

A Kingdom Forgotten

Book 1 of



By Charles W. McDonald Jr.

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Dedication:

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

...and the Living Memory of:

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

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.

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

Don't be horrified that there's a bit of an instruction manual at the beginning of this novel. I can assure you there's a good reason for it.

The complexity of weaving the intricate plot lines and asynchronous timelines of this story required the breaking of a *lot* of rules to bring this product to you. Some of those rules involve unconventional capitalization, emphasis strategies, more modern word forms (homeworld instead of home world), and intentional stylistic deviations from the Chicago Manual of Style. So, for example, there are many reserved words in this story (Humanity, Creation, Man, Mankind, Humanoid, God the Creator, etcetera). Those reserved words and phrases (such as titles of chapters or novels within this series) that will be consistently either capitalized and/or emphasized for this story and you might think *hey, that word shouldn't be capitalized or why is that phrase always in emphasis script*, but I assure you this is done with deliberate intent and should not be corrected to mainstream standards. This is not a mainstream story!

And I will tell you this for certain: if you want mainstream or establishment writing, look elsewhere. I'm going to give you bold and daring, hidden truths wrapped inside the most unconventional sci-fi, fantasy love story you have ever seen. My goal, at the end of your journey with me, is for you to say: 'I've never read anything like that in my life. And I want more...'

If you were to consider that different worlds might evolve differently, it might make sense that, from a many-worlds perspective, there could be a clash of old and new even when told in roughly the same timeline. And thus, stylistically, a writer must flex his/her style according to the technological level at play in a given scenario from a multi-world perspective. This is undoubtedly more complicated to pull off than most epic fantasy or sci-fi which is told either from a one-world perspective, or a uniform/homogenous technological level perspective such as *Dune*.

The bottom line is this: I'm not here to write like everyone else. I'm not here to placate the whims of the whore Gatekeepers of Deep State to win their phony, lauded praise from, at best, duplicitous and compromised people. I'm not here to rigidly adhere to boundaries established by others. I'm here to bring you something truly new and groundbreaking—but in *my* voice and *my* style. If that troubles you, perhaps you should find something more mainstream (or something with establishment's good housekeeping seal of approval) to read. But you're not going to find anything this thought-provoking written in the dark and intellectual void of the mainstream in the voice of the status quo. Groundbreaking content doesn't follow the status quo; else, it wouldn't be groundbreaking. George Lucas had to invent new special effects methods and

new studio techniques to deliver the first Star Wars® trilogy because nothing like it had ever been attempted before. This is the space in which I find myself when writing the story of *A Throne of Souls* for you and for me.

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. The novels that have followed *A Kingdom Forgotten* have required many hundreds of man hours of research and an enormous amount of effort has gone into artwork, iconography, character development, editing, proofreading, and so on. The point I'm making is this: NOTHING about the story that follows will fall into the category of conventional. I'm going to test and stretch, to the breaking point, the boundaries and the very foundational pillars of your belief systems. I'm going to expose you to difficult and dangerous truths, for you to then go and research on your own.

I have written this entire series with the idea that eventually it would become a screenplay adaptation. As such, you'll see scene breaks that provide a 360-degree view of the unfolding events. This is especially true in battle vistas.

These unconventional scene breaks I've chosen to consistently handle in the follow manner:

* * * *

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 preceding flourish bracket 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 change in perspective within the same scene. For example, in a large battle sequence, it's important to understand the perspectives of multiple key players as they are engaged in the fight—to see the same event from multiple camera angles, if you will.

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 asynchronously, and I promise it will contribute substantially to the whole story making perfect sense

to you as the larger mosaic begins to paint itself. I'm not saying you *have* to take notes, nor have an eidetic memory. I'm just saying it will greatly help you deduce the clue drops and critical 'ah hah' moments I've woven into the story for those with ears to hear and eyes to see. And those who have gotten the most out of *A Throne of Souls* have had the trait in common of taking copious notes as they read 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)

If you look in the Glossary of Terms, 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.' I cannot emphasize enough the importance of both the Glossary of Terms and the Glossary of Characters! I put them there for your benefit—not mine. There are so many unusual terms across so many different disciplines and subject domains, it's going to make your head spin if you don't use the Glossary of Terms, so please use it. For those who have read *The Wheel of Time* by Robert Jordan, this story has a comparable number of characters in it. Thus, please use the Glossary of Characters whenever you get confused about who's who.

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

This is the Fifth Edition of *A Kingdom Forgotten*. Why? With each new novel released in the series, I re-release the previous novels with updated maps, iconography, glossary content and so forth. I also use this opportunity for another glance at the content to ensure its integrity and delivery. This Fifth Edition includes all of the aforementioned updates and follows the release of *The Rise of Hope* (Book 4 of *A Throne of Souls*). It also includes another proofread pass from a seasoned editor with decades of experience, so I think that will address many, if not all, of the constructive comments in the reviews that I've seen. In essence, my goal was to get *A Kingdom Forgotten* up to my fourth-novel standards, which it now meets. We're getting very close to the end now, and the conclusion of *A Throne of Souls* will be everything I have promised *and much more...*

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 peek, 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 wyrmwood branch...

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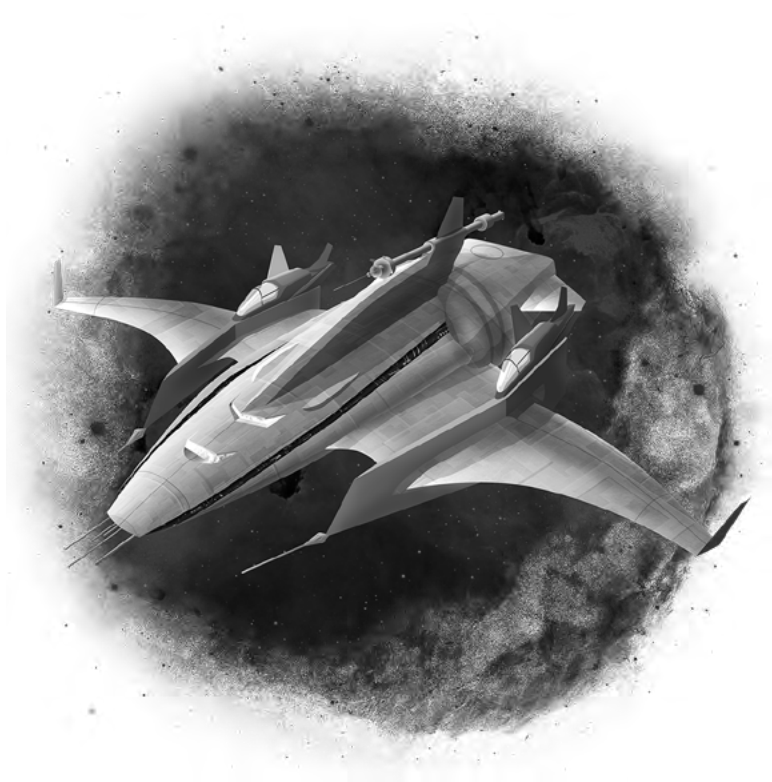


Kaleia



Pre-Flood Terrain





Prologue: The Unspeakable Memory

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

A 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 scarring became visible about his chest, shoulders, and back as his *Light Orb* began tra-

versing 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*.

The scent of slow-burn sparkling cinnamon candles perfumed his nostrils that flared with purpose and malice of forethought. He knew he would pay a heavy toll for this but there was no abyssal bottom to the well of his revenge, for all things heinous and malevolent seemed justified at this point.

He recalled others telling of spells they had created—spells that had taken months, years, and even most of their adult lives to manifest. 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 reality, 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 everything now that the love of his life, and his purpose that thrived with her, 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' 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 'til morning—moreover, he needed *someone*. There, sitting on a pale stone bench just outside the citadel's walls bathed in the morning rays of the Kaleion sun. 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. The air hissed around him in faint but vile howls of the condemned. Gritty motes of dust in the Basrat air instantly became rancid with the cruelty of *Damon's Damnation*, creating an acrid taste upon his tongue that Damon played off as nothing.

Calmly walking through the gates of Basrat as if nothing had happened—certainly nothing of concern—Damon could hear the father's calls, off in the distance, for his beautiful 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. The forging of the very first *throne of souls* in the fire of Damon's *hate*.

His name was feared already, by almost everyone, long before this. Every living creature, on every world throughout Creation, would fear him now.

He feared himself. And the ugly fate for himself he'd just made manifest. 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 immortal soul.

Creation precariously balanced itself on the edge of a knife forged from the furnace of Damon's *hate*, 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 makeshift O.R. on a floating platform, the tall, brooding and handsome man of stark and straight raven 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 unconscious body."

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 straight 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, stainless steel tray where it was delicately plucked into position by the fine-grain, robotic operating arm by the renegade surgeon.

A second robotic arm with fine-grain metal framework and attachments 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 makeshift 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-shaped right-arm. It had legs too—sort of—and could walk when and where required, but they mostly floated via electrogravitic propulsion giving them great range, speed, and agility. A prod-

uct of tens of thousands of years of evolution, it was vastly superior to Humanity in every measurable way.

Now, looking down at the burn wounds that went all the way through the doctor's eye sockets and 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 Elite Guard. 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 tumbled 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 together in unison—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 his own condemnation upon Eldrac's men. A sentence 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 any written account of this siege.

Tiny metallic and organic residue quietly floated to the cold marble floors in motes 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 quickly returned to the corridors of Eldrac's Keep as Talemar closed his eyes in a moment of contemplation, for there was much more killing to come... 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 thin graying hair, Xaldran returned his friend's look with one of respect and admiration, 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 Talemar 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 betwixt *hate* and *hope*, this would be the first truly significant victory since the very first days of the war, which now raged beyond any measure of control, threatening an end to everything and everyone. The whole world knew of nothing but holocaust and misery of war. 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 and would-be leader. 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 cool glare she returned him. From amber to blue to midnight her robes shifted, then quickly back again. Talemar’s grip tightened on her arm, cutting off her circulation.

“I have no choice. You understand that,” Talemar stated flatly—emotionless—to the beautiful Mora. His stare seething with focus.

“Rid me of your conscience and be done with it,” Mora chided, 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. And then 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...

Aeriel 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 thick and 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 camouflaged 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 instilled 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 Talemarr 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 Talemarr 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 questioned, looking at Talemarr, 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?” Talemarr clearly wasn’t seeing what Xaldran was, and he wondered what his inexperience was masking from plain view.

“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.” Xaldran’s stroking of his chin in contemplation made his words and postulations more weighty as he exchanged glances with the rest of the team.

It was an intriguing hypothesis Talemarr 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.

Talemarr 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 in this persistent waking dream of his. 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. With stale air perfumed with the stench of darkened fate and timeless morass, his nose flared at the threat of this strange place. 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 intent, 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 in the shape of a dragon 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 *me* in return?"

"My name," Talemar stated matter-of-factly. He couldn't help staring at the strangeness of that metallic 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..." 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, feeling his anger well up inside him from his abdomen.

"Ah. Ah." The man visibly ts'kd with his right index finger outstretched toward Talemar. "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 verdant 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 and centered themselves upon this one place. 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 strange mage 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 graying, aged skin matched the hue of his robes with their loose threads, cuts, and tatters. His eyes glowed red and gold 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 he 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? Why now?”

Smiling, and obviously amused, the clever mage 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 vile-

ly 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 with the winds of his *hate*. And you shall not catch him, but *there is always more time*.” The stranger chuckled at that last and most apropos quip given their location, disappearing from sight in silvery, ethereal tendrils that licked and hissed at the matted and muted blackened surface of the void around them, chasing his exit.

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 was 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. Or his perception of it at least... The idea of turning back was like a constant knife in his thoughts. The structure seemed no closer now than it had seemingly hours ago, but at least he could make out that it appeared to be a keep or great hall of some sort. Laid out more lengthwise than depth in his facing of it. 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 considered. 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 in 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 curtain wall, he *did* think of a way back.

"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 endless 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 conscience. 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 curtain 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, Talemarr thought it might just work, only to see all that energy absorbed by the portal in the form of the backside of the curtain wall, which brought him to this place.

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

Helplessly, Talemarr 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 Aeriell. 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 naught if any of his friends were lost in this battle. He could afford no more losses.

Talemarr was sure Aeriell knew them both well and knew that he was far outmatched. The sword was not even his mastery but blow for blow Aeriell 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 dueling, leaving Rémy, Garin, and Aeriell 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 Aeriell's shoulder from Rémy left Aeriell staggering sideways over crushed stone and metal. Garin quickly took the opportunity, leaping forward, thrusting hard into Aeriell's side. Talemarr could almost feel the gash in Aeriell's side watching Aeriell's grimaced expression. Leaving Aeriell 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 carrying them to the falls of their unmaking.

Xaldran quickly found Eldrac alone. Just standing there would have been challenge enough as lightning, fire, ice, thunderclaps, and shards of some-

thing 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 curtain wall. Maybe it would have just got him killed along with everyone else. For a moment, the morbid idea was welcome. Death would be a welcome 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 Ariel 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. Then 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 curtain wall 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 Ariel. 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. Ariel's mouth barely moved, twisting silently—perhaps it was a prayer or coming to terms of sort. Talemar looked around the rest of

the battlefield, via the curtain wall, 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 curtain wall 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 meant to be. 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. Xaldran's face twisting at the sight of him as he continued to look for Aerial. His thoughts still relentlessly tormented him for fleeing the scene after falling into the crater with Rémy, yet he knew the others would retreat as well. Retreat or die. 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 rubble of Eldrac's keep. Rushing over, then cautiously moving around the top of Aerial's head so as not to crush his body further with the debris, Xaldran quickly began to cast, hurling the heavy man-sized stone chunks that lay across Aerial's body, hundreds of paces away where they 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," he muttered hopefully, lifting his friend's head to cradle it in his arms as Xaldran knelt in the rubble.

Aerial lay quiet but still breathing in Xaldran's arms, though his strength evaporated. He could feel the weaves of Aerial'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 Aerial 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 to move 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 their goal, 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 before.

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 away. 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 sight 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 unmolested 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 and reconciling 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, handcuffed, into the transporter.

The surface of the virgin planet below appeared to only have animal and plant life as Alexelio materialized 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 tint, 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 like 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 three 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)

The 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, undulating 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 as 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 thoughts as he recalled the brilliant white light all around him, and a fiery god-like presence unlike anything, or anyone, he had ever felt before. A fire at the crucible of Creation akin to his waking dreams that still destabilized his consciousness from time to time. That moment not so long ago had authenticated him as the one, true king. Not only of Britain, but so very much more...

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. Knowing *this* future 'twas not a blessing but a curse. It was an increasingly iron burden, knowing this certainty—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. *Is there any truth to prophecy?* All things were possible. He was only a man, though king to some; even *he* could not stand in the way of *this* fate—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 off the cliffs 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. Michael didn’t see himself as divinely chosen to lead because he was a ‘better’ man. He loathed this burden but carried it because it was *his* to carry. He only knew that mistakes at his level had dire consequences and people could lose their lives at just the slightest of his missteps.

“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 offered, placing his hand on his son’s shoulder as he led his son 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?” He paused, knowing his son and the way his mind worked—tirelessly and at warp speed. “...Or trying to convince yourself of a course not desired but necessary?”

“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 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, by your side. 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 tried to steady the emotional torrent just underneath the surface of his doubt, “Then let’s go.”

Hand still on his son’s shoulder, Michael Sr. led his son as 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. *None* of his actions were ever taken lightly. Billings was a longtime friend and ally; brave, honest, and a tough, 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 abdicated and 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, that the *old* ways were returning. Great machines, computers, robots, cybernetics, and artificial intelligence 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. Everyone was sheltering in place as if the end was upon them. Everything had been boarded up with plywood as if expecting... Downtown London looked as if it were Miami preparing for a category-five hurricane, or the end of all things...

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 England: London SW1A 1AA, England. Michael's father opened his door, getting out first, scanning the abandoned streets for hidden threats and finding none. 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 open 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 wind nor 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 proclaimed with a wave of his hands in the air and 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 questions 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 gold 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 suggested, 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. Built at the cradle of Creation. 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 and hummed 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 unique and historic challenge. Old royalty had gone into seclusion and no one, not even the media, nor his staff, knew precisely where they had all gone. Though many toxic rumors floated about their pending 'day of reckoning.'

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

Shadows of candlelight, like tall waves off the Atlantic, lapped at them from gilded walls as they approached the inner chambers of the throne room. The flames themselves tilted as if influenced by an unseen hand, toward Michael, from all directions. Hackles stood erect 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 the former monarch 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...whoever or *whatever*

this *creature* was now before him. This was much different, much more than something or someone he could control with the rule of law. This was immeasurable hatred—an ancient and unsettled debt between Creation and the Fallen or the *Watchers*.

Smoothly moving 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.

Deliberately closing the distance between them, Harold hissed in an icy and guttural voice not his own, “I suppose it’s up to us now.”

Though it had been years since they had met, Michael had never heard him speak like that before. He wanted to parley. To hash things out, but it would be a wasted effort since this *was not* Harold. Merely 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 of Creation threatened to sear its Gordon Russell-designed scabbard out of existence. The pommel pulsed in the palm of his right hand, threatening to brand him with its ancient inscription from time immemorial.

“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, Harold paced about Michael, never staying in one place to let the terror settle or subside. Michael was *his*, and he would make the arrogant young fool pay for his lack of vision. His inability to sense and see the inescapable truth... That *he* would rule this Earth for a thousand years. “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, “...you must know you are already too late; you cannot kill me now.”

“I came,” Michael chided, mustering every shred of his emotional strength and determination, “...to do what I must. And, you should already know that.” Slowly, Michael began to move in sync with the former monarch about the glimmering white inlaid tiles of Harold’s throne room. His right hand begged to release his mighty weapon from its prison, wanting to hear its ancient song unleashed for all the worlds to hear. Tapping his fingers rhythmically on its hilt and grip as he countered the former monarchs moves about the white tiles, Michael occasionally glanced down at the golden heraldic beasts, recalling portions of the prophecy: The body of a leopard, the feet of a bear, the mouth of a lion, and the dragon who 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 softly in an old familiar voice more *his* than *its*, 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 personally realized a great injustice. "Well, I suppose *you'll never know*."

Trying to see beyond *the veil of white* and into the heart of someone he once knew, Michael wanted another way out than what was imminently before them, "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." Michael recalled his research into metaphysics and his own personal realization about what was meant by the philosophical idiom that free will was the *first* distortion of the *Law of One*.

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

The way he said that... There could be no more doubt! Calling on his years of experience and killer instincts, Michael drew his immortal weapon without hesitating the cruelty required to perform what must be done. Its song released, and the voices of all the true kings and gods 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 white-hot molten 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, heavy silver, and gilded candle holders from all around the chamber bashing about his back, neck, shoulders and skull as he 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 field experience to douse the pain like water to fire.

Rushing Harold in the darkness of his throne room, Michael felt the blunt force of unseen hands trying to drive him backward. Thrusting the Sword of Kings forward, it cut through those dark and unseen principalities and entities, 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 from his right hand to his left.

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

Erupting with guttural, beastly howls, the chamber's foundation split at the epicenter of the dais in a great quake that rocked the palace. Tiles violently burst and splintered, falling into a great deep fissure now forming in the floor of the throne room. A hint of something vile made Michael's stomach involuntarily roll inside his abdomen as 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! The taste of sulphur-perfumed air bitter and gritty upon Michael's tongue. A hellish abyss unleashed.

Blood slowly ran down the fuller of Michael's blade; its ancient magic succumbing to

the thick, dark 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 static and faded as if the blood was corrosive enough to permanently tarnish even the Sword of Creation.

Sheathing his bloody blade, Michael quickly turned back to the double doors that burst open just as he neared. Pivoting back to Harold for a final look, Michael wanted to be certain his stroke had hit home. Harold's body still lay in a lifeless heap, gravitating into the open fissure. Turning back again to the double doors, Michael gathered 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. From his peripheral vision he felt as if he'd seen someone else in the chamber kneeling over Harold's body—a beautifully forged female silhouette with long, flowing platinum hair, buxom—and with 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 bloody pieces strewn about the car's interior and the pavement. 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 gruesome sight before him.

Gotta get out of here while we still can! Scanning the immediate area, Michael's eyes fell on an abandoned, faded red Audi® A4 that must have been fifteen years or more out of good favor, 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. The fissure wasn't yet wide enough to prevent the car from being able to traverse its otherwise 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 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 as its engine roared to life a moment later. 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 blackening the sky as it set on the western horizon. The storm had only just begun—unleashed by the Sword of Creation 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 drifted 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 lifeform 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* just as Damon arrived first. Strikingly young and handsome with rough-cut planes of a symmetrical, multi-cultural face, 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-blue mage regalia of silver piping. Damon threw 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 and unnaturally handsome man of just over average height with graying beard in fluidic grey robes of gold and silver embroidery with blood-red sashes visibly tsked his majesty with his right index finger only inches from the king's face. Royalty or not; beautifully gilded crown or not, Kellen had the king right where he wanted him. His army, his castle, and his life in ruins at the hands of Kellen the Destroyer, all he could do was...

"I surrender," King Argon pleaded, 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 and 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 a massive lightning bolt made from Kellen's unique brand of magic.

"I'll take you to it," The king offered, carefully getting up with his hands raised above his head in a surrendering position, 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 unique magic 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 Kellen found all four walls lined with bookshelves filled with books from floor to ceiling—many of them ancient, dating back to the rule of Durial. Taking Kellen to the far-right side of the bookshelf, deep in the northwest corner of the room, the king 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 language he’d never before seen, but as soon as Kellen saw the structure of the text, he knew... Latin in root at least... Kellen was familiar with Earth’s variant as well as 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 while withdrawing with what he’d come for.

Blasting a massive hole through the wall with a ball of lightning, Kellen the Destroyer stepped through the collapsing hole of debris, his spherical shield protecting him as the debris sealed off the room where the king remained. He had said the king would get live for today, and it would take about twenty-six hours before the king would run out of oxygen, so it technically wasn’t a lie. Damon’s influence upon his conscience becoming more prescient in his old age he supposed.

Tossing another volley of massive lightning balls behind him as he walked out, Kellen ensured no one would be saving the king as the king’s inner keep 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 handsome and lethal archmages stood toe-to-toe before one another once again, for the first time in years, and every kingdom shook to their core. Damon’s charcoal-blue sleeves, in silver elegant scrollwork and seams, danced about his wrists and arms as he began to cast something shrewd, crafty, and powerful. Black and silver stoles embossed in invocation runes ran down the length of his formal mage regalia, shifting 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 encompassed the atmospheric bubble and them with it. The new darkened, web-like 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 deliberately lowered his hood as he spoke first in a 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 most 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?* Damon did not know, but it *did* bother him.

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

"Where did you learn this one?" Kellen pointed upward to Damon's *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; obliterating most of an ancient seaport citadel on their homeworld. A highly unconventional and risky method of casting, but it proved utterly destructive in the conflagration that followed. Thousands died at the hands of Kellen the Destroyer that day, but the reputation it afforded him going forward was...*useful*. Earning him a new title as an outcome: The Midnight Morning.

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." Da-

mon 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 cut to the chase in a matter-of-fact tone, “Evanyil’s plans and mine are now in sync with one another, and we’ve begun to coordinate 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, though Damon’s eyes walked over every inch of his old ally as if to discourage a private meeting between Kellen and Evanyil.

“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 Kellen, and all the times Kellen had done so in return. He thought they were beyond all this gamesmanship. Trust was fragile between them, though their friendship wasn’t.

“Fine,” Damon yielded, knowing it damn well 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. Especially his. “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. Allow him the space and time to come to you and your way of thinking. Some measure of rationale always worked with him, because, for the most part, Damon was a rational actor. If you disrespected Damon or put him up against the wall, the results could be...*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 glee of a child opening presents. "But the power contained in those few..." Kellen mused, 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 for Damon as well. Kellen paused, observing him again in much the way Damon had observed him moments before. 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 offered as he began walking away from Damon but suddenly turned back to his old friend with a broad smile, adding, "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 upon the ancient rock floating in the void, pondering Kellen's words. A few lonely moments passed; moments that seemed like hours as the only thing to accompany him were the odd noises inside the *Distorting Web* and the souls captured in the purgatory of The Void.

Notes of cinnamon and jasmine perfumed the void around Damon just before he felt the silky tenderness of a woman's hand running through his shoulder-length, straight raven hair. Damon wasn't startled, nor surprised, by her silent and sudden appearance behind him, even though she was 'the enemy.' "It's been a long time," the soft but throaty tone in his voice expressed a calmed concern in the presence of one of his oldest Allies of a sort: Illirian Starfire.

"Yes, it has. Am I on time?" Illirian's voice was sweet, sexy and sensual—her scent intoxicating and 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 so very 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 gold-gild sash just below her navel. Made from some enchanted diaphanous white silk, the material scintillated as it revealed perfect, seductive and soft womanly curves everywhere. Red-gold hair spilled down her white backless dress in semi-liquid waves, glittering magically when caught by the lighting of the webbed shell. She was never anything short of stunning and Damon's *black mirrors of the soul* could not help but follow her every little move.

"You were always right on time." He felt her settle down behind him, lovingly caressing his hair and the back of his neck with delicate to-and-fro strokes of the back of her fingertips that made his eyelids involuntarily close in

his imagination of her doing so much more.

"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."

She fell in love with his throaty voice centuries ago, though she'd never, ever admit such a thing. However, the way her eyes gazed upon Damon and the way he could feel her eyes upon him from behind said plenty. "Well, that's certainly nothing new," Illirian laughed, only half mocking. "You were born for trouble."

"You know about my plans with Kellen?"

Illirian answered with silence, rising to sensually walk around to face him—feeling his eyes wantonly lingering on her shapely legs and taut ass revealed by scandalous pleats that swayed with her movements. Her smile was dangerous and erotic. A grand master at a most dangerous game. 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 edges of her supple breasts, revealing silken inner thighs as she lowered herself to sit within the palpable warmth of his breath upon hers and hers upon his. Straddling his lap, she playfully teased and rocked her body against his with her lips within a wanton kiss's breadth of his, proving herself as unpredictable as he. It was hard to focus when all he could think about at the moment was sex and looking down at a dress that barely covered only the tiniest portions of her breasts did little to help free himself from the prison of his very intimate thoughts of Illirian Starfire.

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 tasting 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 truly good thing he

desired, though certainly didn't deserve.

"You know what their reaction will be?" He could barely force the words out past the distractions of her hot and sensual caress of him with her slowly rocking back and forth upon him in his lap.

"Yes...", she softly moaned into his left earlobe, feeling his fingertips gently caressing the inside of 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 recommended as her eyes shifted in that sweet and innocent way that she always used with him. 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 just as his lips touched a most sensitive part of her beautiful flesh right in between her neck and clavicle. His left hand kneading her right breast as he teased and rolled her very erect nipple in between his thumb and forefinger, pushing the fabric of her naughty little dress out of his way.

"Oh God, Damon," she moaned into his ear again, feeling her body start to surrender to him in ways that could not be undone.

And then, a moment of sobriety washed over her from head to toe as she began to contemplate the bigger picture... Her body pulling back from his very sexual arousing caress of her, while still remaining in Damon's lap. "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 discreetly 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 incessant *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 certain 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 little head of hers. Rare were the mo-

ments 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 again. “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. Only her scent remained and the impression of her body in his lap, along with his burning and palpable need for her.



(Paradise, Time Neutral)

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 eight times the size of the Colosseum 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, mastercrafted columns of blue ivory sprung outward from the chamber’s façade, rising some forty cubits, spanning the length of the huge chamber, forming elegant, cathedral archways, low and high, while crisscrossing the immense vaulted ceiling akin to the cavities in between a spider’s web. A mastercrafted, inlaid oak table span nearly the entire length of the room—nearly one hundred cubits in all. Hundreds of candelabras flooded the room with wick-and-wax-perfumed light, as did the whiteout conditions visible through the stained glass, cathedral windows that spanned the length and height of the outer 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 raged red and orange flames behind them. The old, white-bearded 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 from floor to ceiling, but the bright aura about him masked most of his features making them hard to discern—save that of his immeasurable age.

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. Each dressed in differing attire befitting their station: some white and gold, some grey and red, and some black and silver. Yet all appeared stately, prominent people of wealth and power. It held the character of a council and the morass of bureaucracy with the only certainty a complicated and quite possibly, duplicitous, outcome.

“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’ entropy 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 seemingly ageless woman, closest to the fire scolded the Chairman—if carefully so. Her eyes sequentially darted from one council member to the next as if to gauge her own performance. Though some in the room were uncertain the target of her incense. The woman’s radiant hair and brilliant eyes were like unto liquified gold, shimmering in the awe-inspiring light. Age was a difficult attribute to measure amongst people of obvious ability to unnaturally extend their own lifespan. Though, 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 dissenting opinion.

“I did not order her,” The Chairman countered. *A lie? Perhaps... Strongly persuaded* might be a more apt description but such details were not necessary in *this* company and *this* forum, where *his* word ruled. “I chose her because she was the *only* choice to be made. *That* man trusts no one—certainly none of us. But Illirian, he trusts for reasons *you* do not understand, Youngling.”

“However you choose to word it, you forced Illirian to make friends with the enemy then complained about how close she is to him. It sounds to me that Illirian has done precisely as 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—some with hushed whispers and downward, disapproving glares—expecting judgment upon her 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 of the Chairman's audience hall within the Crystal Keep. The main doors themselves spanned some forty cubits into the air with massively thick header beams that were an extension of headers supported by the blue ivory columns, colonnade and cathedral archways that offered the most pronounced feature of the chamber's interior façade. That lengthwise part of the chamber which faced the interior of the wider Crystal Keep. It seemed odd—the massive, studded doors leading to a chamber seemingly accessible via the open-air archways, but then not everything was as it seemed.

The colossal oak doors smoothly and fluidically opened for her as if on cue, making very little noise as she was greeted by a myriad of lights, created by more stained glass, candelabras, and a single gatehouse-sized fireplace at the Chairman's end of the room. Everyone was clearly 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, and Guardian of *Durial's Eye*?"

Illirian paused only for a moment then offered, "I believe *Damon the Banished* 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, throaty tones. After the echoes of his command had chased the separate conversations from his audience hall, the chamber fell silent again. Tense and uneasy they all sat. Breathlessly anticipating Illirian's next report.

Even without being able to see all of his features, one could tell the Chairman was deep in thought. Suddenly he broke the silence voicing his own internal deliberation, "We have known this moment would come and have prepared for it. The mortals must learn 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. Station or not, a line had been crossed that was...unacceptable!

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 and much more 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! I *will* 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 palpably 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," Illirian lied, 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 and would 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. One had to be delicate with Damon. If you ever tried to force him to do anything or back him into a corner, he was impossible to deal with from that moment onward. 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 akin well-stoked coals, but she bowed nonetheless, though a bit shallow while shifting her heated eyes slightly to the left and back to the right as she measured the temperature of the room before departing. Turning slowly, Illirian walked away, as a myriad of distinct conversations welled back up before she even made it to the door.



(Perion, Present Day)

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, using his boot heels thrust into the side of his Grey to spur his mount and thunder hard up the battlefield hillside. Pausing momentarily to spin around and change positions, he headed for higher ground via another path less likely to be blocked before finding himself the target of the next warrior.

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 about his face. Blood upon his shield, armor, and horse, as well as careening down the fuller of his long blade, spoke long tales 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 with one blow as his sword 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! Hold on!"

The older man's efforts did not go unnoticed, and the huge brute of a man 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 again spurred 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 or an old ally he could not remember, but there was little time to worry about him now. He could not help but feel angry, even tormented by his battlefield decision to flee. 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 and profound.

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 labored 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 just beyond the horizon of his consciousness, but for now, his memory was at war with his current thoughts and awareness.

Turning towards what appeared to be a home library or great study, Radin slowly removed his helmet and gauntlets, revealing shoulder-length auburn hair, blue-grey eyes, and a young, handsome face of hard-cut planes and a multi-cultural countenance beyond his years. 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 be certain at such a great distance. A thought struck him as he peered down the great hallway, noticing the even and smooth lighting appearing to come from underneath moldings, cabinetry, and from other hidden places, not at all like the flicker of candlelight one might expect. Everywhere the indirect lighting was

smooth and bright like daylight—not the least bit like flames and without the scent of wick or burning wax or oil. *A grand place*, he thought to himself, heading to the entrance. Careful not to become distracted or lost, Radin explored in the direction of the great library. The feeling of an answer in some unknown form nurtured his confidence in his actions as he pressed forward. *There has to be an explanation around here, somewhere*, he reassured himself as he listened to the echo of his boots upon the great marble flooring.

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, rich-grain, 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 great lord or king*, he considered. The murals, the tapestries, the thousands of leather and gold gilded 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 looking akin to a map. Some strange board with opposing dark and light squares—similar to the floor in the 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 on a different square. 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 that felt rich in texture. A painting of two lovely, 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 trolls 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." As if Evanyil was reading Damon's most personal and intimate thoughts like a diary at her whim.

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 seemingly 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 sweat-laden head as he eerily came out of another increasingly troubling dream of late and gripping his sweat-soaked sheets balled up in between his tight, white knuckles, Radin d'Aguillon inhaled deeply—his chest still heaving. The dreams, if one could call them that, that had come to him at the turning of his eighteenth birthday had already scarred him in ways he might never understand. Opening his eyes to other realms and people that begged for answers and connections he felt were just beyond his reach. For now... He barely dared open his eyes for fear of again finding himself someplace other than his own room. Inside he knew those answers and connections wouldn't

wait for whether he was ready or not. As the raven-haired, black-eyed tall man burned himself into the pathways of Radin's consciousness, he felt the tether between them forming and knew it would never be allowed to break.



Chapter 3: Decapitated

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

Maintaining that knifed edge he'd come to know over many down-range missions, Michael Anthony Day sought the calm, focused, and committed singularity of mind as he busied himself with inverted 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 Manifort trailing behind. Being Terry's right-hand man, and second in command of his unit, Michael *should* have been in that meeting, but Terry knew 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-storey building, "...is where we expect him to be." The target, highlighted inside a red kill-box, surrounded other buildings in various states of ruin and roads that now barely qualified as goat trails. What else would one expect in the southeastern parts of Raqqa, Syria? The whole country had been ravaged by years of civil war, Arab Spring, plus being blasted to bits by pseudo-allied forces of highly questionable armament and funding. Squeezed 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 and even duplicitous 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 unintended consequences. But at least now there was reliable intel—allegedly—and just 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, knowing the CIA’s resources to be competent but their agenda almost entirely corrupt from the head down. So, there was always that...

“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. Not unless you brought in D-Day-like forces. 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 Syrians we’re coming,” Michael righted himself, stopping his pushup routine as he stood before his friend and Team Lead.

“Would you?”

“FUCK NO!” Michael offered Terry a sweaty but sincere smile, acknowledging his brethren SRR team members with a nod though his blood was still chilling in his veins as his heart rate found a happy medium between elevated and nominal. There was still a night of heavy killing in front of them. It was 2000 hours local and normally these kinds of ops 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, with a reassuring hand on Michael’s shoulder. “Team briefing in 30 and we’ll get some chow once we’re on the Kidd.”

“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; 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. Michael was the straw that stirred the team’s drink. 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 PLUG-

GER into his pack. Next on the list was meditating and praying.

* * * *

(Just outside Raqqa, Syria, Earth, 2345 hours 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. Modified since then actually... Hopefully, they'd have better luck with these than the SEALs had with theirs that fateful May night in 2011, though that whole scene had never sat right with Michael and he knew there was more to it than the official narrative. There *always* was...

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 or see 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 necessary.

The Blackhawk blade's rotated and thumped even more as it 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 deep into 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 elec-

tronics, 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 invoked that bloody insurgency that had both born and paved the ruin-laden path to this moment. As they surrounded and squeezed 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 said 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 sequentially parked white Toyota trucks they expected to see. Five plain, non-descript, same year, make and model—all 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 high in the air.

Immediately thereafter, ISIS fighters started dropping like flies to the soft whish of silenced M-4s and MP5s who 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 Squitter's head into a misty cloud of blood and cranial gore—his PKM falling to the rubble in a metallic clatter.

ISIS fighters returned fire from un-silenced AK-47s and hand grenades exploding in the night, announcing their location to an unwelcoming public. Their love of death proved useful in their unabashed, unprotected, and unshielded return fire—making 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, Michael scanned for other targets. *Got three, missed one.* **ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK!** The AK-47 rounds whizzed past Michael, chipping off pieces of rubble just inches from his face. Tossing another grenade to where the rounds came from, Michael barely ducked this time. **BOOM!** Advancing again, almost simultaneous with the explosion of his grenade, Michael pivoted left and right as he searched 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. *Never hesitate*, Michael affirmed in his own mind. He detested shooting at a target he could barely see, but if he hesitated at all either he, or one of his teammates, wouldn't be making it home tonight.

The buzzing sound of the twin M249 SAWs, coming from four-storey cross-fire positions, lit up the night sky in straight amber lines of molten kinetic rounds, 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 recognized the 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 the HVT (High-Value Target) and what *had* been a building, ducking just as rounds chipped at the rubble directly in front of him. Letting some twenty rounds click off right at his position, Michael pivoted just as the rounds stopped, watching Commander Penniston and one of his SEAL Team members, as well as what looked like another ISIS fighter behind the middle-aged cleric, jump all over the HVT just as his clip had emptied.

Scanning right then left, Michael caught another target on the third level, through his night vision—firing. That target fell forward through obliterated outer walls of a building that once was, 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 rushed forward with Mason, Acres and Thomas, hearing Commander Penniston shouting 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, who had jumped on top of the HVT, looking to be maybe mid-thirties, 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 finally 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, motioned Michael to keep his muzzle trained on the last remaining ISIS fighter.

“Eric Clapton. Jeff Beck.” Commander Penniston provided the prescribed 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’ lifeless body was being held up by 8Ball. Mars had given Michael his SEAL call-sign—Scout—like he needed another anyway. SRR members named 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: *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. Globalhawk has eyes on. 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 offering in a tone weighted in the shade of combat, “I got Mars.”

“Sure thing,” 8Ball acknowledged, releasing Mars into Michael’s hands as Michael tossed the two-hundred pound, high-and-tight-cut, KIA Mars over his right shoulder for EXFIL. Terry coming up on Michael’s 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 it, for there were not enough bullets and bombs on Earth to do so.



(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 while 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, though not yet tattered, in the stiff breeze. Upon the standard, a gold phoenix on a blue background seemed 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 verdant grass 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 and magic 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, potatoes, eggs, and ham.

Opening the door to the establishment, Ethan quickly scanned inside, not seeing his friend and he would have classified as 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. *Damn, I need to have my hearing checked!*

"Brigance," Ethan offered in a slightly exasperated reply. It wasn't the first time Brigance Fireheart had made a fool of him and likely 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," Brigance posed to 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 ever 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 large, intimidating white wolf just inside the open front door.



(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 Damon's complete trust, 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 but his innermost circle.

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 spiked with living poisonous thorns 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 inquired in a friendly tone, 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 as he paused his sketch-in-progress. "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?"

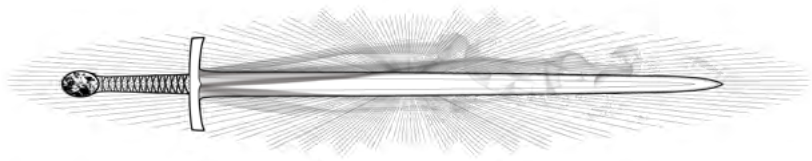
"Boy, I love a challenge!" Goldenbow's million-watt smile was enough to chase away even the menacing aura of the *Staff of the Invoker* as he jumped off the desk, pivoting back toward Damon. "You've still got one of my arrowheads, right?"

"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)

While preferring to do most work in his secret, fourth-floor study, today's work 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 so many centuries ago. 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 below 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 heavy iron clamps to maneuver a large, enchanted ingot of metal, heating it in the fire. This heavy task and all the ones leading up to it were taking their toll on Damon's significant constitution. Exhaustion came rare to him, but he was certainly testing his endurance with this artifact. *A challenge finally*, he acidly realized, twisting the molten ingot again to heat treat it evenly. He was no master blacksmith, but this task was one he had done many dozens of times before, though never with such a complicated artifact as the one he was making now. No doubt with its intended and ultimate use, this *weapon of unmaking* needed to be far different than all the other artifacts that came before. Twisting the enchanted, molten ingot again, he assured smooth distributed heating—all its surfaces a beautifully hot amber-gold.

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. Hours he worked—stretching then folding the metal back on itself again and again, then flattening it again each time, Damon forged into the piece the strength, durability and flexibility for the blade to perform its singular function. Pinched in between a vice to hold it steady, he struck a deep gouge down the length of the blade on both sides that would become the fuller that terminated at the tapered center ridge about one-third from the blade's tip.

The warm glow from the forge highlighted ever-so-faint scars of a tormented childhood about his chest, back, neck, and shoulders. The result of his *cauldron of hate*.

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 tirelessly 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, now 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. To owed debts...

With a scowl, it raised to its feet, standing some eighty cubits tall. Taking a deep breath, it exhaled a very accurate directional burst of white-hot fire through its enormous, razor sharp teeth 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-gold as he guided it down into the oil, ensuring the entire blade was straight and pointed at a perfect magnetic north, so as not to warp the blade as it quenched for strength, 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 massive, diamond-hard teeth of the Gold Dragon that had helped him. Snorting puffs of smoke through its nostrils to clear its airways, it chose 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 private, fourth-floor study first. Knowing exactly where to look and having an organized library helped. He quickly snatched the required spell and blank parchment, opening and walking through a *Portal* to the cavern below. 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 and his controlled emotions into characters and runes on the blank parchment. He had been building this spell in his mind for months. It need only to be documented to be made manifest 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 the energy he sourced from Arcane, Damon held up his right hand, casting first into the prison and dispelled the shield that had held his captives. When nothing appeared to happen, save the dispelling of the shield, he raised his left hand, causing a white-hot stream to burst into existence from nothingness, shooting its energetic stream, about the width of his forearm, 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 as one might expect from *Damnation*. Nothing. Only the slowly turning blade remained, now gleaming with an exceptionally hard edge, sharpened by the souls

it now housed. *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, vanquishing the darkness of Dallia's cavern. 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 this moment, within his Master Plan, 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 al-

ways 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 or 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?"

"Sooooo 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 suggested 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 into 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 darkened-cloud-penetrating moonlight off metal, likely a knocked arrowhead. Weaving another custom crafted spell, a pebble-sized ball of lightning raced forth from his upward-facing right 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 mushrooming debris cloud overhead, drifting back in Damon's direction on a bitter, chilled, evening breeze. A brief satisfactory smile appeared on the hard planes of 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 tear his legs from his body. *Ironic*, he thought. *Would she kill him with one of his fa-*

vorites? This spell 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 his protective shield, had wrapped around almost all of his lower body. Their lanced stingers finding flesh through his herringbone charcoal-blue 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 about his flesh. He could already feel their poison taking hold—his vision starting to shift and blur 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 rubble, his mortal shell starting to break under the tendril's iron grip. Already he could smell his own bile from his broken body and the acrid taste of it upon his lips and parched tongue just as the air around him became perfumed with sulfur and the howls of all things unholy and rebuked.

It clearly wasn't safe to show *her* face to him, but she wanted to be sure Damon saw that it was her who had beaten him before his torn entrails were strewn all over the sanctified 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 coals—a shark rolling back its eyelids before sinking its teeth into a meal of flesh. Chara's flowing red dress—quite simple for her standing yet slit high enough to expose her fair skin—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 jeered, wanting him to live *only* long enough for her face to be the last thing he ever glimpsed.

But just as she got close, powerful gusts accelerated more and more as she neared his broken body; his chest still heaved as he gulped for air that wispily seeped 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, chilled, evening 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 debris 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 upon the shattered headstone where Damon's body still clung to life.

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 molten

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 who or 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 at her later! If she survived the night...

Kneeling over Damon's broken 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 curves shone in shimmering golden and red tones in the blade's firelight. With hair of golden silk and abyssal eyes, she laid her left hand upon 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, further anchoring Damon to life in this world. All in what seemed less than an instant, as time appeared to still itself, the seemingly forged, golden-haired creature started toward Chara at a 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' 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 the front of her dress at just below her 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 her faculties 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 first thought.


Silvery-blue slashes in mid-air rent the Hellish evening in a rectangular doorway to another place before them as Chara ran toward the *Portal* before it had even finished forming.

Leaping after her with all possible speed, 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' 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 and where his 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 irises of his eyes, the tears of yet more loss came as Damon slumped against the severed headstone where Chara had *again* 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 broken and destroyed granite headstones, ensuring the desecration of *each* and *every* one, stepping atop each grave in disrespect and loathing. 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 large piece of headstone debris; 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 raven 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. What was there left for him to lose?

The irises of her eyes were two amber flames in response as it continued to lovingly stroke and caress Damon’s raven locks. 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, *it*, 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, or *its*, *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 from his perspective at this temporal branch of his life, but he knew her well enough to know she'd take his offer. The *only* thing she, *it*, wanted was more power, and *he* was the *only* one who could, or would, deliver it.

It gave him one, and one only, accepting nod. Then *it* was suddenly gone with a stiff breeze. No sound or theatrics accompanied the Dragon's departure. Damon surveyed the hellish landscape ensuring the planular rift he had summoned had now fully closed. *No more surprises*, he assured himself cautiously. Turning back to look over to Banthis, he saw her beautiful and whole again and starting to breathe where Chara's *Portal* had severed her immortal shell moments before. As he got up to walk to her, he felt himself whole again without a scratch nor bruise, having his full mobility restored. And... He noticed a place planted in his thoughts—a place where he could find Chara. Wasting not another instant, 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. Now fully 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, wound, or pain, she started to upright herself with her right hand still holding her katana, leveraging 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 her brilliantly mad and wayward husband.



(Damon's Manor, Kaleion, Present Day)

Hard breath pushed at the comforter to let him feel the illusion of his freedom 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 those answers would *not* be found on his homeworld.



Chapter 7: Forgiveness Sought

(Stirling, Perion, Present Day)

The 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 celestial bodies 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 and free labor.

Formerly a tracker of some notoriety, Rowarc led by example as his workday 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 off-white, 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 as he made flirtatious eye contact with a beautiful, buxom, curly-haired redhead in a pretty lily-colored handmaid's dress who winked back at him before giggling something into the ear of a plump girl who walked alongside her. *More chores*, he thought as he continued to run through his to-do list in his head. *Guests have to eat I suppose*, he smiled at another 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 siege by darkness. A doomsday weapon.

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—her 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, under the sphere 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, while others saw it for what it really was: dangerous. New streets went unfinished, and new building construction slowed to a crawl to satisfy the king's whims and 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 crowns 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. Reinvesting his money back into his labor of love. 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 awkward silence between them was doing untold damage and he didn't have a solution for it. Different generations he supposed. What did he really have in common with his legendary father other than blood?

Shoving those thoughts away and trying to remain cautious of who was around him, Radin fought his way through streets thronged with 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 a line of paying customers. An alluring young woman, with eyes of emeralds, flesh of silk, and strawberry-blonde locks 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 with virile eyes back past him at the young woman. Smiling, shaking his head slightly at his own thoughts of the strawberry-blonde-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 and 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 it 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 weathered stones 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 battered stone’s surface, causing his thoughts and memories to flash in his mind’s eye.

Was it humming, he wondered as he sat it back down on the shelf, stepping away from it as his senses of the here and now returned to him. 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*, he noticed looking at the bottom of it. Reaching into his pockets to see if he had enough of his own coin, he decided to pay for it with his own money, realizing his father would be furious with him if he knew.

Approaching the lovely young woman, he noted she couldn’t have been

much older than himself or any of 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, it 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-blonde 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. She wasn't a hard, forged girl. She was a soft curves, shapely girl. With the eyes and look of a woman.

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 at all. 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 delicately touch his palm as she passed the object.

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

He thought the radiant 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 advocated quietly, softly, leaning in over the counter towards her. The coy look and dangerous smile she returned him held promise and excitement. She was not a scared little girl. Not easily intimidated nor impressed. He was in unprecedented territory with her and that suited him just fine. "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 to-and-fro banter far more than she should. It wasn't 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 to over the years. Something behind his pretty, grey-blue eyes sang familiar songs to her soul. The features of his face looked...oddly familiar in a way. A dangerous way. Still, she liked what she sensed in him, and felt confident in its meaning. Her instincts about him were all saying good and noble things. Even now, as she examined him, with his auburn eyebrows cutely furrowed expectantly at her, he touched her in ways she liked without touching her at all. "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 by her as he held 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 ques-

tions 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 possibility 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 woodwork. 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 suffocate 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 the 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 and draw 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 and Elise's carving into his left. If anyone saw him with that, they would think him the thief, and there would be no explaining his

way out of it. 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 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 in thought 'til he could nearly feel his own heartbeat beginning to race. *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 would not have been able to pass for simply anyone were it not for the tattered cloak of a commoner. 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 fancied. He was becoming a man. Her only desire was to turn back for a final look, but... *Forgive me*, she begged of him 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.



Radia with the Amulet of the Five Gates



Chapter 8: Die Glocke

(Charleston, SC, Earth, Present Day)



brilliant, vertical shaft of silvery-blue light split the now highly charged air particles just outside the manor of Wolf Dietrich in the suburbs of Charleston, South Carolina. It was sweltering hot, and Damon was grateful that he wasn't wearing his full mage regalia, though he had to be judicious in his use of magic. He didn't want to leave traces of his skills beyond the transportation required to come and go as his *Portal* whooshed to a close behind him in transparent waves like unto a rock thrown into a pond, but inverted and transparent.

Dressed only in his UNTUCKit® navy short-sleeve, button-down, collared shirt and Levi's® 501 jeans, he did his best to adapt to the cultures and norms of his host world in this time period, for this was not his first time on Earth. He'd been here many, many times before... Throughout the centuries and epochs of this world.

Carrying a .45 ACP Glock® in the small of his back, covered by his shirt, he pulled out a 5.5" Android Smartphone and began texting Wolf, letting him know he had arrived for their pre-arranged meeting. Casually walking up to the ten-foot double-doors and brushing his long straight black bangs out

of his face, Damon smiled for the security camera, no doubt recording his entrance as he rang the doorbell. *He would have to take care of **that** before he left*, as he considered the possibility of his *Portal* being recorded, again smiling one more time for the camera. He could sense someone approaching from the other side of the door. All his precautionary spells were still working here; that was a good sign. Magic wasn't entirely dead here. Yet.

A healthy, but weathered old gentleman answered the door in shorts and a button-down short-sleeve grey shirt similar to Damon's.

"Dr. Dietrich, I presume," Damon proclaimed extending his right hand for a firm and cordial handshake in the customary exchange of pleasantries. "I want to thank you for making time to meet with me. I was so glad when you accepted my invitation. I'm a huge fan of your work," Damon offered, coming precariously close to a bold-faced lie, which would have been grotesquely out of the norm for him. Still, appearances had to be maintained. For now.

Damon could lie when lying was called for, but he preferred the operational standards of truth because truth made it easier to buttress your flanks upon solid foundations. Truth made it easier to build and maintain Allies, while simultaneously making it harder for your enemies to undermine your work.

"Oh, no need for all that flattery, son. I'm well past the need for that at my age. Won't you come inside and tell me why you've come so far? You mentioned you came from Austin—that's quite a long trip. You must be tired from that drive."

"Oh, it wasn't quite so bad," Damon smirked—not making much effort to hide it either.

"Well, we can have our meeting in my study if you want. That way we have my books close by if we need them for our conversation." His English was quite good and without much of an accent for his German heritage. Some of the Germans had adapted well to living in the states. Some had deep German accents to this very day—if they still lived at all. WW-II was a long time ago, considering these Earth Humans and their very short lifespans, so he counted himself fortunate to even be able to have this meeting. First-hand information and accounts were always better than reading from a book, so he needed to seize this opportunity with this Paperclip scientist.

Wolf started to lead the way to his study while Damon followed behind him and to his right. "You studied physics at the University of Texas is that right?"

"Yes, that's right," Damon replied nonchalantly. "I just wanted to talk to an authority on Die Glocke. Really needed someone that was part archeologist, scientist, and historian. Your name was the only one that kept coming up

again and again. So, I'm very pleased we could finally talk."

"Yes, yes. Like I said, my Son, all the pleasantries are not necessary," Wolf mildly protested, taking his seat just a couple of feet away from his executive desk—his back up against one of three walls dedicated to floor-to-ceiling built-in bookshelves. This man liked his books; Damon could relate. Pointing to the diamond patterned, pleated, coffee-colored wingback opposite his own, Wolf motioned for Damon to take a seat. "Tell me, how can I help?" Wolf began sipping on a steaming cup of tea that had been resting upon an oval, mahogany coffee table with inlaid maple scrollwork as his feet rested upon the warmth of the area rug beneath the table and chairs.

Damon pulled out a single gold coin sitting it on the coffee table between them. "For your time, Sir. I just want to make sure you understand I'm not here to take up your time for free. I imagine you get bothered all the time, and I'm not the bothering type." Damon smiled disarmingly as his eyes never bothered to look at the ancient and weathered gold coin he'd offered. Priceless in age and rarity—regardless of its weight. Damon could be exceedingly disarming when necessary. Kellen always said, 'Damon's best weapon was how close he could get to you before you knew how close to death you were.'

"Oh... Well." Wolf cleared his throat, examining the coin from a distance, not wanting to be so gauche as to pick it up while talking to his guest. He had never seen one quite like it. *Perhaps it was Roman.* "How can I help?"

"Let's talk about toroidal field energy. I'm very interested in finding out what you know from Die Glocke experiments and observations about how the Nazi's tapped into this energy field, or at least found a way to measure it."

* * * *

(A few hours later...)

The clock was ticking, but Damon took the necessary time to find the safe room where the security camera feeds recorded in one centralized location. He needed to be sure he took care of any recordings before continuing his search through the house to see if anyone else needed to be erased. Taking care of Dietrich only required his bare hands, but still, he had to remove any trace of his presence. The four flat panels, each with four independent camera feeds and a series of low-voltage wires chasing down a flexible conduit, assured him that he was in the right place. The house was loaded with CCTV cameras. Looking around, he noticed some lower cabinets with blinking lights shining from in

between the door seams. Looking inside the cabinets, he saw what he knew to be two computers. Ripping out their power cords and stealing their hard-drives should take care of the problem. Just to be sure, he searched the upper cabinets too. “Good thing you looked,” he breathed aloud as he found a NAS drive, most likely the persistent destination of the digital video, and he smashed it to the floor, putting a bullet through all four drives in the NAS and two more in each of the other drives he took from the computers. *Gotta move fast now. So loud,* he admonished internally as he holstered the .45 ACP back into the small of his back. Another ninety seconds and he had searched the vast majority of the rest of the manor, not finding anyone else he needed to neutralize as he walked out the front door with a few advanced physics books under his left arm. *The Zero-Point Field, Einstein’s cosmological constant, Dark Energy, Thermodynamics, and Garrett Lisi’s Unification Theory* would keep Damon busy for some time as he went back into his concentrated development mode. With a mere wave of his right hand, a fissure of energy split and superheated the air in front of him as he found himself back home—worlds and many lightyears away. Damon was grateful his *Portal* spell still worked on a world now so devoid of magic. Even if barely so.


Part 3: The Rapture

I long to be both raptured and caged
by your love immortal;
To feel the threads of time intertwine between us
‘Til there is only eternal bliss,
And all my memories, both near and far,
Are of you, My Darling Love.



Chapter 9: Surrender

(Stirling, Perion, Present Day)

till hard at work, Rowarc d'Aguillon was about his typical day, trying to do ten things at the same time—normal for this time of year. This would be a very busy, and hopefully profitable, next couple of weeks for him during the annual festivities. The inn had been filled to capacity the past several nights, requiring him to hire extra help in the pub downstairs. He hoped the two new girls would work well for him. They certainly cost enough. Brushing back his short black hair now graying at the sides, he began repairs on a chair broken nearly to splinters by some fat lummoX who couldn't handle his ale any better than a little schoolgirl.

Hopefully, with the addition of the new help, Radin could hold things together until he could get back. It was a lousy time for him take on extra work, but this tracking job was too big of an opportunity—beyond just the extra coin. It was a chance to get out and do something he sorely missed, perhaps even to find his own way again now that Arella was gone. With all the

money these men were offering he could finally afford to make major additions and improvements to his inn, or perhaps... *Hmm*, he thought, *with Arella gone and Radin grown...* Rowarc quickly shook off those thoughts before they unleashed a wave of guilt and betrayal he did not need to deal with right now. That was no way for a boy to grow up. Besides, it was only a temporary arrangement. There was no room in his life of responsibilities for traipsing about the world anymore. That time had come and gone...

One concern still bothered him as he went about his repairs: in this city alone, there had to be at least twenty experienced trackers of at least some renown, many of them much younger and still in their prime. So, *why did they want him?* *Ah*, he thought, *You're making more out of this than there is. If you look for dirt in an alley, you're bound to find plenty!* Not that these men were of untrustworthy backgrounds, but something was definitely going on that they were not sharing. He felt their treachery afoot and had learned to trust his instincts. After years of retirement, his senses may have been rusty, but they were not dead. He could smell it, but in this line of business, there was always something that neglected to be mentioned. Some trades just revolved around trouble—such was a major reason he retired from it. It was a rare man, an honorable man, who showed you his true intent right from the start. That was just the nature of the business. You just didn't hire a professional tracker if you didn't have something you wanted to keep from the local authorities.

Oh well. If they want Rowarc d'Aguillon to come out of retirement to find some wealthy noble's stray little girl, so be it. Besides, shouldn't take long to find a stray woman, he thought sarcastically, just stick my head outside and look in any direction. This was going to be like finding a particular needle in a stack of needles, but nothing he hadn't done before. He just hoped the trail wasn't ice by now. The urgency to start about her trail gnawed at him in the back of his mind.

Frowning, and wondering where that boy of his was, Rowarc tied a string around the chair to hold the pieces in place giving the glue time to set. *Where is that boy?*

Rowarc's brown eyes nearly tripped over their sockets as he beheld the sight that walked through the front door, only to be followed in by his very late and wayward son, who had hold of her *by the hand*. Rowarc harrumphed boisterously, searching for the right words as he fumbled to get the glue off his hands. It was not the first time Radin had brought home someone special for him to meet, but they usually didn't leave him a stammering idiot. *Is there a right thing to say?* *Oh well.* "Radin," he said with a long pause followed by, "My Lady." *Was she a lady?* She looked between a lady and a girl... With an air of aristocracy. Appearing more nervous, his eyes kept shifting from the girl to Radin, then back

to the strawberry-blond girl, apparently in an attempt to get the greetings out of the way before he stumbled all over himself.

Noticing his father's discomfort and not wanting to prolong it too terribly long, Radin motioned to Elise, "Father, this is Elise." Elise curtsied for him, while Radin beamed with studded pride.

"Don't suppose you found anything in that flea-infested place Stirling calls a market, did you?" Pausing while he placed the repaired chair upside down on top of a table to dry, "I swear that place is full of nothing but thieves stealing from crooks."

Not exactly the greeting he was hoping for from his father... Radin visibly cringed looking to Elise, wishing his father had asked where they had met before making that comment. Who knew what his father would say next, but whatever it was, he knew the odds were pretty strong that it would be even more embarrassing than the last. *That has to be the primary role of a parent, he realized, to completely embarrass their offspring.* Radin looked to his father as if trying to tell him to shut up with his eyes, then back to Elise, finding her trying to hold herself together instead of cracking up—deciding instead to just drop it.

Apparently, she found the omission of how they met *both* adorable *and* priceless. She seemed content to let Rowarc dig a deeper hole for himself.

"I swear if there is but one honest, reputable merchant amongst the whole lot of them, I'll bend over buck naked in the center of the street," Rowarc proclaimed with a flourish that caused both hands to land perfectly on the cheeks of his butt.

Radin couldn't stop his hand from involuntarily moving to cover his face from the horror of it all. Elise burst out laughing, nearly splitting her side despite her desperate efforts to muffle her reaction.

"Okay, Dad, we're gonna be going now!"

"But... But...", Rowarc protested with his hands outstretched apologetically.

"Radin, don't forget about the things you bought," Elise offered in a sweetly innocent tone that was anything but. Radin wasn't sure if Elise had brought that up to prolong his suffering, or if she was genuinely trying to be polite. *No*, he was sure now, she was definitely *not* being polite! Gruffly running his fingers through his long auburn hair in much the way his father had done only a moment before, Radin tried to shake off the uncomfortable feeling of being this close to his father with a beautiful woman that he desperately needed to impress rather than scare her off with his father's rapier wit.

"Oh, yeah...", Radin paused, giving Elise a look of certain reprisal which she merely welcomed with a wink, "I guess I forgot. What, in all the excitement and everything...", again pausing—glaring, "Elise helped me pick

out some really nice things. Here,” he mentioned, placing a bag full of ornaments, trinkets, sculptures, and nick-knacks on the countertop in front of him. Rowarc appeared satisfied—even a little impressed as he rifled through the bag, making note of what they had picked out, all apparently very nice choices. “And there was a little left over,” Radin remarked, handing over the change.

Rowarc was obviously stunned, but never without comment, “And, you got these things from *Stirling’s Marketplace*?” Rowarc thumbed through the change, more than forty silver pence in all. Shocking.

Radin sighed. This was too much. His father had to know he was tormenting him by now. Intentionally. Surely, he was not that blind. Maybe he just didn’t care. *Yes*, that had to be it. Elise couldn’t help but chuckle again. *That was it. It was a conspiracy. It had to be! They were **both** having fun at his expense.*

Radin simmered as he looked to Elise, examining her—watching for anything that might give her away. Seeing the expression of doubt and inquiry on his face, she knew she had caused enough damage to his ego for now. “Well, it was nice meeting you, Mr. d’Aguillon,” Elise proffered as she pulled Radin along by the hand. Leading him just outside the inn, and hopefully out of earshot of Radin’s father, “I’m sorry...”

“Sure, you are...” Scruffily running his fingertips through his hair again.

“That was just too priceless to pass up. You understand, don’t you?” Her eyes sought forgiveness and seemed quite genuine. Just as he was about to say, ‘yes,’ he was caught in the most awkward of all moments as her face drew nearer to his. Her hands pulled him closer. His throat became dry in an instant that seemed to last forever, as her soft lips enveloped and tasted his bottom lip and tongue. His heart raced then stopped as he tasted her back. Closing his eyes, he let her lips tenderly drape across his in a move indicative of her having more experience than him; blood surging through him with new life. Inside, he felt it. Something beyond the physical... At that moment, he felt the gentle caress of her immortal soul. Something magical had just happened. Slowly, and with great tenderness, he began kissing her back, caressing the side of her beautiful face with the backs his fingertips. *Had something indescribable been captured or caged between them?*

Physically his heart was pounding and his blood surging, making everything more vivid and sensitive to her touch. With his eyes closed, his consciousness felt the caress of her energy and her light that seemed in search of something inside him.

Still inexperienced at all this, he opened his eyes to see she was looking right through him. He stopped for just a second, still caressing her face. Her mood had completely changed in that instant. Her countenance was one of seriousness, knowing, and something else his limited experience couldn’t quantify.

“What is it? Is something wrong,” he brooded, trying to commit himself fully to the moment. Previous girls had told him he wasn’t ‘in the moment’ enough when he was ‘with them.’ He didn’t understand how he could be with a girl and ‘not be with her,’ but *such was the logic of girls*, he thought. *She might look like a girl in some ways, but she kissed like a woman.*

“I... It’s nothing. Nothing...,” she lied.

Her reassurances were not at all convincing. She had completely changed from a young lady of wit, humor, and confidence to one of... She was afraid—terrified. *Had he done something wrong?* With her now shaking in his arms, Radin pulled her closer, holding her tight as he caressed her back. Still, she shook as if nothing he could do could calm her. “Hey. Hey. It’s all right. It’s gonna be all right.”

“What if it already is?” Her expression, her mood, and everything about her changed again in an instant, as she kissed him deeply once more.

He didn’t know what to do but hold on. It had taken her only an instant to work her way into his heart, and already he prayed it would take the rest of eternity for her to work her way out.

A blinding, waking vision of white light upon a great lake of crystal with a booming voice from beyond rocked Radin as the combination of Elise, and the waking vision, appeared almost too much for him to hang on to the reality around him, causing him to briefly lose his stance and stumble sideways.

Pulling away from her and the seductive and perfumed, feminine scent of her long strawberry-blonde hair, he felt the passion and excitement she had invoked coursing through his veins bringing him back to a reality still electrified by all things Elise. The intoxication of sensual success weaving its tapestry of confusion on a young man’s mind. It was perhaps more potent a spell than anything manmade in the way it could completely annihilate all male reasoning. Smiling, Radin pulled the amulet he had found from his pocket, holding it out for her. Her breath immediately caught in its magnificence; her eyes sparkling in fascination and curiosity at the sight of its beauty. *What is it with girls and jewelry? They would have to pick the most expensive things. Oh well, at least she could be impressed with a fake.* “Here,” he offered, placing it into her hands, closing her soft fingers around the artifact. “It probably isn’t real, but it’s pretty and I want you to have it.”

She loved his rich and throaty voice for such a young man—a myriad of places and cultures but with a strong common-tongue accent, speaking of his whole life raised in the area. “But, but... Radin are you sure it’s...?”

“What?”

Elise couldn’t help but smile. She opened her hand to take a closer look at it without appearing to examine it in front of him—she would wait ‘til later

for that. But she was already fairly certain... "Where did you get this? It's incredible!"

"I found it on the ground when I was looking for a gift for you. Somebody bumped into me, and I guess they dropped it." Radin appeared guilty for a moment. "Maybe we should turn it in. I wouldn't want to get us in trouble."

"Turn it in to who? Who would we be in trouble with?"

"Don't know. Either it's real and belongs to some royal family or some such thing. Or maybe a very wealthy merchant, but like I said I'm pretty sure it's a fake so there's really no telling. I can't imagine anyone being careless enough to drop something like that if it were real." *And, not have paid me a special visit by now*, he caustically mused to himself, briefly turning to look down the alley as if that were not such a far-fetched idea.

Elise smirked. "Well, you know that if it is part of the crown jewels, we can look it up and find out. Surely there would be some writings about such things here locally."

Radin nodded knowingly, though he had not considered that before. Smiling, he offered, "Well, I don't want to give it up unless we have to. So, let's hope that we can keep it. And, if so, it's yours. Let's just hope the thing doesn't cause us more trouble than it's worth." His managed smile seemed fragile at the possibility that it just might be.

Smiling a half-smile, Elise held him, quietly putting the pieces together in the secrecy of her own thoughts. The way he kissed, his voice, his gift, and the stranger who 'dropped it,' all mocked her from the void of her very long journey here. *Who was Radin d'Aguillon, really?*



Chapter 10: Heartstrings and Moonbeams

(Stirling, Perion, Present Day)

The warmth and soft comfort of Radin's bed had been welcome after the long and eventful preceding day, not to mention the steady schedule of traveling from one town to the next in her tireless search. Standing at the bedroom window, watching the street below for Radin's return, Elise slowly, nervously, fingered the jewels of the beautiful amulet while she waited. He had only been gone a short while, but already she missed him—thoughts of him racing incessantly through her mind. *Ridiculous*, she chided internally. *Already swooning over him... A little caution might be best at times like this, rather than tripping over heartstrings and moonbeams.*

Frowning while mentally shooing the last thought away, Elise set the sparkling amulet down on the bed, smoothing the soft, cream pleats of her summer dress. No longer able to resist the urge, Elise began to wear her way through the floorboards, pacing to and from the edge of Radin's room; only to find herself back by the bed's edge and the mysterious amulet after satisfacto-

rily releasing enough of her pensive thoughts. Appearing to stare back up at her from the soft quilt bedding on each of her return trips, the amulet quietly screamed at her for her attention. *Probably a fake*, she cynically considered. The amulet gleamed, faceted rays dancing in the morning light from its gilded and enchanted surfaces. Elise merely scowled back it warily. She'd seen enough significant artifacts across many worlds in her time to know better.

Sitting back down on the bed, cautiously picking up the amulet, Elise felt it for the first time—a powerful and ominous presence. It seemed to possess... Taking it to the mirror, carefully, slowly placing it around her neck, the confirmation slammed home with urgent immediacy. Elise ripped the amulet from her neck, as if it were a deadly viper, yet held it with the greatest reverence. Placing it down on the dresser and checking to make sure Radin had not returned, Elise reached for something she had kept hidden around her neck. Hidden between large, supple breasts, she pulled out a pewter Celtic cross, supported by a necklace of exquisitely elegant and delicate, beveled links. Not something a merchant might possess but a gift of undying love. Something of obvious far greater value and sentiment as tears came to her eyes just looking at it.

"Thank you," she whispered to the old and familiar cross, closing her fingers and thoughts around it and the profound memories it invoked.

She thought she knew when she kissed him for the first time, yet there was still much doubt. *How could such a thing be? This place, this young man, and there was something else...* Something she had not expected, but perhaps held at least some, if not all, of the answers. *Could her prayers have been answered so completely? Could her love have traveled this far? Would it have transcended even the coils of mortality?*

Elise fought tears of joy as she carefully placed the beautiful amulet around her neck, tucking it and her Celtic cross in between her bosom. Prickling at her soul like a crown of thorns about her head, she had no idea what it was—only that it did not belong to any king or monarch. It was meant for them—or people *like* them. Now the only questions were: *why them, and what powers did it possess?*

The door to Radin's room opened abruptly, catching Elise by surprise as she straightened the cleavage of her dress. Radin was as surprised as she, by the look on his face. His whole world had just changed in but a day, and he would never be the same. He did wonder how all this happened. It wasn't like this was his first experience with a woman, but none had come close to the level of power and influence she held over him already. He feared what influence a more prolonged exposure to her would have over him.

"Everything okay," he asked from the doorway as she settled down on the bed after quickly comporting herself.

"M'hum," she lied smoothly as if practiced at it while shaking her head innocently, though leveraging her beautiful eyes to help hide her obfuscation.

"I didn't interrupt you, did I... I mean, I can leave if you need some privacy."

Laying back down on his bed in anything but an innocent manner, she wrapped his thoughts in strands of seduction with the subtle moves of her body. A seemingly innocent enough brush of a thigh with her fingertips, followed by a nonchalant and completely unnecessary adjustment of the pleats of her dress, only to let them reveal a tad more for him than they had before. Her breasts pinched together by seemingly innocent inward motions of her elbows enough to cause a little more cleavage to show for him as the strands holding summer dress together around her chest strained.

How do they do that, Radin wondered, forgetting what he had just said—and everything else for that matter. It began to dawn on him that he was standing in the doorway—motionless—staring at her body moving seductively about his bed. And when his eyes did drift over her flesh, to her hemline, as she slowly moved her legs for him, to her flat stomach and soft breasts to her beautiful face, he found her smiling at him. Knowingly. He could feel his face and neckline blush and could only manage a gulp as he struggled to force his legs to move his body toward her. One foot in front of the other. The danger bells in his mind had shattered from ringing so hard for her seduction was all-consuming. Testing himself, he tried to recall the face of any other girl he had been with before, drawing a blank. *Hmmm*, he knew, *that's bad*.

Staring at her for a very long moment, which he was sure had been her intent, Radin slowly left the plate of food he'd prepared downstairs on the dresser at the end of his room, sitting down beside her, letting his right hand rest on the inside of her bare thigh just below the delicate hem of her dress.

"What are you doing to me," he asked, slowly caressing the inside of her thigh as he looked into her wide, aroused eyes glowing with misbehaving and mischievous intent.

Taking Radin's hand with hers and moving it just above her hemline, pushing up her dress so he could feel her warmth and wetness, she offered, "I could ask the same question." Now sitting up beside him on the edge of his bed, she let her pretty eyes linger into his as her neck and breasts flushed with surging blood for him, completely electrified and aroused to his every touch. Her chest heaved as she inhaled his breath and felt his intimate caress, her lips right next to his as they gazed into one another.

A hard and lingering, sensuous kiss formed between them as they met in the middle, both advancing toward the other simultaneously. Her experience showed through in the soft probing of her tongue against his. His physicality

pulsated against the delicate caress of her fingertips settled in his lap, enticingly working on him through his pants as he twitched and ached against her touch. Feeling the outline of his very swollen head twitch against her lingering touch and the bead of wetness she'd encouraged at its tip, she knew there was only one place this could now lead as his tongue licked hers and she arched her back for him, yielding her very sensitive and flushed neck and clavicle for him to devour.

She knew she was on fire for him... She could feel the way she was responding to his touch as her summer dress crumpled all around her for him. The slightest of tugs here. The most innocent of brush there and her tiny, little shoulder straps fell by the wayside, fully exposing her supple breasts to his lips as his index and middle finger found her center and liquescing seam.

Her experience easily had undone the knot that held his pants taut, letting his throbbing length spill into her waiting caress. She could feel every profoundly raised vein along his excitement for her as she teased him only mere moments before helping him find her velvety vulva and loving, teasing caress.

She couldn't be certain it was *him*, but certainty was often casualty to lust.

* * * *

"I should probably be going," Elise suggested sheepishly, brushing breadcrumbs off her and the quilt comforter as she got up. Her eyes and body language not comporting to her words in the least.

What was it with women anyway? Do they practice stabbing men verbally? Glaring at her and seeing more than just her words, Radin thought he would take a chance on her real feelings and of his own.

"Where will you go? Do you have a place to stay tonight?"

"No, not yet."

"Don't think so," he ordered in a voice beyond his years, shaking his head in protest. He smiled disarmingly as if preparing to force the issue without being too overbearing. Whatever she may or may not have been accustomed to, he was not about to let her stay outside the city walls. He had not just met the woman of his dreams to watch her get killed, or worse, with her carelessness or free spirit as he was certain she saw it. *She needs your protection, you dolt.*

She could see the wheels of his thoughts turning as she continued looking into his beautiful blue-grey eyes and could see what was to come. Right about now, he would be thinking of a reason to make her stay. "I was just kidding. I'd like to stay with you if that's okay. I really don't have any place that I would *rather* be."

Straightening his stance and cocking his head, perplexed, he was trying to figure out what exactly just happened. The warning bells had definitely shattered in his thoughts.

Relaxing—very nearly letting go, he took her hand in his, pulling her back down to the bed atop him, gently kissing her. Laying her head back down in his arms, Elise felt the relaxation from comfort and safety wash over her, *though she wasn't the damsel in distress he thought she was.* The road *had* been hard on her, and her body needed the rest. And sex... She hadn't realized how much her body had longed for such things until she'd felt it once again. Yes, she needed sex. *Was that such a horrible thing?*

Feeling Elise fall asleep in the protection of his arms, sleep did not come so easily for Radin. His mind raced with thoughts of Elise all night, as it had the night before, and now with her back in his arms, the thoughts and feelings only became stronger—like an uncontrollable torrent.

Hours passed...listening to the scuttle of guests checking in and out. He wanted to get up and help. He knew his father would be angry at his absence, but, at the same time, *would Rowarc really understand he was starting to grow into a man and having a man's needs?*

Time continued to pass in the torment from sleep being just out of reach, but in the confirmation of knowing happiness, and of the wonder of what may come of them. *Would it disappear as quickly as it had been found? Was it as fleeting as his father had often spoke of?* His father used to say, *leave it up to a woman to turn your world upside down in the time it took for the fleeting moments of dusk to pass before your eyes. Truer words never spoken,* he mused, shuffling his pillows in search of a comfort that might allow sleep. Radin wasn't sure if his last thought was a comforting one or not but could feel the haze of sleep forming over him—his eyelids becoming heavy. Not entirely sure whether in dream or not, Radin caught the glimmer of something inside her amulet as he finally drifted off. Dreaming of a foreign landscape in dusky repose and the glow of a molten star—seemingly on or very close to the ground—that would not be denied.



Chapter 11: Manifested Signs

(Stirling, Perion, Present Day)



waking to a beautiful woman rustling in his arms and gradually recalling the events of the past hours, Radin looked around, not knowing the time—seeing only the waning tawny rays of their star from the window. *Surely, we didn't sleep long enough for it to be morning again.* His father would have switched him already if that had been the case. Frowning and realizing he had neglected *all* his responsibilities, Radin wondered why his father had not come for him. *I'll need to thank him for the unexpected privacy.*

Looking around the room, wondering how he would get up without waking her, Radin recalled the mysterious amulet and his last thoughts before he drifted off to an elusive sleep. He wondered who it must have belonged to, and where they might find that sort of information without drawing attention to themselves. The last thing he wanted was for either of them to get in trouble for having that blasted thing. *It might not be worth the trouble if it's real...* But, if it *was* real, and they could find who it belonged to, *perhaps there could be a reward in it for*

them. Perhaps even enough to start out on a life of his own, maybe even a life with Elise. Where would they go? What would they do? Would she go with him? It was all too much to think about right now, but there it was regardless. The prevailing idea of independence and romance made it hard to think of anything else. He was becoming a man.

Again, she jostled her head in his arms, not that he could feel his arm anymore. It had gone to sleep a long time ago. Frowning, he thought, *how can she sleep so much? It must have been a long journey for her to Stirling—a journey from where? Where was she born? What was her heritage? Her background? Her culture?* There was so much about her he did not know, but the mystery and task of getting to know her was welcome in its newness. Thoughts of Elise and what she must be like continued to race through his head alongside his new waking dreams that hadn't bothered him of late and his dreams that had. He knew it would take time to truly understand her, and those dreams, if he ever did...

The thud of a closing dresser drawer brought him out of his thoughts. At this hour, the only one likely to be moving about was his father. Realizing this was the day his father had mentioned he may have to leave for a while, he carefully moved Elise's body off of him, so that he could at least say goodbye. He did not know, with things the way they were between them, if his father would leave without saying goodbye or not, but he wasn't going to take that chance. Sneaking out of bed without disturbing Elise was a challenge, but worth it to see her sleeping alone in his bed, with her strawberry-golden hair cascading off of his cream, pleated pillowcases and bedding. *By the Creator, he had surely made not many more beautiful.* Her body seemed so delicate and feminine in its slender, nude repose. So soft in its lush curves that formed her breasts that kissed his sheets laying on their side as she lay in a fetal position next to where he was an instant before. He could almost feel her relaxed breath peacefully exhaled in the space of his absence, wondering if this was as good as it gets...

Sighing, he closed the door behind him as he walked towards his father's room.

Pushing open his door just slightly and knocking on the door frame, he could see his father packing an old duffel with riding clothes, maps, and a thin black box, his father had always called his 'tools.'

"I wondered if I would see you again. You're obsessed with her already. Abandoning your work," Rowarc both chided and coached from beyond the doorway, packing for his trip.

"I wanted to make sure I got to say goodbye before you left," Radin meekly replied in a tone that recognized his deserved admonition, standing in the doorway.

"So, is the inn still going to be standing when I get back, or did you

plan to just let it fall into anyone's hands, abandoning it?"

"You're upset with me. I get that. I deserve that." Pausing. Thinking. "I'm sorry."

Rowarc turned, placing a few last shirts in his pack, trying to seem busy in an obviously awkward moment between them. "You have a good head on your shoulders when you choose to use it. I'm hoping you decide to use it, more than not, while I'm gone."

"That's fair, Dad." Thinking about how much he should share, Radin added, "I don't know exactly what to do about Elise, but I don't want to let her out of my sight. I might ask her to stay with me, and I don't know what she'll say to that." He thought about asking if that were alright with him, but best to simply do, rather than ask, where Elise was concerned. That's what he felt his father would have done. "I'm also planning on doing some research with her as soon as time allows, but I won't let that interfere with work. I promise."

"Mhmm," Rowarc nodded knowingly, recognizing his son becoming a man. Making his own decisions now, making plans, but *could Radin do all those things and still remain the responsible son he had raised?* That was somewhat still in doubt. *Women often got in the way of a man's responsibilities,* he scorned internally. "She's a sweet girl. I'm happy for you, Son." Just a few words of recognition but it made Radin beam with pride. He actually got a genuine compliment from his father—the first in a very long time.

"I'm glad you approve. Are you gonna tell me where you're going?"

Rowarc tried to appear too busy to answer his son's question, bustling around the room in search of nothing and everything.

"What if I need to find you?" Radin wasn't giving up just yet. He felt as if he and his father were on the verge of a breakthrough between them and he wasn't ready to let that elusive aim out of his sight.

"Look," Rowarc barked, "...you're going to have to trust me. Okay? I'll be alright, I know what I'm doing. And I'll be back before you know I'm gone. This shouldn't take that long. So, you just make sure that everything runs smooth while I'm away. I don't want to come back and find everything out of control. Understand?"

The words he had wanted to say for a long time seemed lost in the harsh words of his father, but still, his heart was heavy. Something felt wrong, really wrong. It was as if there was this pent-up tension between them and he was trying his best to bring them together so that the tension didn't break their relationship, but... "I...", he stuttered, "...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... I love you, Dad."

There they were—the words for which there was no defense. No parent could remain hard-edged when faced with the love of their child nor the mem-

ory of their child's laughter at play. There was only shame in the way he had treated Radin of late. Shame in the words he could *not* say. Taking a seat at the edge of his bed, Rowarc had to stop. He had to think for a minute about what he was doing and what he needed to say to keep it all together. His son was all he had left, and he loved him more than spoken words could describe, but he couldn't fix everything in just this one moment. *Too much broken and not enough time for...* Ah, I don't have time for this, Rowarc chastised himself. No, he needed more time, but something felt wrong. It all felt wrong. *Who was this guy? And why did he want him—specifically him?* Rowarc picked up his things and headed for the door. He stopped in front of his son, wanting to say something—anything that would help not leave too many things unsaid, but Rowarc's words failed him. Rowarc's chin moved, that way it always did when he was emotional, but he said nothing, preferring instead to pat his son on the shoulder on his way out the door, perhaps in a feign attempt to convey through touch what could not be spoken—at least not now. Different people spoke in different ways and not everyone was gifted with words. Rowarc was a man of action, deeds, and senses that paid attention to his surroundings. It was part of what made him a great ranger, if not a good father.

Radin turned, watching his father descend the staircase, disappearing out the front door. That nagging feeling from a few moments ago now screamed throughout every corner of his mind.

* * * *

Passing by the first alley past his inn, the clomp of his boot heels on the cobblestone streets provided the solemn atmosphere Rowarc needed to be alone with his thoughts. Just maybe, it would provide the answers he desperately sought—answers that had little to do with a stray girl. His foremost thoughts and hopes were that Radin would understand and grow into a stronger, kinder man than him. A more complete man, capable of properly raising his own children better than he had done with his own son. Losing Arella had brought him to his knees. A beautiful, loving mate and traveling companion for years on end. She had been his guiding force. He still remembered that day and would never be able to let it go. Losing Radin would surely kill him if he didn't end it all first, himself.

Watching the wooden signs of the local establishments sway in the early morning breeze on his way to the edge of town, Rowarc retraced the once familiar path to find an old friend he would need once more. Gripping the hilt of another trusted friend, Rowarc suppressed the thoughts of his son, recalling the skills and memories of vast experience he would need to stay alive.

* * * *

Dawn broke a while back, casting brilliant beams over the lush green land that was the Kingdom of Gawth. Radin sipped on hot tea, breaking off another piece of bread as he sat at the table next to one of the downstairs windows while a singular memory of his mom kept stirring in his thoughts. Radin was tiny at the time and had been very sick. He recalled waking in her arms as she rocked him slowly while she sang to him. It was his first memory of looking into her golden eyes, and some years had passed before he understood the significance of that. Some professions manifested signs in different ways just as surnames tagged a smithy. Some signs were best kept hidden.



Chapter 12: Bantthis

(Southlake, TX, Earth, Present Day)



Southlake Town Center, Southlake, Texas was *always* busy. You could barely find a parking space anywhere on the weekend, and forget about getting a table at The Cheesecake Factory® after 7:00 p.m. The two-storey, brick-and-mortar bookstore next door bustled with millennials, in their coolest frump gear, man buns, untucked shirts, and designer facial hair—all jamming on the Wi-Fi while pretending to read; in reality, people-watching or searching for that certain someone. The bookstore staff sneered knowingly, but what could you do? They were customers—sort of. Leslie fluffed long fingers through her long and beautiful, blonde wavy hair, wondering how many times she'd get hit on tonight. Even her husband's purchase of an even obsessively bigger ring, which could nearly be seen by satellite, didn't deter them. She pushed the book cart through the aisles, restocking shelves, answering the dumbest questions every five minutes—and *yes* there was such a thing as a *stupid* question. Of that, she was most certain!

She wondered if she was pushing it a tad too far with the black, satin mini-skirt, white button-down blouse and three-inch black and red heels, but *what the Hell?! She* was only twenty-one, still in college, and she needed to feel

sexy every now and then. In the back of her mind, she really didn't mind being hit on if they were cute. Not like it was ever going to go anywhere or anything. *Oh well, back to work*, sighing as she climbed the step stool, replenishing some stock on the top shelf.

"Shit," she barely got the word out as the ground rushed up to meet her from her sudden fall.

"Careful," unseen hands catching her mid-air like comforting and safe cushions of warm air pushing back against the left side of her ribcage, slowing and softening her fall until she could right herself.

Where did he come from? His right hand on her right scapula from behind as his left found the small of her back, helping her regain her balance by kicking the step stool out of her way. "Seriously, how did you do that? I didn't see you anywhere near me when I climbed on that stool."

"That..." He smiled at her as she pivoted to face him for the first time.

Oh my, she thought, *OMG that gruff smile and those rugged good looks*. She was in trouble now... *Was he Native American? Greek? Central American?* He had features of many cultures and of none with those hard, faceted planes about his face.

"That was nothing," letting the back of his fingertips graze and caress the small of her back while his right hand pulled wired earbuds from his ears, blasting *Led Zeppelin's Kashmir* as loud as his Android® phone would allow.

Those jet-black eyes and perfectly sculpted straight, though almost wind-swept, raven hair with those chiseled and tanned good looks. *Oh my, indeed*. He had this...dangerous look almost akin to Cherokee with those deep-set black gems of his. Her heart pounded as worry and apprehension crept into her thoughts.

"Leslie, you really should be more careful."

Okay, he was positively caressing the small of her back, and *was he checking her out too? Oh, crap!* "Hey, how do you know my name?"

His fingers went from the small of her back to her breasts. *Oh shit, did he have his hand on her breast—HERE??!!* He tapped her name tag with his index finger just over her left breast, and she felt as dumb as the dude in the man bun asking where to find the self-help books. At least that dude was in the right section of the store for him. *SERIOUSLY, woman get your crap together!* She berated herself even though he *still* had his hand on her breast.

"I'm Damon. Pleased to meet you." His hand moved to shake hers as she delicately offered hers to him. "Well, if you're okay and promise not to get on that stool without taking off your heels, I'll let you go."

"And if I don't?" *Wow, that was flirtatious. Holy crap, what's gotten into you?*

"Then I might just have to punish you!" A grin crept across Damon's hard-planed face as his eyes overtly and wantonly walked over every single inch

of Leslie's hot and very married body.

Did he just say he was going to punish me? Doing a double-take in her mind, she considered his seriousness. *Holy shit! And I bet he meant it too,* she examined those black eyes with her sapphire eyes. *God, he's hot!* Taking just a moment to take him in. He dressed somewhere between a collegiate senior and tech God—like one of those venture capitalists who made their first billion in their early twenties, but *way* hotter and a lot taller!

He smiled again, knowingly, wondering if he'd need to use magic to seduce her or not. She was far too beautiful to be working *here*. She needed to be with *him*. She should have been a model, but looking at that wedding ring, she obviously had a husband that was either super jealous or super insecure—most likely both. She definitely had the figure for the mini-skirt, but *he* envisioned her in something far more daring. He was such a sucker for a small waist with big breasts, blonde hair, beautiful facial symmetry, and blue eyes. He definitely had a type but preferred not to discriminate. All women were fair game in his eyes—married or not. Besides, the most beautiful women were always taken or spoken for in one way or another, so he certainly wasn't going to let a little detail like her marital status get in the way.

"So, what are you doing here?" She paused, *wait, that didn't come out right*. "...I mean; what are you here looking for?" *Shit, pull it together*. "I mean; can I help you find something?"

"What I'm looking for should be on the second floor according to your inventory management system," he held up his Android® knowingly, pointing to the reference location on the store map.

Boy, did *she* feel stupid?! She exhaled, looking down at her heels, noting the right one had snapped off during her fall. "Great," she thought aloud, exasperated at her own stupidity.

"It *is* a great app. Very helpful." He smiled again and suddenly she couldn't help but smile back.

What the hell was he doing to her?

"Leslie," he snapped his fingers a few inches in front of her face, bringing her back to planet Earth, causing her to beam for him again and sway towards him so he could brush up against her again. "...You can help me."

"Yeah?" Leslie beamed an even broader smile for him again.

"I'm in room 312, about two hundred feet that way," Damon proclaimed, pointing toward the Hilton® just outside and to the right from their southwestern-facing location. "I'll see you at 10:00 p.m. in *my* room for *our* date." Before she could even protest, about to hold up her wedding ring, he pulled her to him with his left hand nestled once more in the small of her back, kissing her, casting *Seduction*.

Leslie wilted completely and immediately in his arms, becoming hot everywhere throughout her body inside, and out. Tingling electrically from the tips of her toes all the way to her forehead as her eyes nearly glazed over in lust. Feverishly kissing him back in front of God, co-workers, customers, and everyone. Not caring. Her only thoughts of Damon. She couldn't even remember her husband's name as Damon's fingertips delicately caressed her beautiful face while his tongue caressed hers.

Breaking his kiss and pulling away, knowing she needed more, Damon was setting the tone for their date. She tried, in vain, to pull him back to her, but he was an order of magnitude stronger than her. He wasn't budging. "Leslie."

"Yes." She paused right at the edge of panting as she looked into his beautiful black eyes—helpless. The sweet, salty and sensual taste of him on her lips and tongue had already aroused her enough to flush her cheeks as she felt a tingling ripple upward from her solar plexus all the way up to her brow. "Damon." She loved his name; it was unique. He certainly was too. Very! Something about his age and accent was just so mysterious. He *had* to be much older than he looked.

"You are far too beautiful," he paused as she beamed for him again. "... to dress like that for our date. I want you in *next to nothing* when you knock on my hotel room door tonight, and I *don't want you to disappoint me*, or I definitely *will* punish you when you come to me."

Wow, she thought, *just WOW*. He was seriously giving her a command that he expected her to follow.

Damon walked away, leaving her to a slow simmer on his orders for her date attire, heading upstairs for the book on M-Theory he sought—his original purpose for coming to this particular store. It was an obscure book by a cosmologist who died shortly after writing it. Too bad. Damon would love to have picked his brain the way he had Dr. Dietrich. The book was only available in print, and this was the only brick and mortar bookstore in North America with that book in stock, and only one copy apparently left according to their inventory system. He needed to act fast.

He could have *Portal'd* in and right back out, but he didn't want to risk it. And he was in the general area anyway, so why not...? While there was plenty of living organic matter to support the use of Arcane, the belief in magic was so limited, the accessing of Arcane as an energy source here barely worked. It was a much different place the last time he was on Earth so many centuries before. Back then he could cast so much more freely—almost akin to his homeworld. Hopefully, his research, and subsequent work, would prove fruitful in making belief in magic an unnecessary requirement for his spells to work

the way they were intended.

Smoldering as she watched Damon ascend the ascending half of the twin set of escalators, Leslie balked internally. *Did he just walk away from me? From ME? Holy shit! Who does HE think he is? Giving me orders and expecting me to follow them.* Crap, she looked down at her wedding ring. *What was she going to tell her husband so he wouldn't be looking for her after 10:00 p.m. tonight?* She needed an excuse to give her a few hours alone with Damon, and she had to go shopping—like now. Damon expected her in *next to nothing*. *Hmmm*, she thought deviously, her naughty side seemingly now in total control of her body ever since Damon. *WOW!* That was seriously the only word for it—for him. *Just WOW in every way.* And she knew she was going to give herself to him completely tonight. In every possible way. She knew she couldn't say no to him and had no intention of even trying. Her body tingled everywhere at the thought of giving herself to him. And she couldn't wait!

Using her broken heels as an excuse, she went up to her boss and got the rest of the night off. Fortunately, working in a high-end shopping center had its perks. You could find pretty much anything you needed in walking distance—even with a broken heel. More pressingly, she was flushed and in desperate need of some strong *bourbon*!

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Barefoot in only his Levi's®, Damon started walking to the door before the first rap of Leslie's knuckles hit the outside of his hotel door, letting her knock before opening it so as not to raise too much suspicion. Leslie had long since fixed the heel issue, stepping into ones a little longer than those she broke a couple of hours ago. His eyes drifted up her long, slender, shapely legs as she stood there in nothing but a very transparent white babydoll, revealing perfect young flesh everywhere he looked. It plunged in a deep V-neck over her ample, tear-drop breasts, cut so most of her nipples were bare, and what was covered, might as well not have been. The hem of the babydoll had ten two-inch slits equidistant all the way around her waistline, and it was very obvious she had left her panties somewhere else.

Visibly licking his lips in lustful thoughts of devouring her before pulling her to him, Damon saturated her lips with his own. She had this delectable taste of cinnamon and honey on her lips and tongue as Damon began to devour her.

Leslie immediately felt hot all over, wilting again in this exotic man's arms as she caressed the outline of his ardor for her through his jeans, melting for him, willingly letting his hands roam everywhere he wished in his claim

over her body. Everywhere he caressed and kissed she tingled with little electric shocks that sent shockwaves of lust throughout her center. She was his.

The door to Damon's room thudded against the interior doorstep as he dragged Leslie into his room with both his hands gripped upon her wrists hard enough to leave marks. Shoving her lush curves against the wall where her back smacked against the sheetrock and cream wainscoting hard enough to knock some of the air out of her lungs, Damon rushed forward into her where his right knee wedged in between her legs—opening them as the front of his thigh throbbed and chaffed against her naked center. As his lips again devoured her beautiful neck and clavicle in trailed, sensual kisses that led from shoulder to just under her ear lobe, Damon stopped to inhale, smelling her scent of lilac and cinnamon that perfumed his room along with her powerful and fully awakened pheromones that had him aching for her against the inside of her thigh.

His right hand found her heart through the tepid fabric that barely made an attempt to cover hither and thither. And with his hand nestled in between her heavy breasts, their lips met again in sensual, sideways draping motions one against the other as he felt her heart pounding against his touch in anticipation of the inevitable.

It was all happening so fast, she didn't know quite how to register the brilliant golden flash of his black eyes before his teeth suckled upon the perfectly flush flesh of her neck, completely consuming her and leaving little love bites everywhere he desired.

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Laying nude on the room's king bed, Leslie stirred, shaking her head, wondering what time it was. She felt very hungover, but she'd only had those two bourbon-on-the-rocks at Brio's® before heading over to Damon's room. *Surely that wasn't... Hey, wait. What the Hell?* A woman that could only be described as beyond stunning suddenly lay nude next to and just slightly atop her such that her large breasts fit in between her own. The woman's fingertips electrified every part of Leslie's flesh, wherever she touched. "What's happening?" Leslie asked her, looking around for Damon, then looking into the color-shifting and deeply magnetic eyes of this magnificent woman lying atop her. Her hair cascading waves of blonde, then brunette, then auburn, then jet black. "What the Hell?"

"Interesting expression," Banthis mused as her fingertips teased Leslie's fully erect nipples in tender milking motions between thumb and forefinger. "I just wanted to see if you were having fun with my husband."

"*Banthis!*" Damon's tone somewhere between exasperated and pissed, he

practically leapt out of the bathroom where he'd been cleaning up, now wearing nothing but a towel. "Your timing sucks!!"

"I'm hurt," Banthis feigned offense while her wandering fingertips probed Leslie's center in ways that made even Damon raise his eyebrows.

Leslie was clearly in the middle of something she wished she wasn't, causing her to look between them, while biting her lower lip, trying to figure this one out. When she could look at all. Banthis had her *so very* distracted she could barely focus her eyes on anything at all.

Pointing his right index finger at Banthis accusingly, Damon chided, "...you know if you came to see me more than twice a year, I wouldn't need to go..." trailing off with that one while looking at a profoundly aroused Leslie. *Damn she was hot while being caressed by a nude Banthis like that!* But the wheels of his mind quickly started deducing the hidden agenda at work. Knowing Banthis the way he did, he didn't like where this was going.

"Darling, for you and I to be together more often, it would require you being dead, and you're *clearly* not done living..." Banthis motioned toward Leslie's nude torso with her left hand as her right hand found Leslie's most sensitive spots before allowing her left hand to return to sensually petting Leslie's beautiful body, exciting Leslie beyond words. Leslie's eyes rolling into the back of her head as her body climaxed again and again at Banthis' every touch. Her form now solidified, auburn-brunette hair down to her butt with bright green eyes—a reflection of Leslie's previously unknown and untapped sexual desires. "I think I'm going to have lots of fun with this one."

"Wait! Banthis!" Damon paused knowing what was coming next, trying to think of a way to... "What if I told you I liked this one?"

"Darling, of course, you like her. You just got her pregnant. And she's totally in love with you. And how's that going to work out with her *husband*? Are you going to take her back with you, away from her husband, and raise your child? I think not." The top of the mattress opened up beneath Leslie as hot amber tentacles pulled her down into a chasm appearing from nothingness. Two seconds later, Leslie was gone; the bed and mattress looked as if nothing had happened. Banthis acted as if nothing had happened, batting her beautifully long eyelashes at her adulterous husband as she pat the pillow next to her, motioning for Damon to lay down beside her.

"That wasn't necessary." Grudgingly, he complied, laying down so his legs entangled with hers, looking into her now beautiful sapphire eyes, her hair now the platinum blonde, and her breasts now slightly larger than Leslie's. This was Damon's preferred instantiation of Banthis and the one he married so many centuries before.

"Darling Love, you've got hundreds of hot, young girls out there you

need to impregnate. You're literally not done sowing your seed. You're not ready to spend the rest of eternity with your wife. *Not yet.* Besides, I was just doing what I do best." The wicked smile upon Banthis' face spoke of unspeakable things she would do to—and with—Leslie for time immemorial.

"Ha. Ha." The situation wasn't at all funny, but she was being truthful. Damon sniffed, considering his wife's powerful and potent abilities to seduce and consume souls, however necessary. Climbing a ladder of naked ambition common to all underworldlings but with uncommon success and tenacity where Banthis was concerned.

"Although, *she's* been giving me a lot more responsibility. Thanks to all the presents you've been sending me." She warmed her hands against Damon's bare chest, feeling him pulse with heat and energy underneath his towel that twitched upward against her wrists and forearms in anticipation of her every loving touch. Sometimes she wished she were alive. How mortals felt and how sensitive their bodies could be...

"Keep your enemies closer," he thought aloud, smiling at his wife.

"Precisely." Batting her eyelashes knowingly at her husband. "Oh, *she* knows. You didn't believe that you could hide it from *her*, did you?"

"Of course not. Her level of omnipotence has its advantages, but she doesn't know everything. There *are* gaps in her knowledge. She only knows the why and the who." *More than dangerous enough*, he thought to himself—especially if their plans failed. He already knew he wouldn't have the full element of surprise, but there are many accounts throughout the history of many worlds where overwhelming force, accompanied with the right tools and the right plan, didn't require the element of surprise to achieve victory. Still, he knew and felt a very persuasive conversation coming from their soon-to-be target and he wondered how he would handle it when that conversation inevitably came...



(Physical Cave Entrance to The World Below and Between, Kaleion, Recent History)

Dawn still a couple of hours away, they stood and talked, continuing their conversation from inside—where they first met *so many* centuries before. He was still in awe of *her* every time they met—her dark elven skin perfection incarnate. She was quite literally the definition of a living goddess.

Lithe, dark, and beyond beautiful, Evanyil stood there basking in full

moonlight with her radiant platinum hair and unique violet eyes, batting them at the doer of all doers. No one—not in all her lifetimes—could compare to Damon’s ability to get things done. That made him the only possible candidate for *this* task—the only one she could trust to get the job done right the first time and with no loose ends. And with this task, *there would be no second chances*. They would either all succeed and reap the benefits, or they would all suffer a fate far worse than any death imaginable. It was a zero-sum game of eternal death versus life immortal and unmolested.

Damon stood there in his full, charcoal-blue mage regalia, letting Evanyil caress, or rather pet, the top of his right hand as she peered into his beautiful *black mirrors of the soul*. They were so amazing lit up in that cool smoky aura, backlit by the perfect moonlight. He was an amazing specimen. She did love him—truly so. It wasn’t just physical love, or lust, between them. It was a love of trust, a love of reliability, a love of dependability, a love of so very much history together, and the love of rescuing one another more times than either could count. They had been a powerful team from the very first moment they met. They knew each other’s thoughts and could complete each other’s sentences, and they were just opposite enough to attract without driving each other insane. *Well*, Evanyil *would* fit the definition of insane already—with, or without, Damon. Even *that* he loved about her. She was just sane enough to be surprisingly lucid at times, and just crazy enough to come up with the most brilliant and unconventional thinking that frequently dovetailed perfectly with his structure and order.

The vines and dogwood masked the entrance entirely to the untrained eye, but they had been here so many times, they knew right where they were going—physically and otherwise.

“Sweetie, I’m not saying it has to be now-now. I’m saying I know it takes time to plot something of this magnitude, and I’d like to start the planning now.” So unusual coming from *her*—the realization of planning something like this. Evanyil was the act first, solve problems-on-the-fly personality. But, if she, of all people, was realizing the need to plan something like this, then she truly *did* have an understanding of the consequences.

He was trying to keep his thoughts focused and ordered as she continued lovingly stroking his hand, leaning her perfect body into his as she blinked at him with those magnificent violet eyes of hers. He knew he wasn’t being used—not really at least. *Was he?* It was the briefest of thoughts crossing across his consciousness as he replied, “Look, I’m just saying my biggest concern has always been about what happens after. I mean, we’re going to bring enough to this fight, I’m pretty confident we’ll win. The question is, in the massive power vacuum that follows, who gets what, when, how, where, and why are all

extremely important questions that need to be asked and answered before the first spell is cast in this war we're about to start. There has to be a viable path to a lasting equilibrium. That's all I'm saying. And forgive me for saying this, but you're not the 'share my toys' type."

Evanyil feigned insult pouting, but she knew where Damon was coming from. He had a valid point—he always did. "You're suggesting a meeting between myself and your wifey."

"I am."

A huff of derision at *that* thought from Evanyil. She didn't *hate* Banthis. They had largely stayed out of one another's way all this time, but Banthis took Damon away from her. It wasn't a jealousy thing between Evanyil and Banthis. More like, Damon and Evanyil were best friends, teammates, traveling companions 'til the end, and then one day Dallia came in and changed all that. And shortly after Dallia, there was Banthis and even more change came, driving an even bigger wedge between her and Damon. She detested the change that came with Banthis in Damon's life more than she detested Banthis herself. Evanyil knew she wasn't the marrying type, and neither was Damon and yet he'd done it—more than once already. Their relationship had been violently hot, then cold, then hot, then unbearably distant, then ethereal, then... Like two great binary stars orbiting one another elliptically only to cause spatial chaos every century or two they came close. The one constant between them was that they could count on one another, particularly when commitments were given.

He could see the wheels of chaos turning in that half-psychotic mind of hers and thought better to interrupt her train of thought before someone got killed—or worse. "Look, you two need to figure out who gets what when this goes down. I've known you a lot longer than I've known her but don't ask me to choose between you two. That won't be good for any of us."

"And what if I *am* asking you to choose me?"

"Evanyil, please don't. Please."

A batted eyelash, then a look down at the lush grass beneath them bathed in perfect moonlight as her spiders stood sentry around them, made Evanyil consider her options if it came down to it. "I miss *the old us*."

A broad smile from Damon—she loved his smile—caused Damon to reminisce. Thoughts of their first meeting flooded his mind...then their first time together in combat...then all the years she spent with him at his manor. They covered a lot of ground together—shared tremendous history with one another. Cupping her magnificent face, he kissed her—really kissed her—like their lives depended on it. *Was that because it did*, he wondered. "If this works, we'll have all the freedom to be whoever we want, to forge or reforge whatever state of relationship we desire. And, for the record, I miss the old us too. You

mean...,” he paused thinking as a lump formed in his throat, searching for the words that came slowly in her awesome presence, “...more to me than words can describe. You’re my last real living link to the past—at least that part of my past I remember with fondness. I adore you, Evanyil. Please don’t ever change.”

It was a strange, and rare moment, seeing a silvery, starlit tear streaking down the cheek of a living goddess, but she had what she wanted—for now at least. She had Damon’s commitment to execute the plan that would set them both free. Though, here with him tonight, in this perfect moonlit night, she wanted more... She wanted a future *with* Damon...*without* Banthis.