac from the Dragon's grasp.

None of that would matter if today were only a partial victory. If Eldrac could sense what was happening, it would jeopardize everything. Out of desperation for the future, Talemar snatched the young woman from Raghvin's grasp, her shimmering amber evening robe now disheveled about her body, her long raven bangs concealing some of the glare she returned him. From blue to midnight her robes shifted, then quickly back again. Talemar's grip tightened on her arm, cutting off circulation.

"I have no choice. You understand that?" Emotionless, Talemar stated flatly to the beautiful Mora. His stare seething with focus.

"Rid me of your conscience and be done with it," Mora muttered, staring with her own judgment, back into his armor of numbness, through those beautiful black blades of her hair. It had already been a day of great judgment for others; why not them...?

Talemar's grip tightened again, nearly crushing her upper arm where she stood, channeling into her with trust and belief. She was gone. Precisely where, even Talemar could not say, but he knew she would most likely not survive, let alone return. And he knew what had to happen next...

Ariel stepped to the front, checking for traps as he moved carefully to the doors. There was no telling what kind of trap a man of Eldrac's power could leave behind, but he soon found out as, with visible frustration and confusion, he looked at the seam of great doors, moving his hands at a half-pace distance up and down the seam of the heavy onyx. Kneeling at the base of the massive doors, his soft brown leather pants provided no warmth from the coolness of the deep-blue marble tiles. Sighing, he reached into the interior pocket of his road-worn, grey jerkin, pulling out a leather-wrapped object. Unrolling the leather, revealing its compartments, he removed a pair of his longest picks. Since there was no visible lock or discernible handle of any kind, he would need something long enough and fine enough to make adjustments in the physical traps between the doors. "This is a bad idea," he whispered to himself as he began to work the traps in series after determining their sequence of fire. The comment was really only intended for himself, but Talemar, Xaldran, and Raghvin exchanged concerned glances from their position still within the *Web of Mirrors*.

Both heavy onyx doors slowly pushed outward toward Ariel, sliding in unison as if on unseen rails, at the collapse of the last lock. Quickly repositioning himself, and the others in turn with him, Ariel moved out of the path of doors that surely must have been carved and installed with magic. The threshold was marked with a circular seal made of several runes, shifting and dancing with life inside the marble floor. Inside was what could only be discerned as a vast expanse into nothingness—the edge of the world—infinity itself. Yet only a few cubits into the midst of the expanse and off to the right, appeared a shimmering, ethereal curtain wall, taller than a Titan, flanked by twin, round mural towers with archer arsenal slits. Spectral as it was, it did appear first having a gated entrance, nearly seamless from point of entry to curtain wall, though a great jagged fissure slashed downward at an angle, making that seam more pronounced—as if scars of a great former siege. The curtain wall shimmered into, and then out of, existence.

Talemar stepped under the arch, to the edge of the runes, peering into a darkness that reflected his hard-facial features, drawing him further into the

blackness. Even with Xaldran and Raghvin, the most powerful of the lameans, close at his heels, he felt no comfort here, but he knew this was the right place. He could feel it. Eldrac was here.

Feeling the presence of something—or *someone*—else significant, Talemar turned to face the others; someone else was out there—someone he knew. “He’s here. Prepare yourselves,” Talemar instructed, though he doubted any level of protection would suffice. With more than a residue of trepidation, Talemar stepped over the threshold but found—and felt—himself thrust several steps beyond where he should have been. His black soft leather boots made only a slight echo on what could barely be considered a floor—its transparency revealing deep shifting hues broken by knifelike blades of brilliance—like diamonds moving about a dimmed light.

Now inside the room between ethereal gate and threshold, his senses became confused by the cacophony of mixed sounds and by the scent of something strange—something ancient. It was as if he had just walked into a sanctuary from the cradle of Creation, the sounds being all the souls that had come before him. He turned to face Raghvin, who was following inside, but they were gone. For an instant, he panicked, like a bird captured in a cage. His thoughts must have been exposed by the expressions on his face, for when he blinked his friends looked back with visible concern—the threshold open again. “Are you—?” Raghvin barely got the words out, before Talemar cut him off, “I’m fine,” he replied, motioning with his hands to proceed.

“He is here,” Mirak confirmed as he crossed the threshold into the darkness. His steps not taking him nearly the distance Talemar had traveled with one step.

The curtain wall shimmered out of existence—this time for a prolonged absence.

“What do you think it is?” Raghvin asked, looking at Talemar, though half expecting the all-knowing, all-curious Xaldran to answer.

“A dimensional portal,” Xaldran answered as if on cue.

“What makes you say that?” Talemar clearly wasn’t seeing what Xaldran was, and it concerned him to no end.

“This whole expanse wasn’t just created from nothingness; its space was stolen, and I think wherever the space was taken from wants it back.”

It was an intriguing hypothesis Talemar allowed to roll through his thoughts. However, sometimes you cut to the truth a lot faster if you assess the man versus the action, and Eldrac was entirely about power and possessions. So, whatever this was, it was either a trap or a path to one or both of those goals. He still wasn’t sure why Xaldran’s explanation meant it had to be a dimensional portal, but he trusted Xaldran more than anyone, mostly because he’d never known Xaldran to be wrong.

Abruptly coming to a halt as he crossed the seal entering the expanse, Kiervan's red robes whirled about him due to his momentum, slowly coming to rest on his body only a couple steps beyond the runes. Following close behind Kiervan, Badril dared only take two more carefully measured steps, bringing him to the edge of the runes. As Badril peered inside, his hands moved, reaching for a small leather pouch along the thin leather beltline that held his color-shifting robes, indicating his dedication to the practice of time. Channeling, Badril saw ethereal light from beyond the threshold revealing an older black man with short black hair and sharp brown eyes, who bore the mark of seven small runes about his face and neck amidst a landscape of festering moles—disfigured by the weight of his own decisions. Gathering the components needed from his pouch, Badril continued to channel, beginning a chant—unintelligible to even those in his presence.

Talemar had seen him too, as had the others—the old man appearing like a knowing face about a field of stars. What did *he* know that *they* did not?

Xaldran, Talemar, and Raghvin exchanged curious glances among themselves and back into the darkness, when instantly, as quickly as it had disappeared, the shimmering wall was back, this time much less ethereal than before. Louder and louder the level of noise rose, pounding into their heads. At first, the noise was meaningless—like a background of adjoined voices. Then, individual voices that had been concatenated into a cacophony of darkness began breaking away from the group, revealing themselves one by one. Talemar, Raghvin, and Xaldran all exchanged concerned glances as they started to disseminate their distinct messages. Until the last, Aerial, stepped over the seal of runes, and suddenly the voices ceased. The curtain wall, now completely solid, failed to waiver and shone only with the polish on the face of the stone from which it was made.

The jagged and slashed fissure was now much more defined, chasing down the wall diagonally, splintering off in three directions at the bottom, bordered by the strange blackness that appeared to form the barriers of a room. *A room designed for what*, Talemar calculated, rubbing his chin in contemplation as the others gathered round him.

"I can't quite recall where, but I'm certain I've run across such a thing somewhere in my readings," Xaldran stated, examining the wall at an even closer distance than Talemar, running his hand along the fissure only a cubit from the surface of the stone. It did not appear a splinter of stone up close, more like a cut from something incredibly sharp. "Hmmm," he thought aloud. "Yes, I'm certain of it. I have read of such a thing."

Brilliant, inescapable, pure-white radiance was all Talemar could see...and a voice of immeasurable power coming from the other side of a great lake of crystal. Then, in an instant, he was back before the wall. *Another waking*

dream, he thought to himself—and *always the same one*. Talemar blinked, trying to recall Xaldran's last comment without appearing weakened or troubled, but as Talemar regarded the cut in the wall before him, he was troubled.

"Xaldran exaggerates," Raghvin quipped with a half-mocking gesture of his right hand, tousling the grand cuff of his earth brown robes. Not the youngest of them, Raghvin was no child to magic for certain, but he lacked the appreciation and fine countenance that came with Xaldran's experience. The rough edges of his magic found themselves only bested by the coarse edges of his words. With unremarkable hazel eyes and short brown hair, he was, at best, handsome, though he had captured many women's hearts with that beguiling smile he now displayed as he looked to the wall, though speaking to his side. "He's run across everything in his readings at one time or another." He didn't have to look to see the expression of contempt on Xaldran's leathered face. He could feel it.

Chuckling, Talemar pushed his concerns away for the moment, knowing they would undoubtedly come back to him. Xaldran simply frowned at the both of them, shaking his head and mumbling something to himself, or at least something he had not intended for others to hear entirely.

A sudden draft of ice-cold, stale air, enough to raise everyone's hackles, drew all eyes to the wall as Talemar took one step closer to the curtain wall. Again, he convulsed in the midst of the blinding white light and booming voice that relentlessly confronted him. And, just as quickly as it had come, it was again gone, but this time, it had left Talemar beyond the great, fissured curtain wall, facing his friends on the other side who now pounded on the wall at his disappearance. It was as if the stone were transparent from his side, watching his friends and vaguely hearing Xaldran and Raghvin argue over what had just happened. Talemar pounded his fist against the stone with a booming thud of energy that only seemed to travel away from the wall, not through it.

Now banging with both fists, Talemar pulled his dagger and thrust hard against the stone, his muscles flexing as the finest metal known broke off at the tip. Allowing his muscles to relax, he released the hilt of the blade, letting it fall to what could barely be called a floor where it landed with a small, muted thud. He could see his friends on the other side, but from their expressions, it did not appear that they could see him. The best he could hope for was that the others would come—and be allowed to pass through into whatever—or wherever—this was. Perhaps this was Eldrac's trap, getting him here alone—wherever *here* was. If that was what Eldrac wanted, so be it. Eldrac's presence was unmistakable now. *Perhaps this was best, after all*, Talemar supposed, steeling himself. Best they did not follow.

Looking around, searching for any place that might yield some advantage, all he could see was vast emptiness—certainly nothing he could leverage. There was no point in staying; his advantage had been lost. It was forward into the void or futile inaction. Barely a choice. He turned, for the first time really examining where it was this journey had brought him. Before him lay an even greater expanse of this blackness that seemed to form its own barriers. The lack of color made it difficult to perceive distance, direction, and time. He surely could not discern time if he could not tell how far it was that he had walked, or if he could not tell how much further he had to go. *Impossible*, he reasoned. *How am I ever going to find my way? How can I possibly know the straightest course? Straightest course to what*, was the foremost question in his mind. Whatever lay out there in-waiting for him, he would come. Whether he wanted to or not, his feet began carrying him away from his friends, hoping they would find him. Hoping he would find Eldrac before Eldrac found him or his friends.



Wherever he was, Talemar's experience told him he was very likely no longer on Perion. After walking what must have seemed several turns of the sand, Talemar finally sat, encountering nothing thus far, though he had heard the voices again, this time with unmistakable clarity. They were the cries of his friends, and a voice he did not recognize, "You *will* die here," the strange male voice intoned. *A man could go mad here*, he thought. It seemed futile—neither running to engage the enemy nor running from the enemy—just running.

Hairs on his arms and on the back of his neck abruptly stood on end—sensing movement. Someone was here. Rising, turning to face the threat and preparing to cast, Talemar sought out the threat he knew was about him, yet there was no one. *Blast this place; I'm losing my mind already*. He thought it was safe to sit back down; perhaps sitting would calm him. He could still feel his heart racing, the arcane coursing through his veins as he held on to as much as he dare for precaution. It was not so easy a weapon to sheathe, nor bare, as a sword, but then sometimes neither was a sword. He stood there for a few moments, staring into the blackness, attempting to calm himself and regain his senses before continuing. *Continuing toward what*, he contemplated. *What is so important about this place? Surely it is a trap, though like none I've ever seen*.

As if in an attempt to answer, he heard something off in the distance, though it felt close by—unnervingly close. Again, he turned, looking around for the source, noticing a trail of fog leading off into the darkness, or was it leading to him? Stepping back a few paces, Talemar put some distance between

himself and the fog that crept across the surface of whatever this darkness was. *Damn this void!*

"You don't have to worry about going in the wrong direction here," that same strange male voice intoned from not quite behind and to the left of Talemar, still at some distance away.

Talemar turned on the ready, arcane scorching through his veins—stretching him to his limits. "Who are you?" Talemar challenged, facing the man he could not entirely make out, the hood of his dark, aged, grey robes still unyielding of the stranger's features.

"A name is a powerful thing, and I care not answer such a question given in such disrespectful tone, child." His voice grew colder with each word, impatient and agitated with the final insult 'child.' It was the voice of many men and of none—of many cultures spanning a great vastness of time. That accent was...reminiscent, yet difficult to place.

Talemar collected and assembled all the senses from the stranger's words, paying attention to every detail of tone, nationality, age, experience and implied intend, this time using both patience and respect in his reply. "Fine then. Can you at least tell me why I'm here?" The words came out in an even, fair-minded tone, yielding at least some of what the stranger sought—respect. What features were not shrouded by the man's hood and robes appeared cloaked by the darkness forming the barriers of their existence as if the space borrowed to make this place held a vested interest in his veil of starless-night, though Talemar could begin to make out the weathered creases of the man's face.

"Better," the stranger replied in a flat tone as he stepped closer, motioning with open arms, his vast cuffs all but swallowing the features of the man's hands and arms. "Sometimes you cannot skip directly to the end. If I told you my name, I would be at a disadvantage. You see, names hold great worth. They are not mere words to be thrown about," the stranger smirked at that, taking another step closer, delighting in the fact he had not answered either question. Talemar could now make out a chain around the man's neck, which held a heavy wrought iron key unlike anything he'd ever seen before hanging down the center of his chest, resting against the grey folds of wool that made up his aged robes. "So, if I told you my name, what would I gain from it? What would you give to me in return?"

"My name," Talemar stated matter-of-factly. He couldn't help staring at the strangeness of that key around the man's neck. It looked...ancient—like unto a dragon whose teeth formed the tangs of the key itself.

"Your name I already have. What use is your telling me such?" The strange man smirked; apparently the failure to invoke the young man's name was not an oversight, nor of as great importance as having his own name raised.

"How do you... WHO ARE YOU?" Talemar snapped.

"Ah. Ah." The man tsk'd visibly with his right index finger outstretched toward him. "I told you already, names are powerful, and you shan't have mine until you have earned it. What would you give me in return that I do not already possess?" Again, the stranger smirked, taunting...toying. He was having fun at Talemar's expense.

With barely a partial motion of the stranger's right hand, they were instantly standing at the center of a ring of nine crumbled Rune Stones, the empty blackness that defined this world, wherever it was, somewhat replaced with green grass and beachside rolling hills that appeared only half in existence. The center three Rune Stones bore both a mark and a shaft as if accepting a mated key, though the very center of the nine bore a shaft looking to accept more of a rod than a key. It appeared an illusion, yet there was so much more to it than that—as if world upon world layered the appearance around them. Only a lamean of unfathomable power and experience could deduce what had just been done with a mere thought.

"Do you know this place?"

"I do," Talemar toned with certainty.

The man smiled openly, this time, his features now more apparent with some of the expanse's darkness replaced with the color and light of his divination. His greying, aged skin matched the hue of his robes with their loose threads, cuts, and tatters. His eyes glowed red and hot with a seething hatred and contempt of Man. The silver of his hair was a streaming mass of seemingly sweaty, wet curls, and gnarled braids. His skin was like unto the dead—dry, tough, and creased close to the bone with the blade of his own anguish. Yet, this man was not unkempt. He held the look of a once-great and careful lamean, no longer interested in his appearance as if what he'd seen had proven such things irrelevant. "This thing—this key—you seek is a *powerful* relic," the strange man proclaimed, still not answering any of Talemar's real questions. Only generating more questions for a mind already teetering on the brink in this menacing place.

It was the first time he had made mention of the key or the Crown—their reason for bringing the fight directly to Eldrac in the first place. Trying to think of a way to kill the man to take it, Talemar's eyes darted to the object around the man's neck, contemplating a better approach. *No, he could not attack the man now, but perhaps...* *No.* Talemar locked his jaw tight, clenching his fist hard at his side, his fingernails nearly cutting into the palm of his hand. He had to exercise restraint with this thing posing as a man—patience. There was no telling what this thing was capable of, and he was certain the stranger had the resolve to do whatever it deemed necessary.

The stranger continued, moving about the projections of the flat stones that surrounded them, fastidiously brushing his robes, careful, very careful, not to touch the ethereal representation of the stones appearing among them. "It was only meant to be used twice throughout all times, you know?"

Finally, some answers, Talemar thought, but he was taking his sweet time about it. It was time to press him for more... "Why are *you* telling *me* this?"

Smiling, and obviously amused, the clever man replied, thoughtfully, "In time, you will come to know more than you wished. In time, you will come to know me and a great many others as well. But, *ONLY* in time...and that time has yet to come, *Youngling*." Stopping abruptly, the strange man smiled vilely at the last word of contempt—another insult. *Youngling* was a word from his day and time—a time long since passed—often used in reference to an apprentice.

The man turned and began walking away, his vision of stones and hillside already yielding to the returning darkness. "You shall not have Eldrac today," the strange man called back to him. "This day, and this victory is his and his alone. His rudder is steady. His course set. His sails filled. You shall not catch him this day, but *there is always more time*." The stranger chuckled at that last and most apropos quip given their location, disappearing from sight.

Perhaps it was the retreat of the vision of stones and grass playing lighting tricks with his eyes. Perhaps it had been there all along, but where the strange man had walked away and disappeared out of site appeared a structure. He could only make out minor details at this distance, but it was gigantic, whatever it was.

Talemar paused a moment, thinking and looking around in all directions. The now too familiar darkness was the only thing staring back. The lack of blue sky, white clouds, and green grass was confusing and frustrating at best. Given the circumstances, and the fact he could no longer tell which way would lead him back whence he came, it seemed the obvious choice was forward to whatever the structure in the distance. Yet he could not help but think of those he left behind and the danger they might have to face without him. Just the same, Talemar set out in the direction of the structure, hoping and believing for those he left behind, recalling the strange man's words, "There is no wrong direction in this place..."

* * * *

Painfully the time passed. The idea of turning back was like a constant knife in his thoughts. The structure seemed no closer now than it had hours' past, but at least he could make out that it appeared to be a keep or great hall

of some sort. Either that or it was so enormous that he was even farther from it than he had first considered. At least now he could see the ethereal, luminescent tendrils that appeared to hold the massive gothic structure hostage amidst the backdrop of endless night. It was not a comforting site in the least, but it did not appear monstrous either; *ancient and powerful* was his first impression of the structure from this distance.

Kneeling on one knee, Talemar let out a long, slow sigh, looking down at the nothingness that made up the ground, the sky, everything here. *Strength and persistence*, he deliberated. Strength and persistence got him this far. *Yeah, strength and persistence got you HERE!* It was hard to maintain focus. It was getting harder, by the minute, not letting this black void get to him and his exhausted mental state.

With increasing trepidation, Talemar's first consideration was *forward*. *You can never go in the wrong direction HERE. You can NEVER go in the wrong direction HERE!!!* Thinking of the wall, he *did* think of a way back to the portal wall.

"No Love, that is not the place."

Eyes scanning for the voice his heart knew so very well, Talemar turned to see the wall only a few paces away, appearing just the way it had looked when he turned to walk away from his friends, before beginning his journey through the night. He could see his friends on the other side, appearing exactly as they had the instant he walked away. Xaldran, Raghvin, and Aerial still visibly arguing with one another, trying to get through to find him.

"No Love. Please no." Again, the voice called out to him.

Panting, desperate to find her, Talemar turned in the direction of the voice, screaming at the tops of his lungs, "WHERE ARE YOU??? Please... Where?" The last came as a whisper. Looking up, and truly looking for the first time in hours, Talemar could see the Keep lit only by the luminescent tendrils of fog surrounding it, appearing like a beacon against the backdrop of abyssal night. He may not have known how or why yet, but he *did* know *where*.

The voices were gone, save the one of his conscious. In the first moment of true clarity since this day had begun, he knew what had to be done. Just at that moment, he felt Eldrac's presence stronger than ever, causing him to turn back to the wall, spells at the ready. Through the smoky transparent stone, which composed the strange wall that crossed the plains, he could see the battle before him. Xaldran, Raghvin, Badril, Mirak, Esaul, and Kiervan channeled with all their might amidst a castle in ruins against Eldrac and three other unknown lameans—two female, one male. Amidst them fought a host of swordsmen, archers, and heavy guard. Eldrac's trap had been sprung.

Huge sections of Eldrac's castle were blown apart—obliterated. Wood, drapes, paintings, and furniture still smoldered, ablaze across the

landscape. Talemar could no longer tell whether the room that had obviously been created with magic, housing the portal to this plane, still existed or if the others could even see the wall anymore. He wasn't sure if he could even get through, or if his spells could either, but he had to do something. Even with the voice of his love pleading with him otherwise in his thoughts, he cast. *BLAST, he had to try!*

Summoning all the power he could muster, which felt immeasurably stronger here, Talemar cast *Blistering Iron*, sending shards of metal, fire, and acid racing toward Eldrac. If he could just get his attention for an instant, maybe it would be enough to give them the chance they needed. Growing to immense proportions by the time they slammed into the curtain wall portal, Talemar thought it might just work, only to see all that energy absorbed by the portal.

Again, the voice of his love called out to him, "You cannot help them, my Love."

Helplessly, Talemar watched as his friends were picked apart one by one. He wanted to turn and walk away, but he couldn't. He just couldn't. It was wrong, but watching wasn't doing any good either. Eldrac was winning.

Two great swordsmen, Rémy and Garin, battled with Aerial. Rémy was thought the best swordsman anyone had ever seen, though his morals were always of question, as were his motives, save the one you could always count on—money. Garin was his protégé of late. It was rumored for many years Rémy went through them with great regularity, though Garin appeared, different. It was rumored he had been with Rémy longer than any other, four turnings of the seasons. Maybe there was something there to be used to serve him, but he would have to escape here first, and it would be for not if any of his friends were lost in this battle. He could afford no more losses.

Talemar was sure Aerial knew them both well and knew that he was far outmatched. The sword was not even his mastery, but blow for blow Aerial matched the two on him, while two of the lameans, Kiervan and Raghvin, battled with the mortals, leaving Badril and Esaul to deal with Eldrac's allied lameans and Xaldran to deal with Eldrac himself. Great smoldering craters, wider than the girth of a dozen men, and man-sized chunks of stone were all that was left of Eldrac's keep. On opposite sides of the rubble, the lameans dueled, leaving Rémy, Garin, and Aerial to clash amidst the center of the rubble, dancing about the broken masonry in search of the best footing for the stance that would lend them the best advantage.

A quick blow to Aerial's shoulder from Rémy left Aerial staggering sideways over the crushed stone and metal. Garin quickly took the opportunity, leaping forward, thrusting hard into Aerial's side. Talemar could almost feel the gash in Aerial's side watching Aerial's expression. Leaving Aerial for dead,

Rémy and Garin moved quickly toward Xaldran. Desperately seeking more and more power, more and more spells, Badril and Esaul began to look to Xaldran, exchanging frantic glances. The panic was setting in. The tide was turning—the momentum eroding away at them like unto the torrent of a powerful river.

Xaldran quickly found Eldrac alone. Just standing there would have been challenge enough as lightning, fire, ice, thunderclaps, and shards of something glass-like streaked from the sky all around Xaldran. Great, writhing, squid-like, poisonous tendrils erupted from the ground all round Kiervan and Mirak—leftovers from Eldrac. *You shall not have him. Not this day!* Talemar recalled the strange man's comments. Eldrac was well prepared for them and he berated himself for allowing himself to lead his friends into such a horrific trap. Perhaps the woman he had imprisoned to places unknown had betrayed more than just Eldrac. *What could I have done differently?* Perhaps he could have swayed the balance, if but on the other side of the portal. Maybe it would have just got him killed along with everyone else. For a moment, the morbid idea was welcome. Death, at last, would be an end, but that was exactly the kind of thinking they would want of him—exactly the sort of thinking that could end everything. No, there would be NO surrender for Talemar. He had to live. He had to fight. Perseverance had to count for something. It had to.

Something was happening. Rémy and Garin surrounded Xaldran, blades ready to strike. A blinding stroke of lightning blistered the dusk hours, and an unheard thunderclap shook the ground, knocking nearly everyone to the ground, save Eldrac, who continued the weaving of his spell. Shifting rubble all but buried Aerial alive, while crushing Garin and throwing Rémy and Xaldran, headfirst, into a nearby crater—the result of a heated exchange of spells. Heavy dirt and pebbles cast airborne fell back to the ground all round Eldrac as he completed his spell. For a moment, all was still. Talemar could see some movement among the rubble, Kiervan and Mirak trying to get up. Something caught Talemar's eye. Perhaps it was the sudden shift in the sky where dusk became the short arbiter twixt day and night. Looking through the portal to the sky above, Talemar witnessed the white clouds retreat and the formation of something unnatural in the clouds. Like unto a great, dark firestorm in the sky, a massive swirling vortex of fire picked up debris from the ground as it came down upon the remnants of Eldrac's Keep. Suddenly Eldrac was gone, and his allies with him, save Garin and Rémy. Stone columns, great oak beams, and mortar launched into the air, hurling around the exterior wall of the fiery vortex as it began its methodic, remote sweep of the rubble, threatening to obliterate anyone in its path. Then, only an instant after it began, it was gone, throwing its debris back to the ground below, crushing anything beneath it. Scanning the rubble from where he stood beyond the

ethereal gate, Talemar failed to find any of his friends. All were gone, save the broken body of Aerial. Part of his torso and battered face were slightly visible. A large stone slab lay diagonal across his body, and several smaller stones surrounded his head and neck, revealing only a portion of his soot and ash-covered face to view. He stood there awhile. Aerial's mouth barely moved, twisting silently—perhaps it was a prayer or a cry of sort. Talemar looked around the rest of the battlefield, via the portal, for a few moments, ensuring he burned this scene of horrors into his mind before he would allow himself to move on.

Turning away from the portal and staring back into the darkness of the strange world in which he had found himself, Talemar pressed forward toward the great structure in the distance, thinking of his friends and that one might have been able to survive if he was where he should have been. Another memory of war he would have to carry the rest of his life—however long that was. That made the keep in the distance even more important than ever before. There he had better find what he had come for. He had to find something to justify this day's loss.



Some places still smoldered now; it had been some time since Xaldran had fled the battlefield in retreat. Now walking among the ruins, Xaldran was careful not to disturb remains he may yet uncover. Garin's face, cracked and still bleeding, stared up at him with lifeless eyes from in between the chunks of stone and marble. Face twisting at the sight of him, Xaldran turned, looking for where he assumed Aerial had been. His thoughts still tormented him relentlessly for fleeing the scene after falling into the crater with Rémy, yet he knew the others would retreat as well. It was the only thing that could be done. Though, if there was even a chance for Aerial, he had to come back for him. Even now, he felt the unseen eyes that must have been watching him, as he quickened his pace, moving to Aerial's last known position.

"Aerial," he called out, fearing the attention he may draw. Xaldran's eyes darted piercingly in every direction as he called out again, "Aerial, I've come back for you. Please, man, speak now."

Soft, muffled coughing seemed to come from different directions, though it was the first place he looked where he found his companion, buried in the rocks and debris. Rushing over, then cautiously moving around the top of Aerial's head so as not to crush his body further with the rubble, Xaldran quickly began to cast, hurling the heavy man-sized debris that lay across Aerial's body, hundreds of paces away where it burst in mid-air. With Aerial's body

partially cleared, he could now see the crushing wounds of the slab, and the piercing injury from Garin's blade. Pools of blood hemorrhaged out of his body from everywhere, staining rock, dirt, and clothes. "You'll be all right, my friend," he muttered hopefully, lifting his friend's head to cradle it in his arms as he knelt in the rubble.

Ariel lay quiet and still in his arms. Xaldran felt he was still breathing, but his strength was evaporated. He could feel the weaves of Ariel's spirit losing their claim to the flesh of his mortal coil. "I'm sorry," the only words that could come to his mind. What more could he say, to explain his actions—his flight for his own life? How could he have left that way? The visual tormented him—what Ariel must have thought as he lay here abandoned and alone to die. His teeth ground in the frustration of his own inaction. The thin hard line his mouth formed demonstrated a resolve going forward less his excuses.

This war had taken more than its toll in blood and emotions, but now it seemed to be leaching away at his dignity, his very essence of decency, blurring right from wrong. Perhaps that was what they wanted—to demoralize them. Perhaps that was an even bigger victory than trapping them like they had today. Break the righteous into selfish, undignified, and petulant beings. If that was it, victory for the enemy was at hand. Somehow, they now had to find their way without Talemar. Even though they were on the brink of disaster, they could not become what it was they were meant to defeat.

Tear-laden eyes leaving cleansing streaks down his soot-covered leathery skin, Xaldran searched the deepest corners of his mind for the one spell that might save his friend, and the rare components he would have to seek out. It would take even more than that—perhaps even finding the one place where his magic soared like the rays of the morning. He had to try, and if putting himself at that much risk was what it would take, then so be it. Damn his very soul, he would do what he must!



(The World Below and Between, Time Neutral)

Moss and fungi-laden trees, with a girth the size of a Titan, were all that Mora could see—however far that was. It was so dark, she was lucky to see her hand in front of her face at times, yet the glow of the moss on the tops of the trees gave off a subtle glimmer so that she could at least make out some obstacles down here—wherever here was. She had heard Eldrac speak of such a place before, and those had not been his fondest of tales. Though, she was uncertain if he had ever had any memories one could call fond. During her

time with Eldrac, she had witnessed unspeakable events. Perhaps this dark, damp, and sinister place could be a highlight in her petulant adolescence.

Wading through the shin-deep, murky water, Mora brushed back the black blades of her bangs, trying to make some progress in any direction. She just wished she had some small stones, or anything really, that she could use to mark where she had been. She thought of tearing off a bit of her clothing, but quickly dismissed that, given the sheer material of her robe—fearing rape far worse than being lost. It was bad enough being transported to this moldy, damp Hell. The last thing she wanted was to find herself forever lost down here.

Even though it was not cold, she felt more than inadequately dressed for such a journey. She had been in her bath when they had found her, Talemar and the others. Damn them all! Straightening the robe to cover her lush, soft bosom, Mora pressed onward, thinking of how she might get out, thinking Eldrac would come for her as soon as he realized she had been taken. *Or... perhaps not.*



(Valley of Power, Perion, A Thousand Years Ago)

Turning to walk down the mountain, shivering slightly, Xaldran tried to orient himself after *Gating* far from his mark. It had to be done that way here. *Portals* were not allowed in the Valley of Power, and even *Gates* proved pretty inaccurate. Trying to materialize with precision in the valley below was suicidal at best, regardless of what spell you used. It was frigid, as the *Gate* had placed him very high in elevation. He knew precisely where he was, though he had only been here a few times.

It was mid-spring here, yet he was knee-deep in snow. Jagged rock formations stabbed outwardly from the side of the mountain, while boulders threatened to relieve themselves from their precarious stations above. Peeking out from behind a tall, snow-laden fir, a young doe stood, motionless, looking into his soul from a short distance. Fearless, it came closer as he reached out a hand to greet his new friend. Its fur was soft and innocent—its eyes forgiving. Looking around, Xaldran counted six other snow-capped mountains within his site as he gently petted the doe. Four broader peaks, with only remnants of the last snowfall upon them, stood imposing against the skyline. This place was always so beautiful to him, with its majestic mountain peaks and virgin wilderness. It seemed the most virgin of all places. In a very unnerving way, it had become home to him.

Moving through the snow with difficulty in his soft leather boots and purple robes, Xaldran let his staff aid him as much as his age would allow. His thoughts raced from Aerial, to Talemar, to the task at hand, then back through all of his friends, one by one, as if recounting life before death. His journey becoming increasingly more difficult with each passing moment as the blame rose out of the snow first claiming and anchoring his feet, then his legs and chest, then his conscience in perpetuity. There was so much more that had to be done and so few left to do it, if it could be done at all now. Now, more than ever, he needed to count on *hope* to carry him—to carry them all. *Yes, hope it would have to be.*

Hearing the crunch of a branch behind him, Xaldran turned to see the doe he had left now following him down the mountainside. Petting it one last time, he turned back to continue trudging perilously down the face of the mountain, but the doe continued to follow.



(Axum, Perion, Tens of Thousands of Years Ago)

The FTL gravity warp drive of their tactical starship had brought them thousands of light years from home. It was time for them to settle this virgin world. They would be left behind to fend for themselves—without technology, without weapons, even without food. That was the deal—they were prisoners after all—hardened criminals in a society that no longer believed in the death penalty and he had already served as much time as his captives felt they could contain him. This was their lasting punishment—banishment on a world where they might be able to survive, but only through the hardest of toil and sweat. *Purificatio via cruciabilitas*. Translated, ‘Purification via the crucible of torment.’

His banishment callously carried out by the alloy Sentinels who had brought him here via orders from The Eye, Alexelio didn’t fight back as their rigid alloy arms shoved him into the transporter.

The surface of the virgin planet below appeared to only have animal and plant life as Alexelio materialized handcuffed next to the white sand beaches with the sea actively lapping at the fertile green coastline. Beautiful, lush green grass rolled over the hillsides of the island before him, creating a sense of new life and new home on a world he hoped would prove a new opportunity.

Alexelio’s fine, nanite metallic jumpsuit finally settled on a mirror-reflective forest green, blending him into the lush and fertile grass as he surveyed his new home. His grey, satin-finish field-displacement handcuffs clicked smoothly before falling to his feet, freeing him—sort of. Looking as a head

sticking out of the air, completely unsupported by his human form, Alexelio tossed the hood of his jump-suit forward over his head, disappearing into the countryside for precaution. He knew not the threats that might be lurking about.

Now freed of his cuffs, for the first time in a very long time, Alexelio cast, reaching out across the island with his mind's eye in search of something he knew would last the sands of time until coming upon a quarry of dark granite sarsen stone. "*Ibi*," he thought aloud. 'There.'

He couldn't recall the last time he'd cast, but it felt...wondrous here. This planet was rich with so much living organic matter to source the energy he needed. His power felt immeasurably stronger here. He'd be able to create a marvelous monument here, and this was the perfect place, but food and shelter were the first order of business as the rest of his family materialized not far from him on the lush green grass of a place he would call Axum. Using his natural abilities in Telekinesis, he floated toward his family, closing the distance between them.

Magic was forbidden tech on his homeworld. It didn't matter your intentions or usage. Forbidden meant forbidden, and that law, above all others, was very unforgiving. That was there, and this was *his* world—his and those banished here with him. Magic would **not** be forbidden here. Here it would become a vital tool as it was meant to be.



(Axum, Perion, Present Day)

From ground level, the dew appeared like heavy raindrops on blades of verdant green grass, causing each blade to careen under its weight. Brilliant sunlight, casting prismatic rays through the crystalline drops, threatened to evaporate every cloud in the sky with radiant amber trumpets of light, heralding the arrival of the morning. Wave-crashing sounds of the South Sea lapped at the virgin white sand beaches of the Nine Towers. Amid the drifts of fertile green grass, nine massive blue-grey granite sarsens, some broken into pieces, marched about a three-quarter staggered circle, flanked by massive white marble Humanoid statues, half-buried by weather and time. The statues, further flanked by nine quartz-like obelisks, shot up out of the ground at a slight angle, as if leaning on their backs. Each ring marching three-quarter way around like unto a King's crown. The white-capped waves battered the solemn shores of the Nine Towers, accompanied by the wind whipping across the tall grassy fields of sarsen rubble Rune Stones. The entire site had a feeling of ageless royalty like unto a forever king.

In the grassy field, the three center stones, of nine total, bore markings: runes—one on each stone. On each of those three, just above each rune lay a slender opening: a shaft. The center of the nine bore snowy white fissures that leapt and danced with life anew in the early morning light as if rejoicing in the coming of the morning—its shaft looked to be the mate of a rod. The two Rune Stones flanking the center bore shafts more reminiscent of mating to a key. The sacred and holy ground of the Rune Stones lay silent, waiting for the summons from the one voice that would call out across the chasm of the ages. And so, it begins...

Part 1: The Sword of Kings



Chapter 1: The Fatal Wound

(Dover Castle, England, Earth, Early Spring, Near Future)



he stiff breeze off of the English Channel was much colder than the norm for this time of year; even the seagulls appeared to know something was wrong as they scattered to the four winds, away from the cliffs in great mass as if frightened by gunfire. Overlooking the famed Cliffs of Dover out toward Calais, the water-laden North Atlantic wind chilled Michael Anthony Day to the core, frosting his well-kept, short and scruffy dirty blond—almost brown—hair. His leather armor jerkin over ringlet vest, with his coat of arms about a quadrant crest of brilliant red, blue and white panels, an anachronism nearly fourteen centuries out of time, made him stand out like an imperial standard amidst the chalk cliffs of Dover. The golden-bronze, heavily-textured scabbard at his side, adorned with simple runes, housed a uniquely longer Roman short sword, made even more unique with its wider guard, hand-and-a-half hilt, and a beautifully hammered hexagonal pommel about two inches in diameter—reminiscent of an English longsword. It looked almost the perfect evolutionary step between sixth-century and renaissance craftsmanship with just a hint of something...more.

Slightly broad and hard in the face though in perfect symmetry and proportion to his broad shoulders, Michael watched the great swells, and Atlantic white caps batter his coastline—his homeland. Even in the early spring, with the clouds threatening to rain nearly every day, it was still the most beautiful place on earth for Michael Anthony Day.

He loved coming here at this time, to watch the ships from afar, the gulls, and pelicans. Yet his gaze fell upon a site much further away than merely the Channel. His thoughts drifted...

God be praised. We have our King. Those words shouted not too long ago echoed in his head as he recalled the brilliant white light all around him, and a fiery presence unlike anything, or anyone, he had ever felt before or since. There had been many others around him and a great sea of glass, like unto crystal, with the booming voice on the other side. It was some kind of ceremony, though not like any of the pomp he had seen since taking his station.

He could recall only a few words—the command really, and he shivered at the image of what was to come. It was an increasingly iron burden, knowing the future—an anvil thrown about his neck. If others knew... No! He could not think that. That could *not* happen! Yet others *did* know. That was, again, prophecy fulfilling itself. Did *he* believe in prophecy? Did he believe in *this* particular prophecy? He was only a man, though King to some; even he could not stand in the way what was to come—whether prophecy-driven or not. He was but a reed in the winds of the magic of the gods, and those winds began to blow, cold and merciless.

“Your majesty?” The familiar, middle-aged and rugged voice scattered his thoughts, like the gulls only moments before. Visibly gathering himself, Michael turned to face his father, wearing a stately charcoal Bespoke wool suit befitting his station as both Lord of the Realm and Father of the King. Its fabric held a deep herringbone, satin sheen and texture, providing just the right contrast to the shimmer of his well-kept, silvery-white hair and beard. He looked very much the part of Father, and of Lord, yet the frame of his body and his chiseled features spoke more of his years as a field agent and naval commander. Not many sons, in the history of all nations, ruled while their father still breathed. Yet not many who ever ruled did so through means other than their blood or nobility.

“I’ve told you repeatedly to stop calling me that.” Michael paused, facing his namesake, realizing his tone was disrespectful. Recanting, “I’ve asked, Dad. Please...”

Smiling as he burst with pride, Michael Sr. replied only with a forgiving look. “It’s time, you should be going,” he said, placing his hand on his son’s shoulder, leading him away from the cliffs. “You were thinking of something,” he continued as they began their walk back to the immense grey stone castle in the background. “I interrupted. Do you want to tell me about it?”

“Just thinking, ‘He that leadeth into captivity, shall go into captivity; he that doth kill with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and faith of the saints.’”

“Are you questioning its meaning, or trying to tell me something?”

“Dad, only a fool would say, with certainty, that he knew anything like this, but I guess that makes me a fool for telling you because I believe I do know.” Michael paused, looking into his father’s eyes for something, anything that would lead him to the truth if there was such a thing. “As King, I cannot allow the events that are about to happen to unfold. My God, the things I have seen, Dad. If you only knew... I mean, it’s one thing for us to talk about it in private, but it’s entirely something else to see it in your thoughts every time you close your eyes, or even in your waking moments.”

Sighing deeply in frustration, his father paused, “I believe in you, my son, and I know our time is short, but know this, do what you believe you must do, and I will be there. I held you every night when you were a baby. I taught you through the years, and I think I know you better than anyone, so if you say a thing must be done, then we shall go do it together.”

Michael fought the emotional torrent just underneath the surface of his doubt, “Then let’s go.” Hand still on his son’s shoulder they finished the long walk back up the hillside toward Dover Castle and the silver Rolls Royce® limousine waiting to drive them away.

* * * *

(London, England, Earth, Hours Later, Dusk)

“Your majesty, are you quite sure about this?” Lord Quincy Arthur Billings, commander of White Hall, hesitantly asked while making nervous downward curling strokes at the ends of his graying mustache. It was pretty much all he had left to stroke—more than a decade as the head of white hall had left him with barely his sideburns and nothing much to speak of up top. Billing’s Bespoke pinstripe suit, somewhere between copper and rustic gold, accompanied by his handcrafted walking cane and Rolex® watch, spoke to his wealth and power, but none of it appeared to work on this man. Michael was stubborn long before his abrupt ascension to the throne. Now he was impossible! He supposed he did have a faint glimmer of hope while they were still in the limousine, but he could plainly see it was as hopeless as asking a woman to reconsider once she had made up her mind to do anything. “I mean, it’s not like there’s any bloody going back after this you know. The whole country will find you mad. Christ—the whole world for that matter. You won’t survive this politically, Michael. You simply cannot do this.”

Glaring sidelong and pretending to only half-hear his friend’s concern, Michael did seriously contemplate what he was about to do. Billings was a longtime friend and ally, brave and honest, a tough and weathered bastard—and a sharp man above all other things. If Billings felt there was reason to be this concerned after all they had been through together, then there was certainly plenty that could go wrong. He first suspected Billings was merely nervous at the idea of getting ready to denounce the one who gave him his title. Or rather, cleared the way for his title. He supposed his nervousness was just, but he knew there was much more to it than that. Billings was never as shallow as his posturing. Billings knew, as he supposed they all did by now, the old ways were returning. Great machines, computers, even robots and cybernetics could do

nothing to stop what they were about to set in motion. Faith would have to carry their standard now. They were all mad. All of them.

Oddly, but not surprisingly to Michael, there had been little to no traffic. He had worked with political leadership ensuring capital would be under curfew for the next several days due to matters of national security. The limousine carried them to the front security gates of the palace, but there was no one to be found. No guards. No cars. No service personnel. The gate was swung open wide—the normally busy intersection empty. Not a single person could be found on the streets and not a shop was left open. Everything had been boarded up with plywood as if expecting... Downtown London looked as if it were Miami preparing for a hurricane.

Michael could feel the electricity in the air; the feeling one gets on the edge of a brewing storm. It was enough to make the hair stand on the back of his neck as the limousine came to a stop at the gate of the most famous address in all of the England: London SW1A 1AA, England. Michael's father opened his door, getting out first, scanning the streets for hidden threats and finding them abandoned. A cold evening breeze whipped at the tops of his short-cut silvery-white hair, knocking most of it out of place as he held the door for his son. Michael stepped out, sheathed sword in hand, tightening the two-inch-wide leather belt that held it on his left side as he began his stride toward the palace, not waiting for the others. Billings stepped out, frowning at the both of them, nearly having to chase Michael down, while Michael's father brought up the rear—expecting the unexpected.

"Now you're not going to tell us some foolish nonsense about having to do this alone." It was a command really, at least that's the way Billings had intended it. He still wasn't used to having to take commands from Michael, for so long it had been the other way around, but this was a time of great change. And great upheaval. They all knew it. Everyone intentionally not on the streets of London tonight knew it. Even the gathering storm knew. Dark clouds coalesced overhead, threatening neither to rain, nor sleet, but threatening nonetheless.

Again, Michael returned a sidelong glance to Billings to which Billings had become all too accustomed.

"Right then," Billings announced with an obvious vast reserve of sarcasm-in-waiting, "A bloody hero you think you've become. Well, I'll have you know that thing on your side can't protect you from everything."

"I know," Michael replied flatly, sounding a lot like a man trying to convince himself of the sort. It was only a tool—as was he. *For who and what* were the biggest question in his thoughts; he assumed he knew the why.

Sighing and frowning deeply, Billings resigned himself, following Michael and his father into the unguarded and open palace.

Now inside the famed place of gild and pearl, it was easy to see where he needed to go. The whole interior lay in darkness, save the dim reflection of candlelight off the extravagant gold leaf of the palace walls.

"This way," Michael said, gesturing with a directional nod. He caught himself reaching into his jerkin for the weapon he used to carry—his custom .40 caliber Sig Sauer® P226. Old habit, he supposed, dismissing the thought that his Sig Sauer® would prove any use against this foe. Frowning at the thought, his right hand fell upon the hilt of a weapon ancient beyond imagination. Candlelight danced first off his coat of arms, then his eyes, as he felt the warmth and energy of the immortal weapon in his grip as it glowed for him even sheathed.

Michael wore neither of the traditional coat of arms of an English and Scottish Monarch. He had refused to wear the traditional heraldic beast and the Red Dragon of his enemy. When asked, he would never say why. Instead, he had chosen a simple cup from the house of his wife, Elise, and a pewter Celtic cross for his own. His Celtic cross was embroidered in pewter against diagonally opposing white background panels while the cup of his wife's sigil was embroidered in burnished rust and gold against diagonally opposing patriot-blue and blood-red background panels. Many had questioned his decision to dress in such attire, and more had questioned the need for a sword, but they did not question his ascension to the throne. Michael appeared to have all the necessary support from all over the realm, politically and militarily. No one had even heard from the old ruling house, save the letter relinquishing the throne to Michael's challenge. Old royalty had gone into seclusion and no one, not even the media, nor his staff, knew precisely where they had all gone.

The candlelight flickering with increasing urgency, Michael felt his breathing slow, his heart race, as his awareness of Billings and even his father faded. He had to focus on what mattered.

Shadows of candlelight, like tall waves off the Atlantic, lapped at them from the gilded walls as they approached the inner chambers of the throne room. The flames themselves tilted as if pressed by an unseen hand, toward Michael from all directions. Hackles stood out straight on every portion of their bodies as they crossed the great circular seal of a serpentine Dragon in the floor at the threshold of the entryway into the old King's throne room. The double doors were left agape, facing inward, as if guests were expected. There sat, on a great throne of gold, about a wide dais of white inlaid tiles, a young man, not so much older than Michael. Though dressed in simple brown slacks and a white long-sleeve executive shirt, his aristocratic gaze and well-kept features echoed his noble rearing. Dozens of candles of every shape and color littered the two scribe tables on either side of the room, as well as the white tiled floor, every other tile inlaid with a red dragon or a gold heraldic beast. The

flickering light barely shown on the chest he revealed with a few buttons left open at the top, nor did it reveal the depth of his brown eyes, nor the storm raging beneath them.

An unabated, seething sensation of evil and contempt swept over them, not evil like that of being in the same room with a serial killer, nor contempt like that of a rapist, but something unattainable by mortals. Michael only thought he knew what evil was, and having met this man some years earlier; he couldn't believe the transformation into...whatever this was now before him. This was much different, much more than something he could control with the rule of law. This was immeasurable hatred in front of him—an ancient and unsettled debt.

Smoothly standing about the gilded throne with heraldic beasts about the feet and crown, the former monarch sent Billings and Michael Sr. flailing up against the wall outside his chamber, slamming the doors shut behind them with but a slight gesture of his hand.

Slowly closing the distance between them, "I suppose it's up to us now." Harold's voice was icy and guttural—unnatural, and not his own. Michael had never heard him speak like that before. He wanted to speak. He wanted to scream, but the fear of being in the presence of this...thing was overwhelming, and the only thought running through his mind was to *strike*. Strike while he still could—while he still breathed. Throbbing at his side, the immortal weapon at his side threatened to sear its Gordon Russell-designed scabbard. The pommel pulsed in the palm of his right hand, threatening to brand him with its ancient inscription and design.

"It was always going to come down to us." Michael's struggle to hide his fear amused the former monarch—a kind of sweet justice if Harold could only savor it.

Laughing boldly, he paced about Michael, never staying in one place to let the terror settle. Michael was his, and he would make the arrogant young fool pay for his lack of vision. "What could you have hoped to accomplish by coming *here*?!! If you knew enough to bring that," he stared at Michael's side, eyes focusing on the *Sword of Kings*, "then you must know you are already too *late*; you cannot kill me now."

"I came," Michael said, mustering every shred of emotional strength and determination in his body, "...to do what I must. And, *you* should already know that." Slowly, Michael began to move in sync with the former monarch about the white tiles of the throne room. His right hand begged to release the sword from its prison, wanted to hear its ancient song. Tapping his fingers rhythmically on its hilt and grip, as he countered the former monarch's moves about the white tiles, occasionally glancing down at the golden heraldic beasts, he recalled portions of the prophecy: The body of a leopard, the feet of a bear,

the mouth of a lion, and the dragon gave him his power, his seat, and his great authority.

Suddenly Harold stopped his pacing, rather choosing to walk back to his throne where he took his seat luxuriously, as if to ignore or defuse the threat Michael posed. Tilting his head and gazing past Michael, the former monarch laughed. "You know, it's funny..." he sighed, taking a deep breath, then slowly letting it back out as if taking a drag from a favorite cigarette, "...when I first realized it, I was angry." A slight pause and subtle laugh as he continued, "Why me? I thought to myself. I guess you could say I became madder than Hell about it." Michael swallowed at the not-so-cute pun made in incredibly *bad* taste. "But, it isn't *so* bad I suppose. You know the power is quite intoxicating. I've never felt so..." Harold paused again, looking pitifully at Michael as if he just realized a great injustice. "Well, I suppose *you'll* never know."

Trying to see beyond the veil and into the heart of someone he once knew, Michael wanted another way out, "It's never too late, at least not for yourself. You're a child of fate, but I believe we all have a choice. We always have our free will. You *do* have a choice."

"I did." It was a simple resignation, though nonetheless complete. A last moment—and in it, the death of all things he once loved.

Calling on his years of experience and killer instincts, Michael drew his immortal weapon without hesitating the cruelty required to perform this most necessary task. Its song released, and the voices of all the true kings before him, speaking to his heart, giving him the strength to do what he must. A sudden rush of wind blew out all the candles and all their light as the *Sword of Kings* shone like a molten hot star in the darkness of the void just created. Michael rushed up the dais to where he last saw Harold before the candlelight was extinguished—the *Sword of Kings* now lighting his way.

Just as the light of his sword shone on Harold's face, he felt crystal, silver, and gilded candle holders from all around the chamber bashing about his back, neck and skull as Michael tried to reposition himself without losing sight of Harold. Now bleeding about the neck and shoulders from his wounds, Michael cleared his thoughts, using his experience in the field to douse the pain like water to fire.

Rushing Harold in the darkness of his throne room, Michael felt the powerful, unseen hands trying to drive him backward. Thrusting the *Sword of Kings* forward, it cut through those unseen forces, allowing him to close the distance between himself and Harold—close enough for him to strike at last as he spun about the former monarch, shifting his sword's position.

Splitting the Harold's skull with surgical precision, cleaving off the back third, Michael watched the severed piece roll violently about the bloodstained tiles as Harold's body slumped to the floor in a dead heap.

Erupting with guttural, beastly howls, the chamber's foundation split at the epicenter of the dais in a great quake that rocked the keep. Tiles splintered and cracked, falling into a great deep fissure forming in the floor of the chamber. Harold's lifeless body gravitated to the forming crack in the floor at the base of the dais, while every hair on Michael's body stood on end—electrified. Hell unleashed.

Blood slowly ran down the fuller of Michael's blade; it's ancient magic succumbing to the blood of the most vile, as its metal grew cold and its light flickered and winked out of existence. For a brief moment, Michael stared at the runes running down the length of the unearthly metal; runes that once danced with a magical life of their own now lay still and faded as if the blood was corrosive enough to permanently tarnish even the oldest of blades.

Sheathing his bloody blade, Michael quickly turned back to the double doors that leapt open just as he neared. Pivoting back to Harold, Michael wanted to be certain his stroke had hit home. Harold's body still lay in a lifeless heap, wanting to fall into the open fissure. Michael turned again to the double doors, gathering Billings and his father, pausing only to briefly check their pulse, then throwing his father over his shoulder like a great sack, while dragging Billings indignantly behind by the collar of his €3,000 suit. Out of the corner of his eye, he felt he saw someone else in the chamber kneeling over Harold's body—a beautiful female silhouette with long, flowing hair, buxom—and wings.

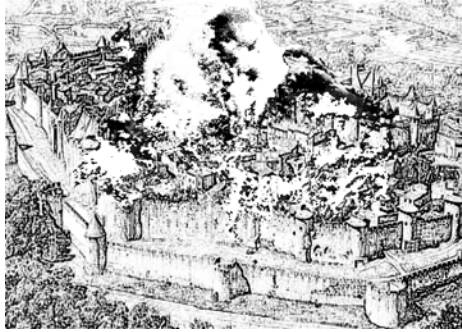
Outside, everywhere there was fire and destruction. Michael's limousine lay upside down in a burning heap of twisted metal—his driver's body in pieces everywhere. Even though Michael had seen terrible things from his experiences in the field, he still had to close his eyes and look away from the horrific site before him.

He *had* to get them out of there. Scanning the immediate area, Michael's eyes fell on an abandoned, faded red Audi® A4, stretched across another fissure in the road, its front tires resting on the curb. Someone must have left it where it was, choosing instead to run from the devastating quake that appeared to decapitate at least some of downtown London. Trying not to look at the destruction he had wrought on his ancient and beloved city, he set down his father and let go of Billings to try and free the A4 from its precarious position. Turning his back to the driver's door, and bursting the glass with a powerful backstroke of his elbow, Michael hastily thrust Billings and his father into the back seat of the Audi®. Frowning, he realized a big problem—no keys. Kneeling at the foot of the driver's seat, he called on his experience as a field agent and operative in the Special Reconnaissance Regiment to hot-wire the abandoned vehicle. Hammering the gas pedal nearly through the floorboard and leaving tread marks all over the pavement, Michael sped through the

broken and empty streets of London as the skies began to darken even more—the sun going black as it set on the western horizon. The storm had only just begun, unleashed by the *Sword of Kings* and the fatal wound he had dealt.



Part 2: The Master Plan Invoked



Chapter 2: The Void

(The Void, Time Neutral)



Time was held stationless here, void of both pattern and sequence. An endless black abyss provided the backdrop for the asteroids floating through the Never. Here were the remnants of something—someplace—broken to dust a long time ago. Not quite like unto space, not all of the laws of physics applied *here*. The hollow light cast into the midst seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere, providing barely enough light to see the immense rocky bodies as they came close. Here, in the vacuum, there should have been no sound, yet there were the stark haunting echoes of the spirits lost here between what is, what was, and what should be. These tormented souls were condemned to this place, but it was *their* domain after-all. There were no living things here; no life form most beings would comprehend. Such was the veiled place of today's most important gathering.

A barely noticeable ripple in the void appeared over one of the larger rocks, forming a clear dome just large enough for a couple of tall men to move unhindered. Another ripple pumped fresh air inside the newly-formed atmospheric bubble, accompanied by a brilliant flash of the silvery-blue light of a *Portal* as Damon arrived first. Strikingly young and handsome, bold and confident, yet even he seemed a little uneasy at first; a little uncertain, as if... Yet, only an instant later, a look of complete clarity settled in his veteran black pools, vanquishing all doubt. Damon knew. His shoulder-length raven hair flowed like his smoky, herringbone charcoal and silver robes. Damon cast back his hood, running his fingers through his hair, knowing the precise moment—if time were even relevant here. His old acquaintance was somewhere about. After ages of dealing with the man, he could almost sense his presence and the terror that followed.



(Kaleion, Present Day)

The slender, unnaturally handsome, thin man of just over average height in flowing, almost liquid, grey robes of gold and silver embroidery tsk'd his majesty with his right index finger only inches from his face. Royalty or not, beautiful gilded crown or not, Kellen had him right where Kellen wanted him and he knew it. His army, his castle, and his life in ruins at the hands of Kellen, all he could do was...

"I surrender," King Argon said, praying internally, but knowing Kellen's reputation of no quarter better than that.

"*Where is it*," Kellen asked angrily, shaking his fist in the King's face, causing his grey robes to ripple in response to his hate.

King Argon knew the only thing that would bring someone like Kellen here looking for him. He swore he'd die before giving it up, but now that the moment was here, he'd changed his mind...in a hurry. His wife had been the only one to ever use it in the last thousand years, but she lay dead and bleeding on his cream marble floors, split in half by Kellen's lightning.

"I'll take you to it," The King offered, carefully getting up, examining Kellen's watchful gaze that never faltered away from him.

King Argon didn't move *too* quickly, not wanting to feel or experience Kellen's wrath any further. Walking through his magic-blistered corridors, avoiding rubble along the way, he showed Kellen to his suite. Walking over to a dark-stained bookcase that seemed attached to the stone wall, he pushed at the left side of the bookcase revealing a secret swivel-door leading to a hidden room on the other side of the stone wall. Inside he found all four walls lined with bookshelves filled with books from floor to ceiling—all of them incredibly old. Taking Kellen to the far-right side of the bookshelf, deep in the northwest corner of the room, he showed Kellen a small plain silver rod with no markings of any kind, and a pair of handcuffs with digital readouts. "I don't know how they work," the King stammered, "...but my wife did. I found them next to this." The King pointed to a book in a version of Latin he'd never before seen. He was familiar with Earth's variant and his own homeworld's variant, but this was different. He flipped through the pages to the index, "Hmmm," Kellen groaned. "You get to live *today*, your majesty," Kellen reviled, though withdrawing with what he'd come for.

Blasting a massive hole through the wall with a ball of lightning, Kellen stepped through the collapsing hole of debris, his spherical shield protecting him as the debris sealed off the room where the King remained. He

said the King got to live for today, and it would take about twenty-four hours before the King would run out of oxygen. Tossing another volley of massive lightning balls behind him as he walked out, he ensured no one would be saving the King as his castle began collapsing in all around the royal bloodline.

Tossing his newfound treasure into a small black velvet bag, seemingly far too small to accommodate any of the three items alone let alone together, Kellen formed a *Portal* with a thought just in front of him walking through to the Void on the other side.



(The Void, Time Neutral)

Damon turned to face the brilliant sunburst of a disturbance in the air that quickly became Kellen. The two tall, handsome, and lethal archmage stood toe-to-toe before one another once again, for the first time in years, and every Kingdom shook to their core. Damon's smoky charcoal robes, dressed in silver elegant scrollwork and seams, danced about his wrists and arms as he began to cast something extraordinarily shrewd, crafty, and powerful. Black and silver stoles running down the length of his formal mage robes—embossed in silver with invocation runes, shifted with Damon's motions as he masterfully wove the many complex components together with his precise monotone chants, creating a swirling, shifting mass of webs overhead, producing a dome which swallowed the atmospheric bubble and them with it. The new dome pulsed with a life of its own, shifting from matte black to a brilliant gold, to blood-red. It appeared, from the inside, like a giant web with the colors moving through the pattern itself.

Kellen lowered his hood deliberately as he spoke first in a soft but certain voice of a madman in an accent seemingly from nowhere and everywhere, "Once again, Damon, you impress me with new spells." Kellen's green eyes sparkled like dark emeralds against the backdrop of the dimly lit distorted shell. His voice was timeless—a myriad of places and periods in time. Though, Kellen wasn't really impressed. He could prove diplomatic when the occasion called for it and his relationship with Damon was...complicated. Given the many years in absentia between them, he thought it prudent to show caution when dealing with this dangerous man of Basrat.

"Good to see you again, Kellen." Damon's voice was that of a seasoned and far too dangerous young man, dedicated to an agenda—not necessarily of his own making. Damon observed his old friend carefully, examining him. For what? Kellen did not know, but it *did* bother him.

Physically, Damon was far superior to Kellen—much larger, muscular even, but in their field, that was largely irrelevant. It mattered to Damon for some odd reason. He was always strange that way—always concerned about the physical. Yet this incessant observation on Damon’s part was beginning to rattle—even unnerve—him. Kellen needed to say or do something to get Damon’s eyes off him.

“Where did you learn this one?” Kellen pointed upward to the *Distorting Web*. He was intrigued by Damon’s new spell, which meant it was time to trade. Kellen was often a source of ancient and unpublished spells for Damon. Damon, on the other hand, was the source of new, original, and risky spells for Kellen. Some, Kellen never dared to cast, and Kellen was thought by many to be without any restraint whatsoever. He was, after all, the mage who destroyed an entire city by casting the same spell fifty times, delayed such that all fifty went off simultaneously. A highly unconventional and risky method of casting, but it proved utterly destructive in the conflagration he had made. Thousands died at Kellen’s hands that day, but the reputation it afforded him going forward was...worthwhile.

Damon smirked, whether or not it was from knowing how much discomfort he had just caused Kellen was uncertain. Damon’s voice was careful and calculated as he answered his old friend, “Her name is Kylyn. She’s a cave elf. It is called, ‘*The Distorting Web*.’ It’s designed to both scramble and encrypt conversations as well as keep out prying eyes. Our conversation is safe.” Damon smiled again as if there was something he was intentionally omitting. Kellen pretended not to notice, “Oh, a new one. The girl, of course. You have not had an elf since Dallia. Why have I not heard about this one?” Kellen had made too much of a show of the girl and the *Distorting Web*. Kellen was afraid, and Damon was picking up on those fears ever observantly. Damon was finally beginning to learn how to play Kellen, though it had taken centuries.

“I’m afraid we don’t have much time for pleasantries,” Damon said, “Evanyil’s plans and mine are now in sync with one another, and we’ve begun to act on them.”

“I want to meet with Evanyil. I think hearing her plans from her lips will help me understand a great deal.” Kellen failed to even mention Damon’s plans, because he felt like he already knew it. Kellen’s ambiguity was intended to test Damon’s reaction. Kellen could, after all, play Damon just as well.

“You don’t trust me?” It wasn’t really a question from Damon.

“It’s not that, Damon, and you know it,” Kellen scolded—if carefully so. “As I understand her plans, it puts us all at risk of a fate far worse than death. If I’m going to take those kinds of risks, I want to hear it directly from the horse’s mouth—so to speak.”

Damon frowned, thinking of all the times he'd come to save his friend Kellen, and all the times Kellen had done so in return. He thought they were beyond all this gamesmanship. Trust was fragile between them, but their friendship wasn't.

"Fine," Damon replied, knowing it wasn't. One word responses from Damon were almost never a good thing. *Would Kellen be able to piece it together*, Damon wondered. *That could be dangerous*. He needed to keep his plans close to the vest—compartmentalized for everyone's safety. "At least do me the favor of verifying what she tells you with me. I wouldn't want her playing us against one another, and believe me she'd do it if it served her."

"Agreed." That's what he truly appreciated about Damon. He wasn't an unreasonable person to deal with. You just had to show a measure of respect and latitude with him. Some measure of rationale always worked with him, because for the most part Damon was a rational actor. If you disrespected Damon, the results could be very...*bad*.

Snapping out of his momentary thoughts, Kellen continued, "When do we move on Evanyil's problem?"

"Soon," Damon smirked. "Very soon."

"We will go in small numbers," Kellen added, burnishing his hands, one against the other, with the greatest of glee. "But the power contained in those few..." Kellen paused, remembering, "I might be getting senile in my old age, but I think I have not seen this much fun since the Halls of Aaramus." His smile broadened with that reference, as it did over Damon's face as well. Kellen paused, looking at him. It was good to see him set aside his agenda long enough to smile. Damon always took things so seriously that he often forgot to have fun. "I must go now. There are many old acquaintances that I must visit." Kellen had begun to walk away from Damon, but suddenly turned back to his old friend with a broad smile, "Do you think they will remember me, Day?" With that and a sadistic laugh, he vanished with a brilliant shaft of white-hot light. A few bolts of electricity crackled on the surface of the rock where he just stood. Tiny shards of lightning remained active for a short while, dancing to and fro, chasing Kellen's exit. Damon sat down, pondering Kellen's words. A few lonely moments passed; those moments seemed like hours as the only thing to accompany him were the odd sounds made by the shell he had invoked, and his thoughts—the sound of the screaming souls were blocked out by the *Distorting Web*.

Suddenly he felt the silky tenderness of a woman's hand running through his shoulder length raven hair. Damon was not startled, nor surprised, by her silent appearance behind him, even though she was 'the enemy.' "It's been a long time, Illirian" the tone in his voice expressed a calmed concern.

"Yes, it has. Am I on time?" Illirian's voice was sweet and sensual, her scent intoxicating, her beauty lethal. Damon could not help but immediately take notice of her, as she sexily walked around him, *or around for him*, in a scandalously short white summer dress. Erotically, it revealed creamy thighs, and much more, as her right leg pushed open the deep slit running down the right center of the dress's scandalous pleats, only stopped by a delicate and very loosely tied sash just below her stomach. Made from some enchanted diaphanous white silk, the material scintillated as it revealed perfect, seductive flesh everywhere. Red-gold hair spilled down her backless dress in semi-liquid waves, glittering magically when caught by the lighting of the webbed shell. She was simply nothing less than stunning.

"You were always right on time." He felt her settle down behind him, stroking his hair and caressing the back of his neck.

"How can I help you, Darling? Your message left quite a bit to the imagination. It sounded almost like...an invitation."

"I think I'm in trouble this time, Illirian."

"Well that's certainly nothing new," Illirian laughed, only half-mocking.

"You know about my plans with Kellen?"

Illirian answered with silence, rising to sensually walk around to face him. Her smile was dangerous and erotic. He was helpless. Any man would have been. It did not help that his weakness for women was as legendary as his adventures, but this woman could break any man's will. Then again, she was no mere woman.

Damon watched her every movement, her diaphanous dress barely clinging to the edge of her supple breasts, revealing silken inner thighs as she lowered herself before him. Straddling his lap, playfully, teasingly rocking her body against his, Illirian proved as unpredictable as he. It was hard to care when all he could think about at the moment was sex, and looking down at a dress that barely covered only small portions of her breasts did little to help free himself from the prison of his very intimate thoughts of Illirian.

Illirian was very dangerous, even without considering her extraordinary powers. For several minutes, they stared at each other's bodies and into each other's eyes, wondering, until the moment came that signified their desperate need to kiss one another. Casting his hesitation to the void all around them, Damon leaned into her, caressing her through her sensual dress as he gently touched her moist lips with his own, softly kissing her for the first time in forever. Half expecting the end of Creation at their act—he *knew* their feelings were forbidden—but he could not stop wanting her nor thinking of her. It was a very dangerous game they played. Each time it went just a little further, both fearing where it would finish. Yet the fear was, as the passionate

foreplay, exhilarating! It drove them recklessly into forbidden regions with haste and abandon as their kissing intensified to the point of boiling over into something uncontrollable.

He could not help but wonder if she were the only thing he desired that was truly good.

"You know what their reaction will be?" He could barely force the words out past the distractions of her caress.

"Yes," she moaned, feeling his fingers gently caressing her thighs—feeling her bare flesh grow warmer and warmer under the excitement of his touch.

"Do you have any sage words of advice?"

"Don't do it," she said as her eyes shifted in that sweet, innocent way she always used. For an instant, he couldn't tell if 'don't do it' applied to his physical intentions with her or his Master Plan. The look in her eyes seemed inappropriate given the fact that the only thoughts going through her mind, at this moment, were anything *but* innocent.

"I have made promises that must be kept," he whispered sensually in her left ear.

"Oh God, Damon," she sighed. "How do you get yourself into these situations?" She seemed almost resigned in her efforts to keep him out of trouble. After all, she had to. Damon was far too important to the bigger equation. She had to do everything possible, but discretely so, to ensure he met his destiny and she hers. She was playing God, but then that was nothing new. Damon was certainly no child to be watched over; he could take care of himself with even the most dangerous of enemies. Only twice in their past did she truly have to intervene, for which he was appreciative only after venting about his masculinity being violated by her constant meddling. In the end, though, she supposed she was accepted as an ally of a sort. That only left the question: Was she an ally, or was she merely trying to clear her conscience by thinking of herself in such a way? She knew his fate, as well as the others', but still she did more than merely pull him from the fire; she had made sure he had power—lots of power. And, even at times, she wished she had not, but what was done was done. *Spilled milk*, she thought to herself. *No turning back now.*

"I'm serious. I need your advice," Damon paused for an instant, wondering what was going on in that pretty head of hers. Rare were the moments where Illirian appeared weak in thought. "What I'm planning will not be received well."

"That depends on who you ask," she whispered into his ear. "The game must go on, but I have to go now. I don't know if I can stop myself if I stay any longer." With that, she returned his soft kiss and vanished before him. No lightning, no thunderclap. Simple elegance was always more her style. Her

only remnant was her scent, the impression of her body in his lap, along with his physical burning and palpable need for her.



Illirian appeared on the outskirts of the Crystal Keep, as usual. She hated materializing close to this place; to say that it was dangerous was a huge understatement, but old habits died hard. She realized her fortune not to have materialized inside of a wall, or staircase, or worse. Set on a vast white marble floor as far as the eye could see, the Crystal Keep was a miracle of architectural character—a brilliantly faceted crystal and sapphire gem set on a sea of white, magnificently crafted from diamond-embossed crystal and extraordinarily rare blue ivory. Yet dread still welled in her every time she was summoned here. Illirian supposed she *could* risk casting to get to the front of the castle, but it was simply best not to cast until you were ready to leave. Besides, they could stand to wait on her for a change. Grudgingly adjusting the regal white, grey, and gold robes of her station, she pressed toward the Crystal Keep, ignoring the near whiteout conditions to focus her thoughts on the war that would deliver her message.



Stark, though mastercrafted, columns of blue ivory sprung outward from the chamber's facade, rising what appeared at least forty cubits, spanning the length of the huge chamber, forming elegant archways, low and high, while crisscrossing across the immense vaulted ceiling. A mastercrafted oak table span nearly the entire length of the room—nearly one hundred cubits in all. Scores of candelabras flooded the room with light, as did the whiteout conditions visible through one side of the hall, made almost entirely of cathedral windows spanning the height of the wall in stacked pairs. There stood as many chairs as one would care to take the time to count, but only eight were occupied at one end of the table—a huge hearth burned brilliantly behind them. The man at the end spoke out in a voice of harnessed thunder, "Once again, Illirian's credibility comes into doubt." His voice boomed through the chamber, but the bright aura about him masked his features making them hard to discern—save that of his immeasurable age.

The others around the table were openly visible, and all beautiful to behold. In all, there were four men and three women, plus the one gentleman at the end—the Chairman. The men sat to one side their backs to the cathedral windows, the women to the opposing side. They were dressed in differing

attire: some white and gold, some grey and red, and some black and silver. Yet all appeared very stately, prominent people of wealth.

"Illirian's credibility is not at issue. She is merely influenced by him because you have ordered her to watch him so closely—to guide him to his 'natural' end as you instructed. She cannot operate in such proximity to him without her influencing him and him her. Damon has proven over the years to be a very influential man. He has learned well the art of manipulation, and now he seeks to use it on the very woman who taught it to him," the women, closest to the fire, scolded the Chairman—if carefully so. Though some in the room were uncertain the target of her anger. The woman's radiant hair and brilliant eyes were like the purest gold, shimmering in the overwhelming light of the whiteout conditions. She appeared the youngest and most beautiful of the women in attendance, examining each of the others closely after her statement, ready to pounce on those who dare offer a differing opinion.

"I did not order her. I chose her because she was the only choice to be made. That man trusts no one, certainly not any of us. But Illirian, he trusts for reasons you do not understand."

"However you word it, you forced Illirian make friends with the enemy then complain about how close she is to him. It sounds to me that Illirian has done what you asked, to a fair degree of excellence, rather than failing miserably as you would have us believe through your spin on the facts." This time, the others watched intently, expecting judgment to be swift. Yet, a few tense moments passed in uncomfortable silence. He knew it useless—arguing the failure of a woman with another woman.

* * * *

A longer walk than usual, this time, Illirian noticed. She stood at the foot of the enormous studded oak doors to the Crystal Keep. The main doors themselves spanned some forty cubits into the air. They opened for her without hesitation, making very little noise, and revealed a grand foyer that was never anything short of breathtaking. There were no servants to greet her this time, so she walked down the foyer and took a right toward the grand conference hall. There, they would be waiting for her, and she knew keeping them waiting much longer would be dangerous—even for her.

As she approached the closed oak doors leading to the meeting hall, she waited. A few brief moments passed when suddenly the doors opened—on their own. She was greeted by a myriad of lights, created by more stained glass, candelabras, and a single gatehouse-sized fireplace. Everyone was visible, save the Chairman at the end, who spoke first, "What news do you bring us, Illirian Starfire, Ruler of Rod of the Nine, Watcher of the Runes of Fate?"

Illirian paused only for a second then said, "I believe Damon to be on the verge of what we feared was not possible."

Muttering erupted from both sides of the table. Illirian couldn't quite make any of it out, but she knew what they were thinking; that it would not be long now.

"Be silent," the Chairman's thunderous voice commanded in deafening and fateful tones. After the echoes of his command had chased the separate conversations from the hall, the chamber fell silent again. Tense and uneasy they all sat. Even without being able to see all of his features, one could tell the Chairman was deep in thought. Suddenly he broke the silence with his deliberation, "We have known this moment would come and have prepared for it. The mortals have to fight for themselves. There is no prophecy to guide us along a path never before charted, yet we have planned for this and must not find ourselves in panic," he paused briefly, looking at the others and then back at Illirian. "Illirian. Hear me! You will stay away from Damon henceforth. His path is set—his destruction certain—his justice purpose-built. You will perish, and the remainder of your immortality will be spent in torment if you continue your little personal tête-à-tête with this man. He is lost! Do not let him influence you any further. I fear you are..." He hesitated to say it, but he didn't have to. He had already said enough to make Illirian's blood boil.

Shock marred Illirian's lovely face; her self-control vanquished, "You *arrogant, self-important, pompous bastard!* How dare *you* speak to *me* like... I was a member of this council when you were but lost in the wilderness. You will not dare to speak to me in such a manner ever again! Do you understand me?" Outrage consumed her, but caution began to creep in as well. This was the Chairman, and there was a chain of command—even for her! She'd made her point quite ferociously. Her body flooded with arcane as she prepared herself—for what, she didn't know. "Oh, it doesn't surprise me, coming from you, but just to set the record straight: I can handle him. Nevertheless, we should have better things to do than argue amongst ourselves." Icy-fingered silence crept in, again. Illirian loved getting the upper hand on the council, and she could feel it palpable within her grasp as the silence held everyone captive in introspection. She knew she had given him a satisfactory thrashing and hoped he would not snap back at her from his seat of great authority. She would have to show herself more mature than they. "I will, of course, do as you suggest," noting to herself he hadn't suggested. "But isn't he—as you said—too valuable?" She had no intention of doing such a thing, of course. She could not allow Damon to walk his course alone. Doing so had consequences beyond measure, and with her own immortality at risk, she wasn't about to let fate guide Damon unaided. *Better to fail through action than inaction*, she accepted internally. Damon needed subtle guidance to go where he must, but guidance

only from her. No one else could ever handle or guide him the way she could. She had spent far too much time building the bridges between them to simply let them fall to ashes, while Damon wandered around aimlessly and the future of Creation itself hung on the edge of ruin. No, she would have to work more subtly than ever before, but work she would, and no one could ever convince her otherwise. Ever.

"You may go now, Illirian. May the Light forever shelter you from darkness and illuminate your path," the Chairman waved her off with the back of his hand, dismissing her as if she were a small child. Illirian smoldered, her eyes burned hot like well-stoked coals, but she bowed nonetheless, though a bit shallow, shifting her heated eyes slightly to the left and back to the right. Turning slowly, Illirian walked away, as a myriad of distinct conversations welled back up before she even made it to the door.



The crashing sound of steel on steel resonated throughout as the men wielded their lethal weapons of battle against one another. Their screams and cries permeated the air.

Breathing laboriously under the protection of his steel helmet, a young man, desperate to find out what had just happened, quickly flashed his blue-grey eyes in search of answers. Desperate to keep his head about his neck, he quickly found himself ducking a hard brute of a swing from a man as thick and as tall as two, thundering hard past him upon his Grey. Using his heels to spur his mount, he spun to change positions and head for higher ground before finding himself the target of the next warrior. Finding it difficult to weave his way through the traffic of blood and blows, he desperately sought answers.

Not knowing where he was, nor the men he fought, he struggled to understand. *How did I get here?* The symbol of a lightning bolt on their breastplates bustled in the back of his mind, as did the voice he heard calling out over the roar of the fighting. Turning his horse to see where the voice came from and spotting a much better place from which to look if he could only get there, Radin sought out the source of the familiar voice.

"My Lord? My Lord? I'm trying to get to you. Hold on. I'm coming." The voice came from nearby. Radin spotted the tall, middle-aged hulk of man, who had lost his helmet—or shunned it for being able to more accurately see where he swung his blade. What was left of his short hair was not all grey and was either cut or worn very close to his skin, much like it had been shaven recently. His full beard, with streaks of grey, was now matted with blood to his face. Blood about his shield, armor, and horse, as well as careening

down the fuller of his long blade, spoke of his deadly acts. Striking his attacker bluntly against his breastplate with his blade, then running it across his body as he spurred his horse onward, the middle-aged man nearly took his combatant's head as his blade collected another toll. Wildly he thrashed his horse side-to-side, swinging his longsword, taking out the enemy wherever they crossed his path, like a moving wall of iron between himself and Radin. "I'm coming, my Lord. Hold on!"

The older man's efforts did not go unnoticed, and he was soon swarmed before he could get to Radin. That may have very well been the intent of the man, to get enough of them off of Radin so that he could escape. Seizing the opportunity, Radin pounded his heels into his mount's firm side, bolting to higher ground. He hoped the middle-aged man would be okay, and felt almost shameful for leaving him behind as if he were a friend, but there was little time to worry about him now. He could not help but feel angry, even tormented by his decision. Radin felt like he should be by his side, helping him, fighting alongside him.

Radin's feelings subsided somewhat as he neared the top of the hill, looking back down on the grassy field of crumbled Rune Stones to see the middle-aged man beating down his attackers in retreat. His regret began to fade, as he surveyed the devastation amidst the beachside Rune Stones of a place he felt...familiar.

Suddenly, the air before him rippled like waves on a pond whisking through an unseen veil, as flashes of lightning chased Radin and his mount through the disturbance with a deafening thunderclap. Abruptly, he found himself lost yet again—his mount gone. He found himself standing amidst a hall of staggered blue and white tiles, every other tile midnight blue and in regal decor with a golden crown. Huge paintings, masterworks all, adorned the walls, while rotund marble columns supported a grand arched cathedral ceiling, which resonated his every breath. Dazed and confused, he scanned about, not wanting to question his arrival nor the power at work. Something about the place tingled in his thoughts as if it should mean something, similar to the thoughts he had had earlier about the brave man who fought to help him. He knew there was a war raging somewhere, but for now, memory was at war with his thoughts.

Turning towards what appeared to be a home library, Radin slowly removed his helmet and gauntlets, revealing shoulder-length auburn hair, blue-grey eyes, and a young, handsome face. His flesh and muscles were chiseled, but the harsh stubble and worrisome look about his face added another generation to his appearance. Making note of his specific location, Radin could not help but be in awe of the majesty and power of this place as he began his journey through the keep. Opposite the great library, and much further away,

was what appeared to be a formal dining hall—though it was hard to tell at such a great distance. A thought struck him as he peered down the great hallway, the lighting was even and smooth, appearing to come from underneath moldings, cabinetry, and from other hidden places, not at all like the flicker of candlelight. Everywhere the indirect lighting was smooth and bright like daylight—not the least bit like flames. *A grand place*, he thought to himself, heading to the entrance. Careful not to become distracted or lost, Radin explored. The feeling of an answer in some unknown form nurtured his confidence in his actions. *There has to be an explanation around here, somewhere*, he reassured himself.

Heading toward the library, cringing at first at the sound made by his boots as they struck the tile flooring, and knowing the noise would only serve to announce his presence to whoever lived here, he decided to press on. Whoever had brought him here already knew his location and was aware of his presence.

Just inside the library, a strong sense of impending danger beat at the doors of his consciousness, warning him. *Where was this place? And what?*

Now inside the library, the colossal, beautifully stained, built-in bookshelves intimidated and impressed. It was odd being able to see the stars outside through such an enormous ceiling above. *How did they shape the glass so, and use it for a ceiling?* He certainly had never seen anything like that before. *Wherever this place was, whatever the palace, it must belong to a King*, he considered. The murals, the tapestries, the thousands of leather and gold gilded first-edition books, and the castle itself must have taken more wealth than he could ever imagine. *So, where am I?* That question he wanted to know more than any other, as he spotted another much smaller chamber toward the back of the library, deciding it as good a place as any to start.

This chamber appeared to be a smaller and more private study, adorned with richly mastercrafted woodwork, area rugs, paintings, and a very large, brooding desk. Some kind of painted blue orb with tan and black markings, suspended on a pedestal at an angle, sat in the far corner of the room. Some strange board with opposing dark and light squares—similar to the floor in the ground foyer—and ornately carved pieces sat on another smaller end table, under yet another strange lamp that failed to flicker as it burned smooth and bright. Curiously, he picked up one of the small wooden pieces off the board, examining it, then placing it back on the board, but in a different spot. The piece looked like a knight mounted upon a horse, and it was originally placed next to a piece that looked something like a round turret.

Behind the desk sat a burgundy leather chair, studded with gold rivets, its back to the wall. Two smaller matching wingback chairs sat in front of the desk on a handsome oval rug. A painting of two lovely very young children—

babes really—hung behind the desk. On the desk itself, sat a portrait of a kind he had never seen before—a likeness of a beautiful strawberry blonde young woman—though definitely not a painting. The likeness of the beautiful young woman sat inside a burnt gold frame embroidered with tiny globes, each made of celestial circles, which enclosed an even smaller orb—seemingly suspended midway between the circles. Radin leaned over the front of the desk, losing himself in the innocence of the young woman’s likeness. She must have been... *What’s this...?* He looked closer and found his thoughts drifting...

*Dimly lit by the chemical reactions given off by the strange underground vegetation, the interior of the city seemed darker, more dangerous, than the outer that butted up against the native plant life of the massive caverns. He paid little attention. This place was very dangerous, especially for a new mage of little experience and power, but he felt the advantage still belonged to him. If someone wanted a fight, he would give them all they **couldn’t** handle.*

Sitting on the steps of the temple, he watched others go by—elves and trollocs alike, even the occasional human, though that was much less common down here. Turning his attention temporarily back to the temple’s entrance, he could see a figure moving in the shadows—definitely female—unquestionably beautiful. Just as quickly as she had appeared, she was gone, perhaps inside. He couldn’t tell.

Sighing, he turned back to face the street, regretting his decision to wait here for Evanyil. What am I doing? I don’t need her, or her even more unstable sister. I’d be better off on my own.

“I think so too.”

The sultry voice of Evanyil was more than enough to make him jump out of his skin right there on the spot. Spinning around, rising to his feet before he knew it, Damon

found himself confronted by the most beautiful woman in all creation. Her satin, yet shimmering, black skin was perfection as was her ageless youth. Her perfect symmetry, glowing violet eyes, shimmering platinum hair to the small of her back, and her stunning breasts turned every head—man, woman, elf—everyone. She appeared not even twenty summers of age. They say first impressions are everything. Damon's first impression of Evanyil in the flesh was... WOW!

(Stirling, Perion, Present Day)

Shaking his head, eerily coming out of another dream, gripping the sweat-soaked sheets balled up in between his white knuckles, Radin inhaled deeply—his chest still heaving. He barely dare open his eyes for fear of finding himself someplace other than his own room.



Chapter 3: Decapitated

(Mediterranean Sea, 25 miles off the coastline of Syria, Earth, Present Day)



aintaining the knife edge, calm, focused, and committed, Michael Anthony Day busied himself, doing inverted—declining—pushups with his feet up against the triple bunk bed compartment of his special ops accommodations aboard USS Virginia, stealthily operating in international waters. The Operational Orders (OPORD) had already come down. The Delta Force and NAVY SEAL Team leads were finalizing the tactical and operational plans in the Intelligence Summary (INTSUM) from the Other Government Agency (OGA) in the next room astern. Colonel Terry Goodwin of the British Special Reconnaissance Regiment casually walked in with lieutenants Thomas Hanson and Acres Manifold trailing behind. Being Terry's right-hand man, and second in command of his unit, Michael should have been in that meeting, and he knew it, but he was trying to keep his killer instincts honed and icy. Terry had worked with him long enough to know Michael's routine, so he made nothing of it, slapping the tactical satellite imagery maps down on the floor where Michael could view them as he continued his inverted pushups.

"This," Terry pointed to a pile of rubble that could barely pass for a four-story building, "...is where we expect him to be." The target, highlighted with a red kill-box, surrounded other buildings in various states of ruin. What else would one expect in the southeastern parts of Raqqa, Syria? The whole country had been ravaged by five years of civil war plus being blasted to bits by allied forces. Sandwiched between the bastard Assad, ISIS, Russia, and the United States, there wasn't much of anything left standing. The incompetence and neglect of the Syrian Government allowed bad U.S. and Western policies to seed, then grow a legion of monsters in the so called, "Islamic State." Throw in some good old-fashioned Russian and U.S. interventionism—uncoordinated of course—and you had yourself a real shitstorm of intolerable conditions. But at least now there was reliable intel, and maybe they could do something with it.

"What's the probability they're giving us he'll actually be there," Michael asked, never breaking from his workout routine.

"They're saying between forty-five and seventy-five percent," Terry replied, adding, "but when I probed about how they got the intel, they wouldn't tell me shit. That's Americans for you, but I suppose if it were one of our human assets we'd probably do the same."

"Helo entry," Michael presumed, already knowing. There was no way to storm Raqqa from the coastline with it being so far inland. They'd get cut to pieces and decapitated before they made it halfway there, special ops units or not.

"Transfer to USS Kidd Destroyer in forty-five minutes for Helo transport."

"I'm guessing we're not telling the Syrian's we're coming," Michael righted himself, stopping his pushup routine as he stood before his friend and Team Lead.

"Would you?"

"FUCK NO!" Michael smiled at Terry, acknowledging his brethren SRR team members with a nod though his blood was still chilling in his veins. There was still a night of heavy killing in front of them. It was 8:00 p.m. local and normally these kinds of opps went down in the pre-dawn hours, but the time of the meeting dictated the assault window this time.

"Back into the sandbox," Terry smiled at his friend-in-brotherhood.

"Roger that," Michael didn't smile, because he didn't find this as fun as Terry did—not quite as gung ho. His brothers-in-arms all said he was too damn serious like that, but Michael was being Michael. Nonetheless, it was his third time operating in the sandbox, and each time the stakes got higher.

A pat on Michael's shoulders from Terry, as he, Acres, and Thomas gave the room to Michael to finish his prep. They knew he liked to get his mind and body right—alone if possible. And when Michael was right, the team was right. They needed all that shit locked down tight because they needed each other at one-hundred percent.

As they left, Michael finished organizing his gear, throwing his PLUGGER into his pack. Next on the list was meditating and praying.

* * * *

(Just outside Raqqa, Syria, Earth, 11:45 p.m. local Syria time, Present Day)

The whipping, thrashing, and chopping sound of the Blackhawk chopper blades felt comfortable against the internal thump of his own heartbeat, and not nearly as loud as what he was used to. They were using the

latest stealth variants, used in the Osama bin Laden raids. Hopefully, they'd have better luck with these than the SEAL's had with theirs that fateful May night in 2011.

Geared up in body armor, night vision goggles, and his favorite MP5, Michael was in the kill zone mentally. Physically they were less than a mile out from the LZ.

The hard part about this was landing far enough out so no one in the meeting, or aware of the meeting, would hear the choppers or warn those ahead. But, they still had to be close enough to secure the kill box without having to go through any more VERY unfriendly territory than absolutely necessary.

The Blackhawk squatted just over the GPS coordinates of the LZ allowing Colonel Terry Goodwin to sling repelling ropes for his men and the Delta Force that were with his team. The SEALs were in the lead chopper, already deploying and fanning out over the goat trails beneath them. Slinging his custom MP5 over his dominant side shoulder, Michael quickly hit the repel ropes, going down first. Twenty-two men in all, including the eight from his unit, Michael gave an acknowledging nod to SEAL Team II Lead Commander Roger Penniston as they fanned out in standard two-by-two formation doing the very dangerous work of progressing toward the heart of the Islamic State in the dead of night on foot. It had become increasingly difficult for Michael not to chuckle internally every time he looked at Penniston now, recalling Mars referring to Commander Penniston as Washington's Driver. Seeing Penniston's graying sideburns and designer stubble marked him a man easily in his upper forties.

Quickly checking his Blue Force Tracker (BFT), identifying his location in relation to the hostiles being reported in real-time from the Globalhawk-streaming telemetry from overhead, Michael stowed the vital field electronics, making note of the two SAWs, one Delta Force—Conan, and one SEAL Team Operator—Ace, now fanning out left and right down the goat trails according to the plan.

It was difficult—here—telling the difference between city and village because everywhere they looked was nothing but bombed-out rubble. It reminded Michael of pictures of Fallujah he'd seen on the Internet just after Bush 43 sent in the Americans and dealt with that bloody insurgency that had paved the ruin-laden-path to this moment. As they closed the distance on the kill box, it looked way worse than anything he'd ever seen from photos of Fallujah. This was Hell on Earth, and Michael wondered how anyone could live here.

The tap and squeeze on his left shoulder told him Terry was right on him, right where he was supposed to be, as they cleared another block of the rubble that was Raqqa, Syria. The designated kill box was in sight, and he could

see the white Toyota trucks they expected to see. Plain, non-descript, and five of them all the exact same year, make and model looking like clones of one another. *Tradecraft*, Michael confirmed internally. If he weren't here, Michael would be very surprised. One didn't waste tradecraft like that on just anybody.

Squatting in place beside Terry, they awaited the 'go' order from Commander Penniston. Observing the kill box and the area outward about one hundred yards in all directions, Michael counted some fifty-odd mujahideen with AK-47s. There had to be at least that many inside the building where the meeting was taking place. That was another good sign, at least in his mind. Twenty-two to one hundred odds, he'd take that any day of the week, especially given the skills and experience in the twenty-one brothers with him. Looking into Terry's combat-focused eyes, Michael hand-signaled the four on the right he wanted. Terry hand-signaled he'd push forward and left to a spot where he could take out another four on the left while putting himself in a safe position to cover Michael if needed.

Over the comm-link in his ear, Michael heard the order come down from Commander Penniston with his men now in position, "I have the count. Three. Two. One. EXECUTE!" The execute command came simultaneously with a closed fist signal Commander Penniston made with his right hand held in the air.

Immediately thereafter, ISIS fighters started dropping like flies to the soft whish of silenced M4s and MP5s but quickly began returning fire as they hid behind rubble wherever they could find cover. The hostiles couldn't see the Operator's muzzle flashes, and didn't have night vision so the ISIS militia was at a severe disadvantage as they continued dwindling in numbers until support came from within the building.

"I've got three Squirters, including a PKM and an RPG, heading into the building to the northwest. Copy?" Michael radioed in the threat.

THWACK! A silenced Barrett® .50 cal sniper rifle nearly split the ISIS fighter, and associated RPG, in half as he tried to take up a high-ground position on the fourth floor of the building to the northwest of the kill box.

"Roger that, Scout," Overwatch was doing his job, though it was a near miss from the SEAL's Overwatch perspective, not to be repeated as he would make adjustments for the wind to get the headshots he sought thereafter. THWACK! Another .50 cal Overwatch sniper round turned another Squirrel's head into a misty blood smear—his PKM falling to the rubble in a clatter.

ISIS fighters returned fire from un-silenced AK-47s and hand grenades exploding in the night, telling everyone their location. Their love of death proved useful in their unabashed, unprotected, and unshielded return fire—making the allied forces headshots an easier task.

Enough of this playing footsie with these assholes, Michael determined, tossing a grenade some twenty yards forward and to his right, ducking behind the safety of a large piece of rubble. **BOOM!** Rubble splintering everywhere as he advanced, firing simultaneously at where his targets had been with his silenced MP5. Catching one that the grenade missed, he scanned for other targets. *Got three, missed one.* **ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK!** The AK-47 rounds whizzed past Michael, chipping off pieces of rubble where he sought cover. Tossing another grenade to where the rounds came from, Michael barely ducked this time. **BOOM!** Michael advanced again, almost simultaneous with the grenade going off, pivoting left and right, searching for the target. A slight movement in the settling dust and he fired, not sure if it was his target or not. The ISIS fighter slumped dead against the rubble, bleeding out. *Don't hesitate*, Michael affirmed in his own mind. He detested shooting at a target he could barely see, but if he hesitated one moment tonight he'd be dead and likely so would a team member, because of him.

The buzz saw sound of the twin M249 SAWs, coming from elevated cross-fire positions, lit up the night sky in straight lines of molten kinetic energy obliterating ISIS fighters trying to charge Penniston's advancing forces.

The kill ratio was good—at least as good as expected, but the ISIS fighters coming out of the building were Hell-bent on killing the forces of the Great Satan, charging with knives, pistols, and machine-guns—whatever weapon they could most easily get. **THWACK!** Another silenced .50 cal sniper round decapitated an ISIS fighter charging Michael and Terry's position as Michael looked up to the Overwatch, giving a thumb's up as he noticed a familiar man coming out of the building with an AK-47, starting to fire on his position in a Death Blossom. *He* was their target. Michael rushed forward to a large chunk of rubble thirty feet in front of him and some thirty feet from the front of what had been a building, ducking just as rounds chipped at the rubble before him. Letting some twenty rounds click off right at his position, Michael pivoted just as the rounds stopped, watching Commander Penniston, one of his SEAL Team members, and what looked like another ISIS fighter behind the middle-aged cleric, jump all over the target as he ran out of ammunition.

Scanning right then left, Michael caught another target on the third level, through his night vision—firing. That target fell forward splitting his head open as he landed head-first into the rubble below.

"CLEAR," Michael called out.

"CLEAR," Terry called out similarly. A chorus of "CLEAR" followed from other Operators.

Michael and Terry rushing forward with Mason, Acres and Thomas, Michael heard Commander Penniston yelling at the man they'd knocked to the

ground and disarmed, “NAME,” Penniston yelled at the middle-aged man in Arabic. “NAME,” Penniston yelled again at him in English this time.

The last remaining ISIS fighter, looking to be maybe mid-thirties, who had jumped on top of the target, rose to his feet.

Quickly aiming his muzzle straight at the mid-thirties ISIS fighter, about twelve feet away from him and to his left, Michael had his finger on the trigger—waiting for him to make the move that would end his life.

In perfect, unbroken English the middle-aged grey-streak-bearded cleric responded, “I am Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. I surrender.”

Commander Penniston seemingly, satisfied at the target’s response, seeing his features matched that of their intended HVT (High-Value Target), motioned Michael to keep his muzzle trained on the last remaining ISIS fighter.

“Eric Clapton. Jeff Beck.” Commander Penniston provided the challenge code to the surviving ISIS Fighter, clearly expecting a coded reply.

“Jimmy Page. The Yardbirds,” the mid-thirties ISIS fighter replied, never taking his eyes of Michael.

“Roger that Trojan. Glad to see you alive,” Commander Penniston offered his hand to what was obviously the mole in al-Baghdadi’s organization. Motioning Michael to muzzle down, Penniston called out over the comm-link, “Overlord, this is Spear actual. Come in.”

“This is Overlord actual, go ahead with your sitrep Spear,” Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) replied, awaiting a mission status report.

“Body Snatch. Body Snatch. We have the package *and Trojan* in UP status, incurred three wounded, one K.I.A. Mars is down.” Commander Penniston provided the status report, visually scanning around for threats through his night vision.

DAMN, Michael hadn’t even noticed Mars was being held up by 8Ball. Mars had given Michael his SEAL call-sign—Scout—like he needed another anyway. SRR members called him Tincup for his love of golf. He didn’t even know how he earned the name Scout. Most likely it was a derogatory term of endearment knowing the Americans. Regardless, he liked Mars—enough to know he earned the call sign because his wife’s favorite book was *MEN are from MARS, WOMEN are from VENUS*, by John Gray.

“Confirmed Spear, we have you EXFIL WITH Package. Total plus two. Proceed to waypoint Charlie to pop smoke. Globalhawk has eyes on, watching your threat six. Move with all possible speed. We can see at least forty hostiles enroute to your position from points Hotel and India.”

“LET’S MOVE!” Penniston ordered.

Michael had already moved to 8Ball saying, “I got Mars.”

“Sure thing, Scout,” 8Ball replied, releasing Mars into Michael’s hands as Michael tossed the two-hundred pound, high-and-tight-cut Mars over

his right shoulder for EXFIL. Terry coming up on his right side, Mason on his left in standard echelon formation as they started moving out of the heart of the Islamic State.

ISIS leadership now decapitated, the War on Terror would enter a new phase as the allies would need to focus on defeating the radicalized ideology of 'The Narrative' rather than trying to kill their way out of the problem with enough bullets.



(Perion, Present Day)

Radiant, rainbow-backlit birds of late spring chirped and fluttered amidst the blooming jasmine and wildflowers dotting the lush green hillsides. Elms, maples, pecans, bradford pears, cherry blossoms, and dogwoods swayed gently with the will of the wind as warmth finally returned to northern lands of the oldest of the Nine Kingdoms. The wind swept its way across the landscape, just stiff enough to disturb the crested banners that draped over the sides and chest of the majestic Grey. Adorning the mount, the crest displayed a King's crown inside an oval ring, caught between two griffins struggling to capture the power of the crown. In the foreground of the crown sat two angels amidst an array of broken arrows and olive branches. In the background, and standing over the crown, was a fiery phoenix, wings spread wide, engulfing the warring griffins. A handsomely crafted hilt of gold stuck out from the well-worn silver scabbard, nestled against the white and red banner. The exterior of the scabbard was embossed with a few unintelligible runes. A leather strap and clip ran across the sword's guard, holding it in place at the beast's side. A travel-worn saddle straddled the faithful mount as he began to graze in his master's absence.

A standard, far older than most, mounted on a sleek metal pole had been driven into the hillside and now rippled wild and free in the stiff breeze. A gold phoenix on a blue background seemed alive and ready to take flight under the power of the wind that held it aloft.

The old mount began to tire, swaying slightly side-to-side, as the dusk brilliantly tinted clouds, leaves, and grass alike in beautiful reds, magentas and orange bursts of sunset. It had been days already and would be much longer still. Yet the Grey stayed.

The birds sang through the moments of dusk. Only a few feet away from the banner and the faithful Grey stood an oval *Portal* in the background, shrinking ever so slightly as time ran to an end. On the other side of the man-sized *Portal* was the heart of absolute darkness. Waiting with worry-laden eyes,

the faithful mount looked down the hill, back to the *Portal* where Iain Longbow had entered some days back. He would wait as long as it took.

* * * *

(Florè Castle, Perion, Present Day)

Just outside the castle walls, Ethan Marshall walked a well-worn dirt path to meet up with friends before heading to work inside Florè Castle. It would be nice to take a break from the hammer and anvil for a while and get back to some time spent with good friends.

Passing a merchant carriage that appeared to be stopping at a makeshift tent set up for selling wares, Ethan continued towards the straw-roofed tavern with long, weathered wooden planked siding that marked the first major protected structure in Florè, though still not inside the castle walls. It was protected because it was the best food in, or outside, the castle walls. Several times the Steward of Florè had tried to recruit the cook to work inside the castle, though never successfully so. His stomach growled, turning over inside, at the smell of fresh buttered bread, eggs, and ham.

Opening the door to the establishment, Ethan quickly scanned inside, not seeing his friend. He was an easy-to-spot sort.

A crushing hand landed on his left shoulder, "Ethan, glad to see you away from the smithy for a change!"

How could such a hulking man sneak about like that? Ethan hadn't heard him approach at all. He needed to have his hearing checked!

"Brigance," he offered in slightly exasperated reply. It wasn't the first time Brigance Fireheart had made a fool of him, and wouldn't be the last. But it was good to have friends that could rip an average man in half with their bare hands. "So, what's the job? You know I don't like leaving the family with raiders roaming the open countryside."

"It's good pay, easy work, and you get to stay within walking distance of your place. Fair enough," he asked his blacksmith friend of many years. Smithing was usually the sort of thing you found the biggest of men doing for a living, but Ethan was just slightly above average, yet his craftsmanship was the best Brigance had seen. The massive broadsword Brigance carried on his left side was Ethan's work, and he loved it. The weight and balance were perfect, and he could cut an armored man in half with it with one blow, and had already done so several times in the past. "Let's get you some breakfast and head on up to the castle to talk with the Steward. I'll fill you in on the way."

"Sounds good, I'm starving," Ethan accepted, carefully side-stepping the intimidating white wolf just inside the door of the establishment.



(Damon's Manor, Kaleion, Present Day)

He was equally tall as Damon and even more muscular, with bushy blonde hair—short-cropped to make for easier maintenance in the field where he no longer spent as much time as he used to. His stark blue eyes were an intense contrast to the black mirrors of Damon, while the contrast between his near chaotic attitude and Damon's logic proved even bigger. Yet they were the best of friends for longer than either could remember—brothers really. More so than Kellen and Damon. Kellen was always just beyond the horizon of total trust for Damon, whereas Goldenbow was squarely inside, and always had been. Goldenbow lazily kicked his left leg to and fro as he sat on the edge of Damon's desk in his private study—a place Damon allowed almost no one.

Goldenbow's palette of colors swung through the entire spectrum of neutral, from the incredibly dull greys of his pants to the soft tans of his belt, to the pale forest green of his vest covering the slightly dirty off-white of his long-sleeve shirt. If you didn't know better, your eyes would walk over him a hundred times before noticing anything remarkable about him, despite his youthful and rugged good looks. Goldenbow liked it that way. It was an absolute necessity for an assassin of his caliber—probably the greatest assassin Damon had ever seen. Goldenbow was a legitimate living legend, and while many would never get a good enough look at his face to ever remember it; his name—whether real or not—was synonymous with a guaranteed kill. Damon had known him for many lifetimes and never knew, or had ever asked, his real name. Everyone only knew him for the golden shortbow he carried everywhere without fail. It was a pure extension of his arm—completely inseparable from Goldenbow, the man.

"So, when's all this going down, Day?" Goldenbow asked, still lazily swinging his leg as he relaxed with a bottle of Damon's best red wine. Nothing but the best for Goldenbow—ever.

"I wish I could tell you."

"That's pretty non-committal for you, Day."

"Sorry, not a matter of trust," he smiled at his longtime friend. "More a matter of not really knowing how these next few critical steps are going to play out. When I get past Phase One, I'll check back with you."

"And you're not going to tell me what's involved with Phase One I suppose..." It came out like a question, but Damon knew otherwise.

"The less you know, the better." Damon paused, genuinely wanting to tell his friend more of his Master Plan, but surviving the Master Plan was more important than bragging about it or sharing it. "For both of our safety."

"Not like you to worry about your safety, our ours for that matter," Goldenbow began his line of thinking aloud, "I mean you've been pretty damn cavalier for the last hundred years or more. What makes you so cautious now?"

"Stakes have been raised," Damon sketched a sword, unlike any either had ever seen, on the paper on his desk before them. "Are you sure you don't want to stay for dinner? You're welcome anytime, you know."

"And listen to more of this hidden-meaning-banter all night. No thanks."

"Very well," Damon countered, putting down the pen. "You're the most lethal person I know, and when I need you, I need you to be prepared to come fast. I need you to come prepared for the biggest threat you or I have ever faced. How's that?"

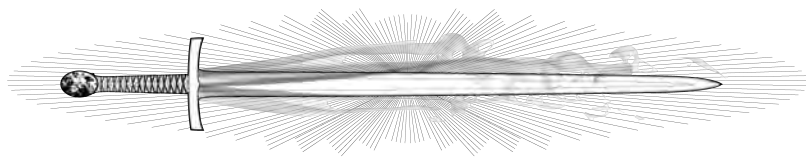
"Boy, I love a challenge!" The smile on Goldenbow's face glowed enough to chase the charcoal-tinted evil gloom of the aura of the Staff of the Invoker just a few feet away as Goldenbow jumped off the desk, pivoting back toward Damon. "You've still got one of my arrowheads, right?"

"Of course!"

"Might be a good idea to start carrying that thing on you at all times."

"Consider it done. I'll signal you when I'm ready, or at the end of Phase One, whichever comes first."

"Cool, Day. You want to..." he didn't have to ask when Goldenbow started getting within touch range, Damon knew. A touch of Damon's left index finger and Goldenbow was gone without a trace.



Chapter 4: A Crucible of Will

(Damon's Manor, Kaleion, Present Day)



hile preferring to do most work in his secret fourth-floor study, today required a great deal of space for Damon to perform the laborious task at hand. He could, of course, manufacture the space required out of nothing, but it was just easier to work within the spacious caverns Dallia had carved out of the bedrock under the foundation of his manor. This was the largest of all the cavern chambers, measuring some four-hundred cubits by nearly a thousand. From the cavern ceiling, Damon appeared merely a dot on the landscape as he worked shirtless with a series of smithy hammers. A great anvil and a blacksmith's fire, burning with stoked amber coals, lay before him.

Invoking *Distorting Web* to mask and encrypt his work from prying eyes, Damon used long tong clamps to maneuver a large ingot of metal, heating it in the fire. It had taken several days to enchant the ingot before beginning this step. All this work was taking its toll. It was rare he ever became truly exhausted, but he was certainly testing his endurance with this artifact. *A challenge finally*, he acidly thought, twisting the metal to heat it evenly. This task was one he had done many dozens of times before, but never with such a complicated artifact as the one he was making now. No doubt this one needed to be far different than all the other artifacts that came before. Twisting the metal ingot again, he assured smooth distributed heating.

Pulling it from the fire, he placed the glowing ingot on the anvil and with firm but careful blows began to form what would become a longsword blade. The glow from his ingot and the forge highlighted ever-so-faint scars about his chest, back, neck, and shoulders. Hours he worked—stretching then folding the metal back on itself again and again. The captured masses, which he had spent the last month accumulating—now exactly one hundred of the most pristine souls he could find in this world and many others, watched him work through the night. Some found a way to sleep on the cavern floor. Others looked at the *Distorting Web* in awe as it encapsulated the entire massive cavern chamber all the way to the ceiling. All had stopped their attempts to escape the swirling transparent blue field, which imprisoned them here, below his keep.

Women, children, and men of all ages huddled in terror at what lay directly beside them. It had been asleep for hours, but still, no one dared speak or utter even a word for fear of waking it.

* * * *

(Some hours later...)

Surely, it's morning by now, Damon wondered. He was well past exhaustion. However, the blade was formed: fuller, tang, and all. He was ready to quench. Using his natural Telekinesis to elevate the blade into the air just in front of its man-sized teeth, Damon cleared his throat loudly to get its attention. "Now if you would be so kind, please," Damon glanced sidelong at Hadron—the great golden beast he'd captured solely for this purpose. Though, captured might not have been the best description since their relationship went way back...

With a scowl, it raised to its feet, standing some eighty cubits tall. Taking a deep breath, it exhaled a very accurate and directed burst of white-hot fire at the blade, suspended in mid-air before it by Damon's Telekinesis. Only an instant was required, and the blade glowed a perfect molten amber as he guided it down into the oil, ensuring the entire blade was straight and pointed due magnetic north, so as not to warp the blade as it quenched in the oil, scattering and spitting forth plumes of sparks and smoke.

Moments later, lifting the blade with Telekinesis, using one of his floating light orbs to examine the blade for defects, Damon sighed with relief, finding none. *Well, that was the easy part. Must rest now.*

Damon collapsed to the cavern floor right where he stood, only a couple of cubits from the razor-sharp, diamond-hard teeth of the Gold Dragon that had helped him. It went back to sleep as well. The huddled masses, still held captive, were left to sit and ponder their fate a while longer. The blade hung in the air only a moment longer, clanging loudly as it landed squarely on the anvil waiting for Damon, obeying his unconscious thoughts.

* * * *

Damon wasn't sure what day it was when he woke, or even what week. Not even bothering to check on his captives, or where Hadron might have gone, he opened a *Portal* to his kitchen stepping through. *Fuck, I'm starving!*

* * * *

After the necessities of his mortal coil had been satisfied, he wanted to return to the cavern, but he needed something from his study first. Knowing exactly where to look and having an organized library helped. He quickly snatched the required spell and blank parchment, opening a *Portal* to the cavern below, walking through. Acknowledging his captives for the first time in forever, he could see they were all still alive, but looked starved and exceptionally weak. Damon knew he didn't have much time until he'd have to start feeding them to keep them alive until he could finish. He unrolled *Damon's Damnation*, setting it on the floor to his left, then set the blank parchment immediately right of it and began gating his thoughts, his imagination, his vision into characters and runes on the blank parchment. He had been building this spell in his mind for months. It need only be documented for what had to come next.

Lifting the blade off the anvil back into the air with his Telekinesis, it slowly twisted, next to the light orb he had used to examine it days before. Flooding his entire body with arcane, Damon held up his right hand, casting first into the prison and dispelling the shield that had held his captives. When nothing appeared to happen, save the dispelling of the shield, he raised his left hand, and a white-hot stream burst into existence from nothing, shooting directly into the center of the blade as it continued to twist in the air. A look to his right confirmed all one hundred living souls were gone with not a trace left. No ashes. No symbols on the ground where they had been. Nothing. Only the slowly turning blade remained, now gleaming with an exceptionally hard edge, sharpened by the souls it now held. *A Crucible of Will*, Damon admired his work while the blade's mirror finish threw the orb's light into every corner of the chamber. It still needed a grip, guard, pommel, and an appropriate scabbard, but now the hard part was done. He also needed a place to hide it from prying eyes until the moment it would be needed. But, for a moment he could truly rest.



Chapter 5: Broken

(Damon's Manor, Kaleion, Present Day)



olling her muscular, nude body toward Damon, letting her scarlet hair spill down over his face in waves of seduction, Victoria knew he was not sleeping, though his eyes were closed and his breathing relaxed.

"What are you thinking, my Love? Tired so soon...?" Nothing jabbed so well as a shot to the ego.

Only one eye opening in playful response, Damon's forehead furrowed—that one eye closing again in mild rebuke.

Frustrated, furrowing herself, Victoria thought he might need some reminding, "Lest you forget so soon, I AM stronger than even you."

That statement proved worthy enough for a rebuke from both eyes. "What would you have me say to that? You should not tell such big lies when smaller ones are much more believable."

"And what would you know about telling lies? I thought you and your *code* would not allow that." She knew him too well after being with him for so long—well, long according to her lifespan, not his. "What's been bothering you so much lately? I know I'm not one of your typical women, but you've always been able to at least make some conversation with me."

He understood her concern and agreed, though there were some thoughts he simply couldn't share. He knew there were things, that if she fully knew, she would not understand. There was simply too much history that didn't include her and too much future that *couldn't*.

A decidedly thoughtful look seemed his best defense. He swore successfully navigating a relationship with a woman a thousand times the feat of his greatest magic. Sometimes he regretted his promise to himself that he would never use magic to maintain the love of a relationship. A brief inward, reflective moment pointed out the obvious flaw to his 'conscience.' "If you knew the full of my thoughts, you'd run."

Sitting straight up, she threatened to get up from the bed in complete frustration, though it was evident in the squinting of her beautiful green eyes and her tone that she didn't *really* want to leave him, "I may not know all your thoughts, but I know you."

Reaching up, caressing her long sun-red strands, slowly letting his fingers touch her cheeks as he dragged them along the way to her lips, he felt his internal struggle whether to encourage her to go and pull her back into his lethal orbit. "I know. Kellen always warns me about keeping people, especially you, close to me when secrecy becomes of greater need. I should listen to him more often. He's right." Pulling her down, gently kissing her, softly caressing her tongue with his, he wanted to tell her everything. He needed a confidante. Colors whirled in his thoughts as they formed into a magnificent lush—though much shorter—body in a seductive dress with flowing brunette hair with starry-blue eyes—*Mira*, he thought before dismissing her with an old but powerful sense of loss. Some voids were not meant to ever be filled again. He wanted to be free to tell someone everything, but his secrets had a way of killing the unintended as well as the intended. *Everyone may perish still*—'twas a comforting thought.

"You know I can't tell you everything," he whispered, resting his head back on the pillows. "There's just a lot happening, and it takes all the concentration I have to keep the planning straight."

A brief glimmer of a memory threatened to drag away her attention, "Were you always like this?"

Cocking his head inquisitively, he blinked at the question. "What do mean?"

"Sooo deliberate. I can just tell; you were not always that way—I mean before we ever met. Were you ever a free spirit?"

Though smiling outwardly and apparently taken by the detail with which she tried to know him, inside he wanted to hide from her. It was as if she wanted to live inside of him at times. But, to truly know Damon was...perilous at best...unimaginable horror at worst. "No," he said not wanting to elaborate on that—instead he resumed slowly caressing her hair. "There were...many *memorable* times... Perhaps someday, I will tell you of how Evanyil and I 'met.'"

"You keep promising," she quipped, gently stroking and caressing his body.

"Well," he defended, "It's a rather long story you see." Squinting, piercing him with her eyes, Victoria begged him to continue with her delicious smile and seductive strokes of his thighs. "I'm certain it is."

"Once I was even less predictable—some might have incorrectly presumed chaotic. I've only managed to keep *that* reputation by becoming excellent at keeping my plans complicated, and in seclusion, such that the execution of my plan appears random. Let's just say that guts only get you so far, and then they'll get you dead. It took me a while to learn that lesson, but I only had to learn it once. What seems many lifetimes ago..."

"You're talking about Banthis, aren't you...?"

It was not quite a look of death, but certainly an icy one. Working his mouth, Damon snapped his head, turning from her, taking some of the covers with him.

Uncomfortable silence crept in as Victoria rose from the bed, covering some of her enticing curves with bedding. "I'm sorry," she murmured, walking out of the bedroom to his darkened study.

It was too late, the memory had been well dredged like preparing the soil for a foundation, much had been uncovered that he thought had been buried a lifetime ago. "Chara," it was only a thought, a memory, but he could not stop himself from muttering that...name! The bitterness of it tainted his lips. Decades, she had been a thorn in his side, so much so, he dedicated every resource, every man, every spell, every coin, every thought—WHATEVER it took to annihilate that woman! An obsession like none before, and there had been none quite so severe since, though his current situation with the Master Plan could be called nothing less than an obsession. So determined was he; she warranted the creation of spells just for her. Banned or not, damned or not, he would destroy her utterly and completely, leaving not even her ash to revive.

Turning toward the study, seeing her curves in the darkened shadows, wanting to tell her, he exhaled, mentally exhausted—tormented. Quietly he whispered to the darkness, "If you only knew all the thoughts racing through

my mind, you would run as far away, and as fast, as you could. There are, in everyone's life, lasting implications. Like festered wounds that ever scab and bleed and scab yet again. Partners throughout life, whose only purpose is to cause pain, to prick and discomfort, and eventually, cause your end. It was in that moment, I knew I had sealed my future and all those around me. I've become a black hole of consequences. Do not come too close to the event horizon that circles my singularity of death." He thought for a moment about what would come of his next words, closing his eyes at the words as they quickly escaped his lips for fear of not escaping at all, "*Run, Victoria. Run while you still can.*" Quietly he sank back into the comfort of his bed.

The comforter only slightly covering his magnificently black-jeweled eyes, his silken black bangs razor-like across his irises, but his face showed his thoughts, drifting. Memories were terrible creations, especially this one...



(Kaleion, A Long Time Ago)

Two giant hemispheres, one of elemental fire, the other of concentrated lightning bolts, like two immense bowls turned upside down and overlapping in half their diameter, exploded with incredible violence where she had stood only an instant before. Headstone rubble, dirt, rock, and ash erupted outwardly in all directions away from the blast area—some as far as 150 cubits away. The blast area itself was some ninety cubits across in all, though he couldn't be certain it had yielded a direct hit. Chara was entirely too crafty for her own good. "Show yourself Chara... I *have* something for you," Damon taunted just as barbed, and flaming arrows struck at his chest only to deflect off of an invisible force into the ground and into the air instead of piercing their intended target. *The church rooftop*, he thought as his vision registered a brief glimmer of moonlight off metal, likely a nocked arrowhead. Weaving another custom crafted spell, a pebble-sized ball of lightning raced forth from his upward-facing palm, piercing the church window—completely shattering it. Only an instant later dirt, foundation, plaster, stained glass, and roof exploded, taking more than half the church structure in one enormous blast that yielded a mushroom cloud overhead, drifting back in Damon's direction on a bitter cold breeze. A brief satisfactory smile appeared on his face as his eyes caught sight of feathers, from the attempted assassins' quiver, drifting on the breeze toward him. Satisfaction at his obliteration of both the assassin and the church was short lived as he felt something tugging at his legs and waist—threatening to rip his legs from his body. *Ironic*, he thought. *Would she kill him with one of*

his favorites? This one he knew quite well, and he would surely die horrifically if he didn't act quickly. The squid-like writhing tendrils, piercing the ground beneath him in between himself and the shield, had wrapped around almost all of his lower body. Their lanced stingers finding flesh through his herringbone charcoal robes slashed with silver and gold seams. His stoles running the length down his robes embossed in silver with five invocation runes and his symbol were rapidly being ripped apart beneath him. He could already feel their poison taking hold—his vision starting to shift under its influence—only an instant left before he would no longer have the concentration to channel. He had only one hope remaining as he collapsed against the headstone, his body starting to break under the tendril's iron grip.

It clearly wasn't safe to show her face to him, but she wanted to be sure Damon saw that it was her that had beaten him before his entrails were all over the graveyard. *Fitting*, she thought; *I'll bury the wretch in holy ground*. Her fire red hair whirled around the gorgeous features of her face while her dead eyes burned like icy coal—a shark rolling back its eyelids before sinking its teeth into flesh. Chara's flowing red dress—quite simple for her standing, yet slit high enough to expose her fair flesh—whipped around her sultry legs as she continued to step ever closer, cursing under her breath as she had to right herself, stepping over battlefield rubble and burned, broken bodies. “Damon honey, I do hope you're still alive,” she taunted, wanting him to live *only* long enough for her face to be the last thing he ever glimpsed. Gusts accelerated more and more as she neared his broken body; his chest still heaved as he gulped for air that leaked through open wounds of his lungs. Her dress nearly being blown off her lush, silken body, Chara turned to see what was causing the disturbance in the debris-laden air. *Had he managed to summon a storm?* Oddly there was no storm visible in the distance, yet birds suddenly scattered in all directions—fleeing! Only a few crows remained about the headstone Damon now leaned against—his familiars no doubt. She began to see clouds being pushed outwardly in all directions, *but from where and what?* Chance favored she look directly overhead, and what she witnessed made the hackles on her lifeless flesh stand on end as her core chilled enough to make her vomit her most-recent blood meal on the headstone where Damon's body leaned. *Damon's Hellgate* caused clouds to abscond and the moon to give way as the sky whirlpooled inward on itself from above; dim light, like unto a volcano's heart, was visible right before they started to fall through. Landing with thunderous herald, the ground erupted in all directions as creatures of abyssal imagination began to fall through the rift everywhere throughout the Hellish landscape. *Run!* Chara's last distinct thought before being slashed through her center with a long, curved katana blade—its ancient rune alive and blazing in the blade's center as it was pulled from her torso before she was blasted the tens of cubits away from

Damon by unseen hands. Placing a hand over her wound as it had already begun healing itself, she couldn't help looking back to see what had dealt the blow. She knew running was the only smart thing to do, but there would be time to kill what had struck her!

Kneeling over Damon's body, only barely visible to her now from the leathery, ribbed wings some twenty cubits in width, her blade still blazed with a fiery, molten haze. She must have been no taller than Chara—certainly not much more beautiful—though with a hard body seemingly more forged than formed; her firm, but curvy body clearly visible in the blade's firelight. With hair of golden silk and abyssal eyes, she laid a hand on Damon's forehead, muttering something that made the ground under him thrust his body upward slightly as the tendrils sunk into the ground and his chest heaved, clinging Damon to life in this world. All in what seemed less than an instant, as time appeared to still itself, the golden-haired creature started toward Chara with frightening speed. Rounding Chara with a body and quickness that seemed to defy even Chara's imagination of her own abilities, the creature seemed content to strike at her with her sword. *Sword versus magic*, Chara thought, *for all her speed I'll still have time to kill her before fleeing the rest of whatever Damon summoned*. Banthis's first katana strike came across Chara at neck height from her left and recovered gracefully into her next strike that swiped at Chara's chest, cutting off her dress at her lower breasts. As Chara countered with nearly equal speed, causing Banthis to back away with some measure of caution, a white-hot, explosive blast directly in front of Banthis caused Banthis to temporarily lose sight. Regaining fast, but her vision still slightly fuzzy, Banthis nearly ran through Chara, taking one smooth, quick motion to her left at what would have been Chara's middle had she not shifted with all possible speed, still managing to again slice open her flesh, even if not as deep as the last. Grimacing, Chara realized there may be more to this underworldling than she had time to unveil now.

Silvery-blue slashes in mid-air rent the Hellish evening in a rectangular doorway before them as Chara ran toward the *Portal* before it had even finished forming. Leaping after her, knowing she had but an instant, Banthis used her powerful wing muscles to fly her to the *Portal*. Slumping to the ground with an unceremonious thud, Banthis's body—what remained—lay lifeless as the *Portal* collapsed on her, cutting her forged body in half. Banthis corpse still searing on the ground, Hell breaking loose around them as Damon's abyssal summoned creatures tore through the graveyard killing anything that moved and desecrating what didn't, Damon tried to sit up; looking to where the *Portal* had been—where Banthis now lay dead. His mouth worked at muttering something while his black eyes burned like well-stoked coals. Through the hot amber-gold glow around the black iris of his eyes, the tears of yet more loss

came as Damon slumped against the headstone where Chara had broken him in ways he would never heal.



Chapter 6: The Fork of Consequences

(Kaleion, A Long Time Ago, Continuation...)



lowly descending via *Damon's Hellgate* into what had been consecrated ground only moments before, *it* walked slowly amidst the granite headstones, ensuring the desecration of each one, stepping atop each grave in disrespect. A massive, pernicious, leathery-winged beast left Humanoid footprints in the soil, with the talons of its six-digit feet, in its wake as it closed the distance between *it* and Damon. Its shape changed from dragon, to beast, to man, to woman as it approached Damon, who was still slumped half unconscious against a headstone, breathing still, but unaware of its presence. Finalizing on its instantiation to converse with this particular disciple, *it* had settled on a brunette with large breasts and a slender waist, legs, and frame, just more than a hand shorter than Damon and wearing what he would know to be Roman robes, revealing her absolutely perfect flesh everywhere Damon desired. Fitting she thought—the Roman

aspect of it. She reached down to his slumped masculine frame, running *her* fingers through his hair as Damon suddenly gasped for air, waking to her touch.

"Damon. I've meant to come visit, and my apologies for the timing. If only I'd come sooner..." She trailed off, looking to Banthis' broken body, severed in half by Chara's *Portal*, destroying her only *real immortal* shell.

It was hard for Damon to speak. The words came out slow and measured as he looked down at her, or rather *its*, golden heels that were actually part of *its* feet. "I...know...you."

"Of course, you do. I'd be disappointed if you didn't." She...*it*...still slowly caressed his hair. He did not pull back. He didn't appear, or feel, repulsed by her, or rather *its*, presence. It had made a good choice in choosing this representation of itself. Or maybe it was because he was even more broken than Banthis, that the warmth of her hand on his head was...needed. Hmmm, *it* could leverage that. Her, *its*, caress became more tender, more nurturing—close to motherly, but still eerily, creepily seductive.

"I am truly sorry for Banthis. She was one of my favorites, just as she was yours." She paused, thinking—rather *knowing* in its omnipotence—how Damon would react to the next. "I know what you sent her," she, *it*, whispered in hush tones only a breath away from his earlobe.

Looking directly into her eyes now so she could see the fire in his black mirrors of the soul, he replied, "Of course, you do. I'd be disappointed if you didn't." Damon's wit perilously dangled his own soul before her, before *it*. He no longer cared.

The irises of her eyes were two amber flames in response. He knew who he was talking to, and yet this wasn't disrespect. This was either his challenge or him showing his backbone. Either way, she could crush him with it or use him. "My point is that I don't have a problem with what you've done. Only that I wish to share in its rewards. Would you think that a possibility?" Her, *its*, true purpose now finally shining through as *it* decided on how best to use Damon. ***Souls were power, and power was useful.*** If she scaled in power even a little, it could keep the gap between her and Banthis manageable.

"*Damnation* was made for one intended target and one intended destination. Both are gone now."

"Oh, Chara's very much alive, and I can tell you where she's hiding. And Banthis..." She paused again. "I know where the other half of her immortal shell is, and I can bring her back fully and completely. She'll be your wife again—whole. Haven't you suffered enough, Damon? Besides, Banthis wasn't meant to die this way, nor at this time. Chara has tampered with what was to be. So, helping you to set things right works for both of us. Doesn't it?" A lie was most convincing when hidden between two or more truths—such was her *modus operandi*.

“I won’t send you more than I do to her, nor even equal shares. That won’t happen—ever.” It was a take it or leave it offer from Damon, or rather a take it or destroy me now offer. Either way, he didn’t care. Living or dying without Banthis wasn’t an acceptable outcome, but he knew her well enough to know she’d take his offer. The *only* thing she wanted was more power, and *he* was the *only* one who could, or would, deliver it.

She gave him one, and one only, accepting nod. Then she was suddenly gone with a stiff breeze. No sound. He looked around ensuring the planular rift he had summoned had fully closed. *No more surprises*, he assured himself cautiously. Looking over to Banthis, he saw her whole again and starting to breathe where the *Portal* had severed her moments before. As he got up to walk to her, he felt whole himself, not a scratch, nor bruise having his full mobility back. And... He noticed a place planted in his thoughts—a place where he could find Chara. Wasting not a second, he opened a *Portal* where he stood with his right index finger walking through to his private fourth-floor study where he needed to gather a couple of scrolls and his second surprise for Chara before using the information he was just given to face her, but this time on his terms and with *both* his surprises at the ready.

* * * *

She’d only been breathing again for a few brief moments, face down in the dirt. Aware of her own death and rebirth, she felt herself with her left hand where she’d been severed in half by the *Portal*. Feeling no scar, or wound, or pain, she started to upright herself with her right hand still holding her katana. She leveraged it to help her to her feet. It wasn’t that she was still wounded, but just... Something felt very different about her and everything around her. Neither new nor old. Gathering her bearings, pushing those thoughts she hadn’t the time to afford to the back of her mind, she looked around for Damon. Searching beyond this place for her tether to him to pinpoint his location. *What have you done*, Banthis rebuked Damon internally.



(Damon’s Manor, Kaleion, Present Day)

Hard breath pushed at the comforter to let him free while his memory of Chara, Banthis, and that thing, reflected in his black mirrors of the soul. His face now ice, his body stiff, as he remembered... The image of Victoria’s body surprisingly still standing in his doorway reflected in the glass of the master bedroom windows as he began bringing himself back—thankfully. Memories

were a vile creation. If he only had the courage to wipe them forever from his mind, he would have done so long ago.

The die had been cast. His Master Plan now set. His mind made up. Damon was arguably the most powerful mage on the planet, and yet his power was a nit in comparison to what he would need to execute his plans. He needed to think. He needed to research new power sources he could use for his magic where living matter and belief in magic were not required, and he knew he wouldn't find the answers on his homeworld.



Chapter 7: Forgiveness Sought

(Stirling, Perion, Present Day)



he bustling and often perfidious marketplace of Stirling was among the busiest of places to be found. A morning no different than most others for Radin d'Aguillon. He had a full day's work ahead of him: preparing rooms, fixing a couple of fussy doorknobs that only wanted to work if certain stars were in complete alignment, tending to not only their own horses but those of their guests as well—the usual. Father had given him four days' work to complete in four hours—yet he would get it all done, as he did on a daily basis. Rowarc could always count on his son, though Radin did begin to wonder if his father was merely trying to challenge him, or just taking advantage of his inherited work ethic.

Formerly a tracker of some notoriety, Rowarc led by example as his work day would be just as full. Radin believed his father a great man—a hero to him always. *Who has time for heroes*, Radin thought sardonically, heading

out the front door of his father's inn to accomplish today's to-do list, while his father cursed removing stubborn door hardware from room number four just above the main dining area.

* * * *

Adjusting his weathered cavalier shirt and puffing it away from his chest for ventilation, Radin noticed how much warmer it had been this spring compared to last given how relatively far north they were. *This'll only make the marketplace more charming*, he thought bitterly. *More chores. Guests have to eat I suppose*, he smiled at a passing young beauty, turning his head to get a second and third glance as she passed. *Blondes*, he chided internally. *Trouble!*

You would have thought every breathing soul within two hundred leagues was here, attempting to buy or sell something. Then there were those who had no intention to buy anything—those were always the least appreciated. Thievery carried with it a very stiff penalty in most of the northern countries, but especially in the Kingdom of Gawth, where King Aaron, Keeper of the Wind, took his duties as judge and ruler very seriously. Punishment here was notorious, legendary even. Yet it did not always stop the desperate, nor the experienced professional.

Thought to be the oldest of Kingdoms, the ruling house of Gawth held the title Keeper of the Wind long before the object that made the title known around the rim of the world. Built in the center of the oldest parts of the city, near the plateau of the king's palace, stood a colossal effort of human ingenuity, strength of will, and cooperation with the world of magic. At the time of the great war, it was supposed to be the last line of defense, the last gasp of a world under then siege by darkness.

Soaring three hundred cubits into the air, before arching outward to sea like half of a great crystal rainbow, the watchtower held only one occupant for nearly a thousand years: a beautiful, womanly figure of crystal and gold with her sword pointed out to sea—The Lady of the Wind. Standing four times the size of a human female, the sword proportionate to her, it was a remarkable feat of architecture. No one knew if it ever worked, nor if it was ever used, only that it was built mostly with the old magic, and that it could never be destroyed.

It was the sole object of obsession for the young and ambitious ruler. If it could do half of what was claimed, and no one outside a very tight circle even knew what had been claimed, the power of the magic required to make such a creation would have to have been beyond imagination. So fascinated was the reigning monarch that he commissioned the building of a new expansion to the king's castle, building alongside the immense artifact so that he could sleep closer to it, in range of its influence.

Monarchs before King Aaron had given the Lady of the Wind credit due but paid it no real attention, thinking it was nonsensical to mess with its power, if it had any at all. They all continued the research, but not until King Aaron did any ruler show interest in unlocking its powers. In his obsession, King Aaron more than tripled the manpower and intellect on the task, recruiting the best minds from as far as a message could carry, investing vast amounts of the kingdom's wealth and resources in a project some saw as futile and most as dangerous. New streets went unfinished, new building construction slowed to a crawl to satisfy his obsessions.

In a roundabout way, that's what all of this was about: making Stirling the center of attention. The King offered a reward of five hundred gold pieces to the champion of a tournament that would be held on the royal grounds south of the palace. The competition would include several rounds with the best that could be found abroad facing the King's best men in the final rounds. There was some talk of the winner also leading an expedition to seek out some great relic—it was never really said what exactly, but the King made it all sound necessary to the growth and security of Stirling. *Necessary enough to levy more taxes!* Radin clenched his jaw at that thought.

Oh well, he had work to do: supper ingredients and a few trinkets to spruce up the inn. Tradition suggested he haggle the merchant down at least once for each purchase. Rowarc d'Aguillon already owned one of the more respected and profitable inns. It had been exceptionally profitable of late, but Rowarc always took pride in making it better at every opportunity. He had made it his passion since his wife's passing. Everything had changed since then. At least Radin felt so when he and his father were alone. He felt they should have grown closer. Instead, he could feel the gap widening with each passing week. The chasm of silence was doing untold damage to them.

Shoving those thoughts away and trying to remain cautious of who was around him, Radin fought his way through the sweaty masses. After six different booths, finding nothing but worthless junk on sale for ten times its worth, he finally spotted a booth that might have something of genuine value. A merchant tent, much larger than most, with room in the aisles for people to peruse. Even so, it was filled to capacity and mostly with young men. The reason for that became evident as he ducked into the tent, crossing the line of paying customers. An alluring young woman, with eyes of emeralds and flesh of silk, stood behind a small table with a large wooden lock box, taking care of the sales. She appeared to be taking over for someone else, an older gentleman walking out of the back with sack lunch in hand. *Maybe a father or uncle*, he considered as he started to look around.

A quick glance down the line of customers and he could see each of the young men staring back past him at the young woman with virile eyes.

Smiling, shaking his head slightly at his own thoughts of the strawberry-blond-haired beauty, he pressed toward the back of the tent where he thought he could look around at what they had to sell. He found a little bit of everything, ranging from cryptic staves and ornate canes to small statues to trinkets of every nature. Everything was very nice and moderately priced.

“Apologies, Master,” the words from a seemingly genderless voice coming from a slender patron covered in tattered grey woolen rags that must have been stifling hot on such a warm day. More than a bit late too as he had already been shoved into one of the shelves. Radin barely maintained his balance, dropping to his knees as he braced himself with his balled-up fists to keep from falling flat on the canvas. Whoever he was, he must have been in a big hurry. By the time he looked up, whoever it had been was long gone. Frowning, he began pulling himself up, noticing something on one of the lower shelves that caught his eye.

Very small and nestled toward the back of shelf was a sculpture portraying a ring of sarsen stones battered by the ages, set upon a grassy plane—somewhere. Picking it up, he quickly began to lose himself in the intricacies of the artifact—the tiny pits in the weathered stone’s surface. *Was it humming*, he wondered as he sat it back down on the shelf, stepping away. He wasn’t sure if his ears were ringing, or perhaps it had been playing tricks on him. Such extraordinary detail for something so small, as if witnessed firsthand and captured in thought and clay on site. His father had warned him about such things before, but those were just tales. *Two silver pence*. Reaching into his pockets to see if he had enough of his own coin he decided to pay for it with his own money. His father would be furious if he knew.

Approaching the lovely young woman, he noted she couldn’t have been much older than himself or his friends. Trying to project confidence—however manufactured—he managed to look into her emerald eyes. Then it hit him. His dream from a few nights ago—the portrait that wasn’t a portrait on that desk. *It was her!*

Much more than just beautiful, she was elegant—regal even, and now making the connection to his dream, that made sense. Even in a wool sackcloth, he could have picked her out of a mass of thousands, with her head held strong—prideful, with hot burning eyes. Her wavy, strawberry-blond hair cascaded off her shoulders in radiant strands of silk. From what he could see of her profile as he walked up to her, she had a slim, taut waist with a firm, fair bosom, and healthy, medium hips. It was a difficult choice picking out her best feature—everywhere he looked, he liked.

He decided not to ask if her father had made these works, thinking that might very well be a horribly embarrassing miscalculation if he were wrong. He knew he would thrash himself mentally, and otherwise if he passed up an

opportunity with someone like her. Though, he wondered if his dream of her meant she was spoken for or not—if the dream was even accurate or had any purpose. Dream or not, she felt so out of reach for him, but, mustering his confidence, he took a deep breath. A quick brush of his right hand through his shoulder-length auburn hair, maybe just enough to feather it for her.

“Afternoon. Are you new to Stirling, or just here for the Shirantal” he asked through a disarming smile, hoping it would be enough to charm, even if only for a bit.

She twisted the small artifact at eye level in her left hand, feigning to look at it while actually returning his smile with a radiant one of her own. *Did she actually swoon for him*, he hoped. *Does that mean what I think it does?*

“Do you like it,” she asked, regarding the artifact as she handed it back to him, letting the back of her hand chafe his palm as she passed the object.

Could I be that lucky? Something was working, whether his charm or not didn’t matter at the moment. Trying to calm down and not think of how incredible the lady was before him, his heart began to race, swallowed by her seductive charm. “It’s so detailed for something so small. Did you make it?”

He thought the glow from her smile could be seen from outside the booth. “How did you know? Everyone always assumes that all of these are the work of my Pa, or uncle, grandpa, or some such other relative. Is it so inconceivable that it could be mine?”

“Not if they pay attention to you, no,” Radin reasoned with a smile. “Truthfully, I thought the same thing until I got a closer look at you.”

“Really? So, what is there in a closer look at me that gave it away?”

“Everything,” he said quietly, softly, leaning in over the counter towards her. The coy look and dangerous smile she returned him held promise and excitement. “My name is Radin,” he offered, pausing in hopes she would fill the void with the beauty of her name.

“Elise.”

“So, Elise, will you be here long?”

“Not sure. I’ll go where I go.”

Radin raised an eyebrow at that, wondering how such a beautiful woman could be so free, wondering what it would be like if he were able to do whatever he wanted—go wherever he dared. That thought carried with it punishment. Nevertheless, he could *not* go back home without at least asking, “So, where will you be going when you close up tonight?”

Elise smiled knowingly, obviously enjoying this far more than she should. It’s not as if he were the first to ask. Everywhere they had gone she was asked, but already this was different—he was different. She sensed something special about him—something old, like one of the places she had been over the

years. She liked what she sensed, and, confident in its meaning, “Well, I suppose I’ll be going somewhere with you.”

Radin swallowed hard, trying to gather his words, not wanting to suddenly become the babbling idiot after doing so well thus far. He managed a genuine smile while his words came to him, “Well, then I guess I’ll stop by at dusk to help you close up shop.”

“Well, I guess I’ll see you then, Radin.”

“What about th—” he was cut off, holding up the carving.

“Don’t worry about it, Radin. Consider it a gift.”

He didn’t know what to say. *She was giving him things already. Wow! Whatever I just did, I need to write it down and sell it.* Who would have thought? *Perhaps, I should use the money I was going to spend to find her something. Good idea.* There had to be something amidst all these merchant tents she might like. He needed to check out some of the other booths anyway to see if there would be anything to bring back for his father’s inn. He couldn’t go back empty handed, or there would be more questions than he cared answer.

Pushing the tent flap out of his way as he left, Radin began his diligent search for something she might like—something to make her swoon for him again—he liked that very much. And, for what he had been sent as well. *Priorities*, he thought exuberantly, knowing it wouldn’t be his father’s items he first attended!

With the hundreds of booths and permanent shops in the city, surely there would be something that a woman might fancy, alas... Resigning to this deceptively difficult task of picking out something for a woman, Radin started walking back to one of the tents he had run across earlier, earmarking it as a tent for something for his father’s needs. Then he remembered her, pulling out the tiny sculpture she had given him. *What about something like this? Not bad*, he thought, *but where, besides her booth, would I find something like this?* He put the sculpture back into his pocket, scanning around the marketplace, searching for anyplace that might have some decent carpentry work. His eyes caught a brute of a middle-aged man and his son coming out of a large white tent that advertised his goods with a sign carved out of singed wyrmwood. Carrying a small wooden practice sword and brandishing it in play, the son kept himself busy just outside the tent’s entrance. *Maybe there*, he considered as he set out to cross the sea of people that stood between him and the merchant tent.

The air was thick with the sweat of the masses, threatening to choke him before he ever reached the carpenter’s tent. Suddenly someone ran into him, nearly knocking him to the ground.

“Hey!” Searching for his balance before he went all the way to the ground, Radin jumped back up, shaking his fist in the air, trying to see who had knocked him down so rudely. Only catching a glimpse of a torn grey

beggar's cloak, nothing more. *Was that the same person from before?* Whoever it was had managed to vanish among the multitude. Radin snarled, checking himself over. "If that was a thief, I'm gonna ki...", he blurted. Unable to find the gift Elise had given him, he started to panic. Again, he shook his fist furiously in the air in the direction of fleeing peasant.

People were turning to look at him. Realizing how ridiculous he must have looked, Radin shrugged, turning away from them, trying to make himself appear smaller, drawing less attention. He didn't want anyone who might have known him to spot him like that. In his effort to shrink in place, he couldn't help but notice it now—the beautiful piece of jewelry laying at his feet alongside his missing carving. Leaning over, conscious of everyone around him this time, he picked up both, shoving the gleaming jewelry into the right-side pocket of his dark brown pants. If anyone saw him with that, they would think him the thief, and there would be no explaining his way out of that one. He'd be hung in hours, if not minutes.

Radin looked around once more, trying to find the person who had nearly knocked him to the ground, but it was as if they just vanished—scattering into the hot, stale air. Spotting a secluded alley where he could take a better look at the jewelry without the prying eyes of the masses watching over him, Radin tried to calm himself enough to walk there without causing more suspicion.

Pulling it out of his pants once he reached the back of the alley, near a small fence used to separate the property lines, he saw that it appeared to be designed something like an amulet, and certainly was pretty for a fake. *It can't be real.* Barely filling his palm, and seemingly made of gold, its emerald-cut ruby set in the center was edged with dozens of small round glass stones. Etched into the gold circumference and extending from the Ruby itself were five navigational arrows with unintelligible runes at each point. Each rune, at each of the five points, set inside a small star sapphire stone. He could not imagine anyone possessing such a thing if it were real, not unless they were royalty. Radin paused till he could nearly feel his own heartbeat. *No. No. NO!*

* * * *

Gleaming silver eyes stared back at the boy from underneath the hood of her matted and tattered grey cloak—a cloak that did not befit the woman wearing it, nor of her beautiful features. Youthfully middle-aged with straight platinum hair, she wouldn't have passed for simply anyone were it not for the tattered cloak. A burdened smile crossed the very soft skin of her face as she watched him from a safe distance. A solitary tear streaked down her cheek as

she forced herself to turn away. He would find happiness soon. She could see it in his eyes, and in the girl he found to fancy. He was becoming a man. Her only desire was to turn back for a final look, but... *Forgive me*, she begged in her thoughts from afar, forcing herself to walk away without that last, needed glimpse. *Please forgive me*. Each of her burdened footsteps away from where she wanted to be brought the weight of another tear hitting her soft, dusty and weathered, leather boots.



Radin with the Amulet of the Five Gates

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