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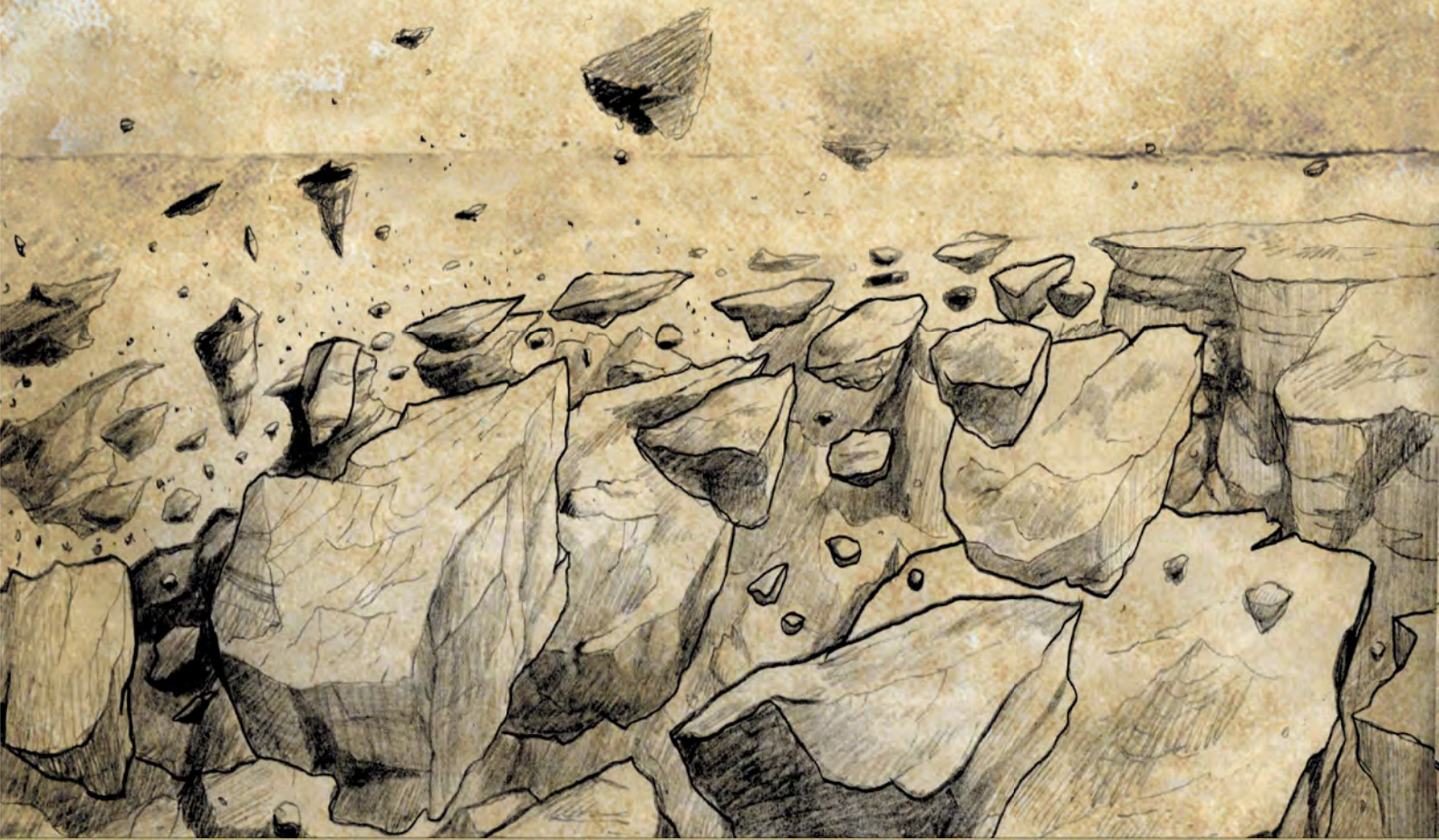
*Legends of  
the Ancients*

A FAN-MADE CAMPAIGN FOR  
*HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC V*

*WRITING AND DESIGN BY JULIEN PIROU*  
*ARTWORK BY JEAN-MATHIAS XAVIER*

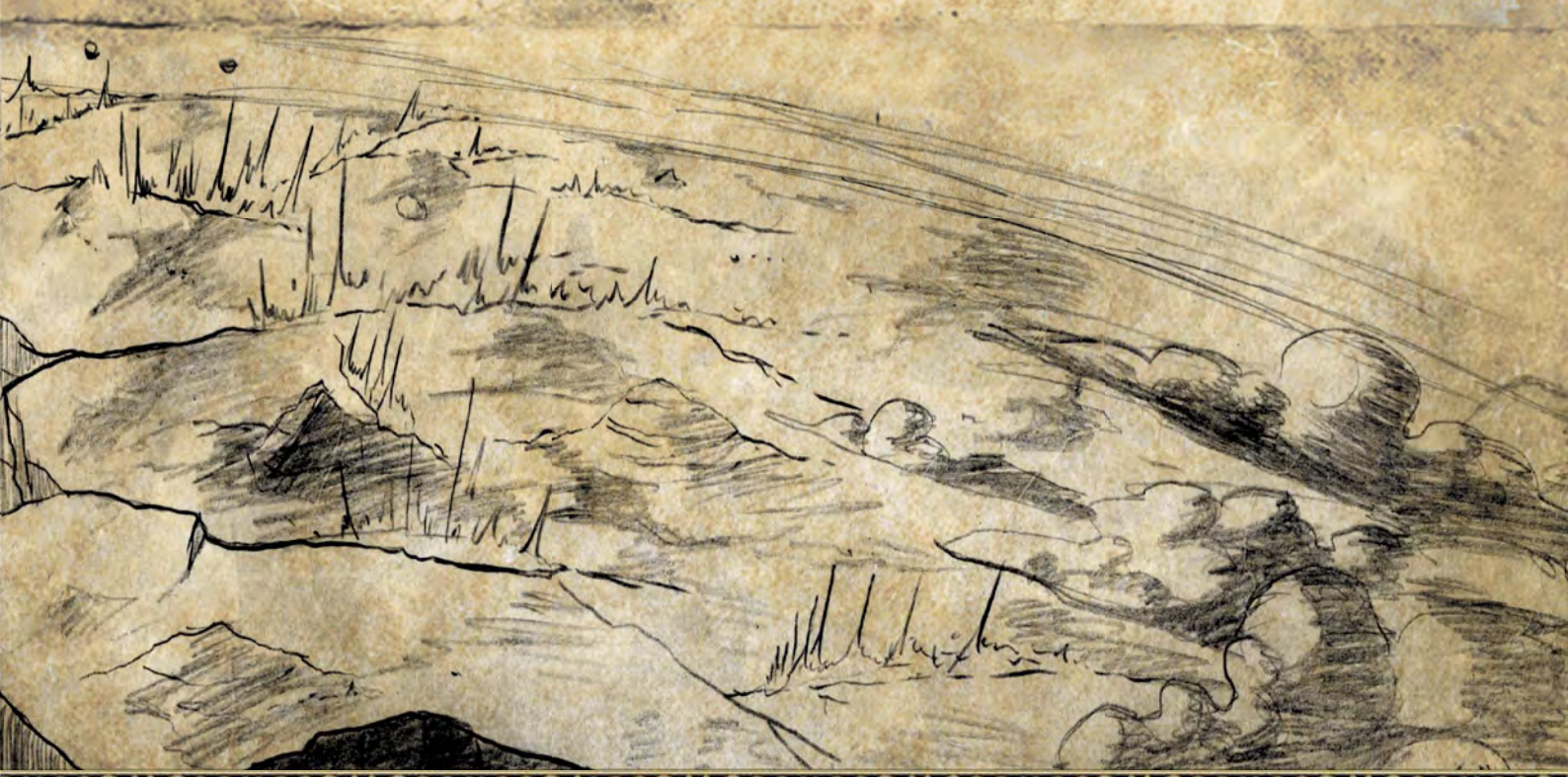
# EVERYTHING HAS A BEGINNING...

*Legends say that a long time ago, somewhere inside the infinity of the Void, a space was born where matter could exist. Immediately the four elemental powers of Air, Water, Fire and Earth appeared in this space, fighting each other for dominion.*




*Then, after aeons of raging Chaos, the Ancients, travellers of the stars, came upon this plane. They tamed the elements, stabilizing this corner of the Universe. When Order was finally reached, a new planet had been created.*

*And it received its name:  
**Axeoth.***



*But as powerful as they were, the Ancients were facing an equally powerful threat. From the depths of the Void, the Creators and their legions of minions had begun to wage a war against the Ancients. Soon the two races were locked in conflict, which took galactic proportions, with the supremacy over the Universe at stake.*





*No one knows which side ultimately won the Great War, but one thing is sure : the voice of the Ancients was never to be heard again on Axeoth. The Age of Wonders had ended, and the mortal races slowly forgot everything the Ancients had taught them. Of the Ancients and the Creators, all that was remembered were stories of heroes and demons.*

*This was the age of sword and sorcery, of*

***Might  
and  
Magic.***

*Empires rose and fell, civilizations shone and were shattered, heroes died and became legends. And finally, twelve centuries after the Great Silence, the Portals of the Ancients opened once again. Through them, thousands of refugees arrived on Axeoth. Their homeworld, Enroth, had been destroyed in an apocalyptic event known as the Reckoning, and they were ready to fight to earn a place in this world.*



*Fifteen years have passed since the day the Exiled came to Axeoth.  
The humans, dwarves and elves are rediscovering the legacy of the  
Ancients, and the Dark Age is finally coming to an end.  
But there are still stories to be told.*

*This is, after all,  
only another beginning.*





BELDONIA

HANNDL'S GRASP

CHEDIAN

RySH

FRAMON

QASSAR

SEA OF

VERHOFFIN

CHANNON

KORRESAN

MENDOSSUS

ARBOR'AL

NYB

ETENDAR

TRIBAL LANDS

SULDUSSAR

SEA OF SENJAK

ORILIOS

DARASHANN

ULUDIN

DEVONSHIRE

LODWAR

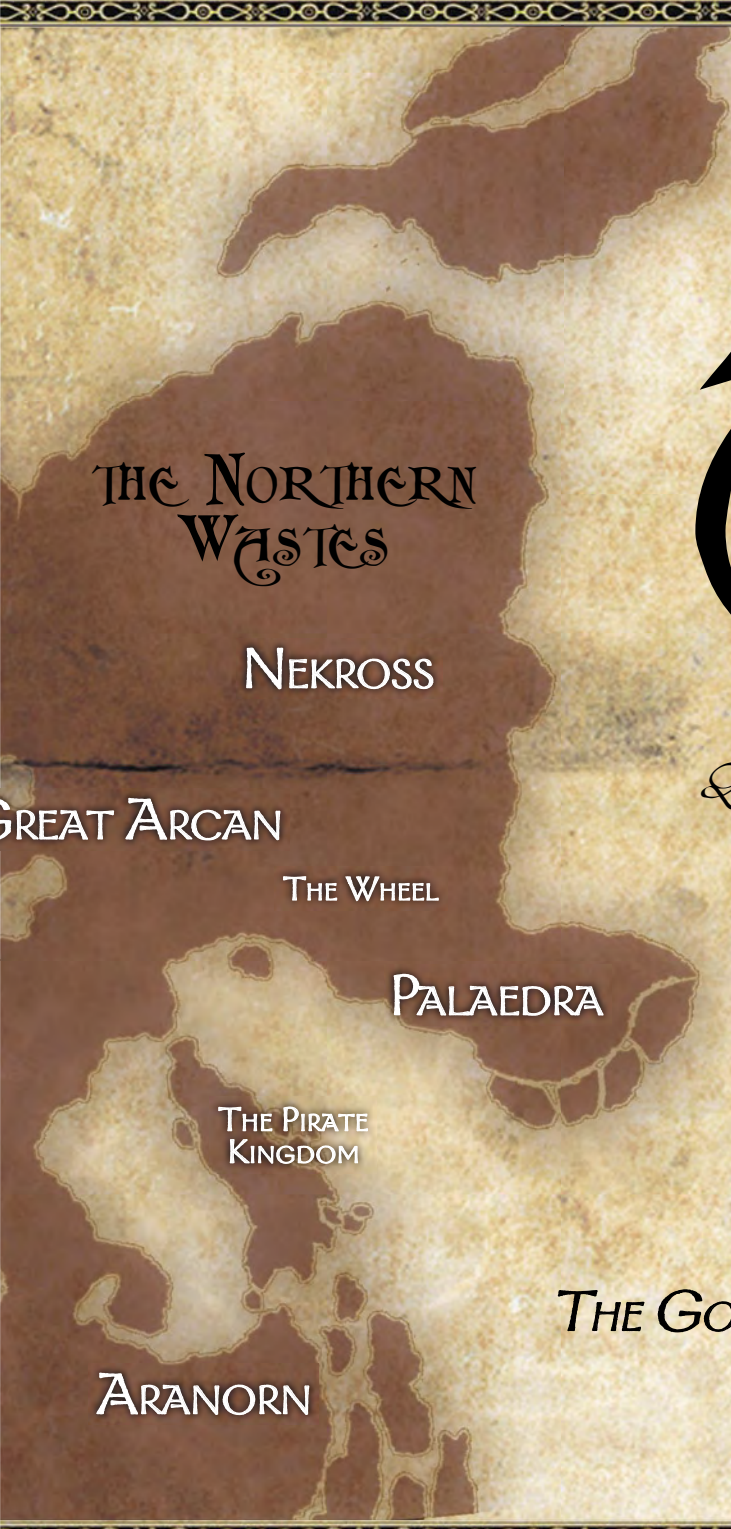
MERLION

ALDAMAR

BLACKSWORD

SEA OF MERLION





# THE LANDS OF Axcoth

*Drawn at the request of her majesty  
Queen Emilia Nighthaven of Great Arcan  
by Taddevan the scholar in the year 528  
(Axcoth Calendar)*

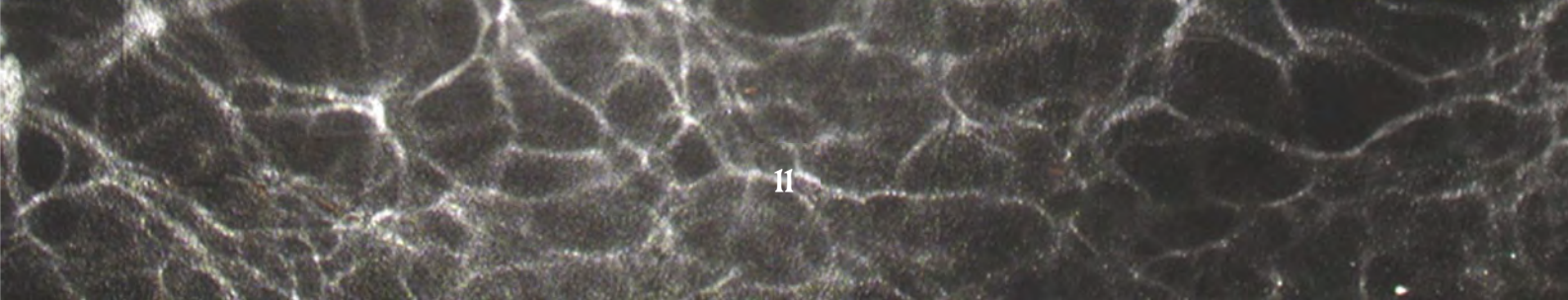
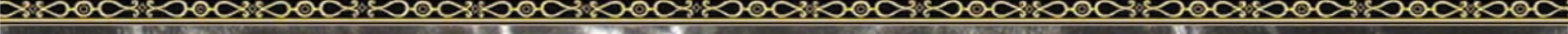
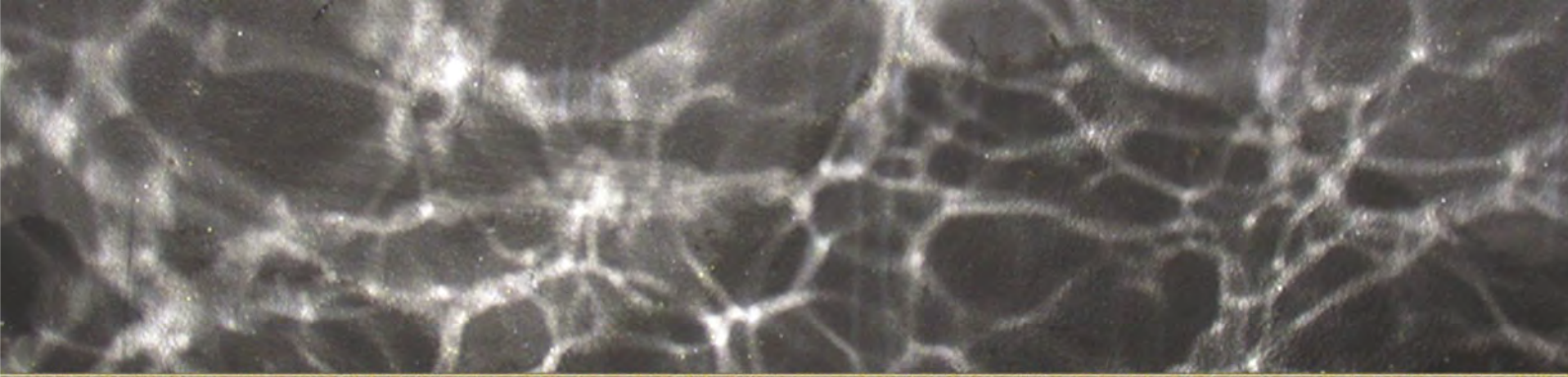
# BOOK 1

## *Fires from the North*

*535 A.C.*

Rising from the ranks of the demonic invaders known as the Kreegans, Malustar has become the new Demon King. Once a minority in the kingdom of Nekross, the Kreegans are now ready to claim this land as their own...

In the meantime, in the south, a quarrel between the kingdoms of Great Arcan and Palaedra threatens to involve the whole region into war...





# Malustar

## CHAPTER ONE - RISE OF A DEMON KING

*After years of scheming, Malustar, the new king of the Kreegan Hives, is finally ready to claim the land of Nekross as his own. But there is still a long way before the demon army can besiege the capital city of Nekorrurum. The Civil War has just started...*

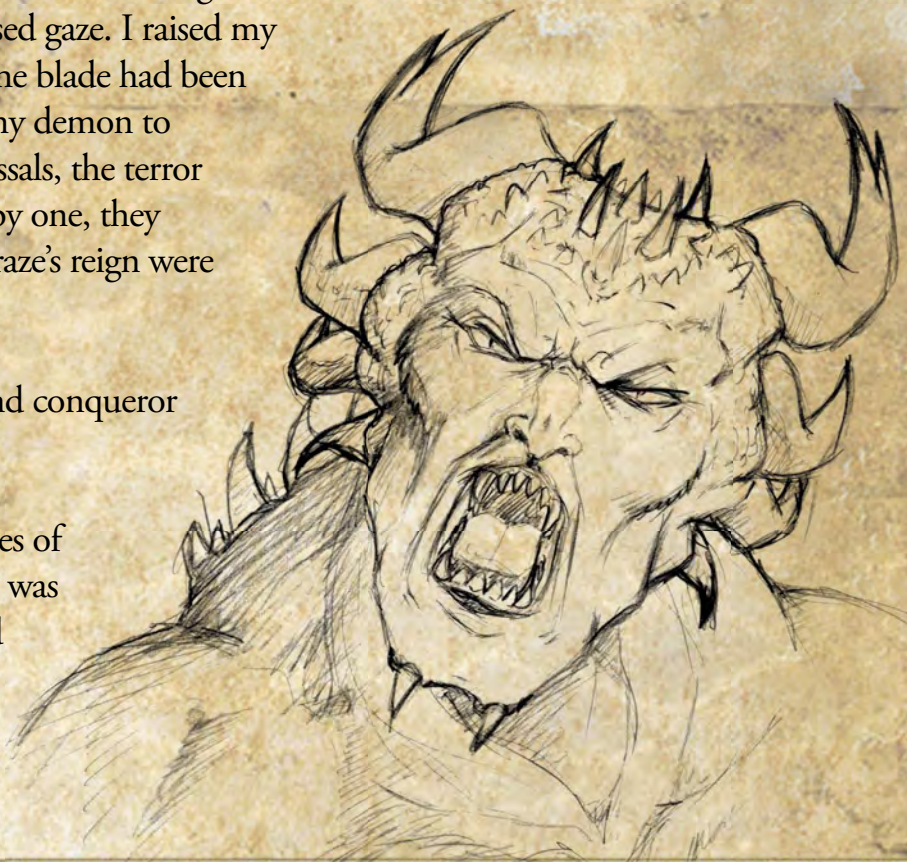
### DAY ONE

(Transcription of a Memory Cube, part of Queen Iona Arran's personal collection.)

Suraze's head rolled on the throne room floor. The Kreegan leaders, shocked, were staring at me with a confused gaze. I raised my sword, still soaked by the duke's blood. The blade had been broken long ago, but it was enough for any demon to recognize it. I could feel the fear of the vassals, the terror inspired by the red-glowing sword. One by one, they kneeled before me. The seven years of Suraze's reign were over.

I'm King Malustar, warrior of the Void and conqueror of worlds.

When I arrived on this land, after centuries of drifting through the emptiness of space, I was relieved to find that some of my kind had survived the aftermath of the Great War. But I was quickly disappointed, as they had little in common with the fierce, merciless warriors of my



memories. I soon discovered they had been deeply affected by the destruction of a previous world, of which I briefly visited the burning wastes. With constantly decreasing numbers, and no lord to guide them, they had lost their fighting spirit. But before I could rally them under my flag, someone else beat me to it. That was enough for me at the time - I still needed to learn as much as I could about what had happened during the last thousand of years - so I joined Suraze's forces. We fought against the necromancer Gauldoth Half-Dead during a grueling civil war.

But soon Suraze would commit a treason to his own race and ancestors.

He offered a TRUCE to Gauldoth, even recognized him as the KING, and for what? Land, wealth and the title of duke. That fat, cowardly little worm ! I would never forgive him for that, even now that justice has been done.

## DAY THREE

There is a lesson I learned from my past mistakes. During wartimes, an opportunity must never be wasted. So when I learned about what was going on with the necromancers, I decided to change my schedule. Apparently, some foreign spellcaster had come to Nekross and took control of part of the Half-Dead's army. But rather than sending them against their former master, he disappeared with his newly acquired troops. That was almost too good to be true.

Gauldoth had paid little interest in Kreegans internal affairs lately, so he probably didn't know his pawn Suraze wasn't in command anymore. It was time to hit hard and fast.



## CHAPTER TWO - WAITING FOR GAULDOTH



*The Kreegan offensive against the undead cities has turned into a violent civil war. Malustar and his army are now aiming at the very heart of Nekross, the citadel of Chiaroscuro where Gauldoth has retreated.*


### DAY ONE

(Transcription of a Memory Cube, part of Queen Iona Arran's personal collection.)

After our initial strike against the necromancers' cities, we were able to advance deep within Nekross' homelands. Still, Gauldoth reacted faster than I thought he would. There were still a few days of marching to get to the capital city of Nekorrurum when we encountered his vanguard. It was a small force of skeletons, zombies and vampires. They tried to ambush us, but fortunately I was expecting such a move - albeit not so early. It soon became evident they were in fact mere scouts, trying to assess our strengths and weaknesses.

I knew Gauldoth wouldn't take any risks. His citadel, the dark tower of Chiaroscuro, was located high in the mountains above the capital city of Nekorrurum. If we had taken the chance of besieging the citadel, our losses would have been dreadful, but I knew there was a way to strike directly at its heart. Gauldoth used to keep magical amplifiers in the two main necromancer guilds in the region, located in the cities of Nekorrurum and Vitross.

While Gauldoth was preparing for the upcoming siege, we would strike at those two guilds. With



the magical amplifiers in our possession, I would use them to increase the powers of my own spellcasters, allowing them to open a dimensional door leading inside the walls of Chiaroscuro. That was something even a superior mind like Gauldoth's wouldn't expect.

## DAY THREE

Red lights flicker madly, a siren rings and jolts are shaking the bridge as I run desperately towards the nearest escape pod. The escape bay is already on fire. I see dead or injured or dying people everywhere. The other commanding officers and myself are abandoning the crew and passengers to certain death. As my pod glides slowly in the field of stars, I can see the Hive-Ship becoming smaller and smaller, ripped apart by the deadly laser beams of the Ancients' battlecruisers. The battle for the Arc is lost. I failed, and I'm watching the death of one billion of my own kind, when the Hive is finally destroyed in a blinding, silent explosion.

I woke up in my tent, covered with sweat. Always the same dream, over and over. Next to my couch, the broken sword's reddish glow was pulsating slowly.

In stasis in the escape pod, I drifted through space during a thousand years of inanimate slumber (*hum vive alien*). Finally, I was awakened by a signal emitted by another Kreegan hive. I set the course of the pod towards the planet from which the signal was emitted, but all I found was a burning wasteland. Some unspeakable cataclysm had destroyed all life on this world, all that was left were melted ruins and clouds of black ash. This is where I found it, in the very center of a crater of gigantic proportions: a broken sword, still radiating with tremendous power, the only thing in the area that hadn't turned to dust.

It was only later, after I followed the tracks of the survivors through one of the mysterious portals to this very world, that I learned its name: Armageddon's Blade.



## VICTORY

We were victorious.

I watched the yellow flames engulfing what had been Gauldoth Half-Dead's citadel. The necromancer himself had been captured earlier during the battle of Chiaroscuro: he was now chained on the outer wall, waiting to be consumed in the fire that was devouring his house. I was impressed by his calm behaviour. I couldn't resist taunting him.

"It seems this time we'll finish your last half, necromancer."

- It seems so, he replied, a smile appearing on the corner of his mouth on the living side of his face. Would you mind telling me... Why did you go to such lengths?"

I laughed.

"Because that is exactly what we Kreegans do. We are warriors and conquerors. Only a fool would believe we can be trusted."

- Fortunately, his majesty is no fool."





My mouth opened in surprise as, before my eyes, the appearance of the prisoner started to alter. The traits of his face were changing, his skin taking an uniform greyish tone. In a matter of seconds, he was not the king of Nekross anymore, just some undead warrior.

“Who are you? Where is Gauldoth?” I roared.

The zombie’s smile turned into a contemptuous grin, filling me with anger. I could feel the Armageddon’s Blade feeding on my rage.

“I am Hadrin, first lieutenant of King Gauldoth of Nekross. His majesty is, I’m afraid, reasonably far away as we speak.

- Don’t worry, slave. Your master will soon join you in the emptiness of the Void!”

The Blade was so hot I could feel blisters forming on the palm of my hand. Despite the pain, I raised the broken sword high in the air, then I struck Hadrin with all the my might. There was a bright, burning light that seemed to erupt from the blade, creating ripples in the air, and with a horrible, but quite delightful scream, Hadrin simply melted until all that was left was a small pool of bubbling, liquid flesh. My hand was throbbing with the pain, but the sword was now cool, almost cold.

I simply hoped that Gauldoth, wherever he was, was still linked to his puppet and had shared a bit of his pain, because that was only a taste of his own agony which, I swore, would be much, much worse.

# Gauldoth Half-dead



# Solmyr ibn Wali Barad



## CHAPTER THREE - THE END OF PEACE

*Meanwhile, the neighbouring nations of Great Arcan and Palaedra are facing their greatest crisis yet. A series of border incidents brings these lands to the brink of a massive all-out war. Is it still possible to save the peace that was so costly won a decade before ?*

### DAY ONE

(Manuscript found in the remaining pieces of a broken bottle lying on the shores of Merlion.)

I should have told her earlier.

I can clearly remember the first time I understood I was actually betraying her. I can see myself meeting her in the Hanging Gardens of Arkania, one of the last mornings of spring in the year 536 of the Axeoth calendar. She was standing at the edge of the balcony, looking at the dawning sky. The mere fact that she was standing and walking was a miracle: ten years before, she had suffered a terrible injury and the healers said she could never walk again. But they just didn't know her. As no spell would allow her to stand on her two feet, she crafted one, even if it took her two long years. That's what she is like.

"Good morning, Solmyr," she said, without even a glance towards me.

"Good morning, your majesty."

She turned to face me, with a smile on her lovely face.

"I didn't give up the hope of you just calling me 'Emilia', you know."

For a second, it reminded me of our first meeting, a couple of years after the Reckoning. She was just a child back then, an orphan with enough courage to stand before a being a hundred times more powerful than her - and win.

“I know. Giving up hope - giving up anything actually - just isn't your style.”

There was a sadness in her voice when she softly replied :

“Sometimes I wonder, Solmyr. I really do.”

Her gaze went back to the horizon. Far in the east, battles were raging. Palaedra's armies were marching on us.

## DAY THREE

There had been border quarrels with Lord Lysander's people for years. They were our brothers and sisters, refugees from Erathia, just as the people of Great Arcan were mostly refugees from Bracada. Like us, they wanted a country of their own in this new, hostile world. In the first years, we only talked of peace and friendship - even befriendng the necromancer country of Nekross in the north. The horror of the Reckoning was still vivid in our memories - not to mention the wars we waged to defend our nations from the various invaders that were swarming on us like feral wolves on a newborn lamb.



As our population and territory expanded, more outsiders from the barbaric lands came, seeking shelter or fortune. As the population kept increasing, the border

# Emilia Nighthaven



# Lord Lysander





incidents began. People were forgetting the lessons of the Reckoning.

That's when I tried to murder Palaedra's ambassador.

According to Palaedra anyway. As the ambassador of Great Arcan, I was supposed to meet the Palaedran delegation on neutral ground, in the independent region known as the Wheel. But when our delegation arrived at the meeting site, we were attacked by palaedran soldiers. They accused me of attempting to assassinate ambassador Milton (I was actually relieved to learn he had survived his wounds). I tried to explain that I was just arriving, that I had known Milton for years and that we were good friends, and that I was the victim of a set-up. But they wouldn't listen. I gathered my people and was forced to summon a Dimension Door to escape the ambush.



When we finally managed to escape the Wheel and reached Great Arcan, the war had already begun.

## THE KREEGANS

We had been at war with Palaedra for nearly two months. And the greatest mystery was still the identity of the person who had disguised himself as myself in order to stab Milton. Who could gain profit from this senseless conflict? At first, I suspected this to be the doing of Gauldoth, the necromancer, as that's exactly the kind of trick the old guild of Deyja would have used to gain more power - and simply more death. But that didn't quite fit with what I knew of the Half-Dead. And I soon learned that he was having his share of troubles, too.



I was alone with my thoughts in my quarters that night. “I should tell her”, was the phrase that kept coming back at me, time and time again. The secret had now been burning my soul for three months. I just didn’t know what Emilia’s reaction would be, or that was what I thought in order to soothe my pain. For I knew she was compassionate, forgiving, and that she firmly believed in balance. The only problem arose from my divided loyalty, even after all those years.

I was lost in my thoughts when the raven landed on the old lamp I had carried with me from Bracada. I immediately sensed this was not an ordinary bird. It was a familiar of some sort, and I knew who’d sent it to me.

“I carry the word of King Gauldoth of Nekross, to warn you and your people. The Kreegans have gathered behind a new leader. They took Nekorrurn and Chiaroscuro. As we speak, they’re marching south through the Dragon’s Backbone,” quoth the raven with the voice of Gauldoth.

“The Kreegans!” I yelled, startled by this revelation. “It can’t be! How far are they?”

“It is only a matter of days. I hope you’ll be able to succeed where I failed, Solmyr ibn wali Barad. I truly hope.”

And with that, the raven was gone.

Three days later, the dwarven cities in the north reported the first sightings of the demon army. The Kreegans were here.

## VICTORY

They were retreating. After all those years, seeing the Kreegans at our very doors sent a chill down my spine. Emilia, on the contrary, only said: “So, that’s what Kreegans look like.” As it turned out, their army was unexperienced, while our own soldiers had been hardened by the ongoing war with Palaedra. We managed to defeat them on the field, in front of the gates of Arkania.

Emilia summoned me into her quarters this very evening, as a great celebration was held. There was a sad and piercing look in her eyes. I almost immediately understood that she knew.

“He escaped during the siege,” she told me. “He had recovered. It took ten years, but he did. And you knew. You knew it, and still you chose not to tell me.”

I tried to say something, but words couldn’t get past my throat. I tried to escape her scrutinizing gaze, but I couldn’t.



“You know this is important to me! He’s Gavin Magnus, the Immortal King! You know what he did to me! You know what he tried to do to the world! Why, Solmyr? Why?”

“I... I just... I’m sorry.”

I was born before the days of the Silence, twelve centuries ago, and yet I was completely defenseless against her. And the cold sadness of her voice hurt me with more pain than any spell or blade ever could.

“I am too, old friend. You have no idea how much I am.”

## CHAPTER FOUR - TURNS AND TWISTS

*Solmyr finds himself in the Wheel again, trying to locate the man who pretended to be him and tried to kill Ambassador Milton from Palaedra. What he is about to discover will change his destiny forever.*

### DAY ONE

Two days later, I once again found myself on the roads of the Wheel. But this time, it was not to attend a diplomatic meeting, but to investigate the circumstances under which the ambassador of Palaedra had been attacked by someone pretending to be me.

“I can’t take the risk of having you present during the talks with Lysander, Solmyr,” Emilia had told me. “During my peace address, you’ll sneak in the Wheel to find out who played this dirty trick on us. Still, please be careful. The Wheel is a protectorate of Palaedra and we don’t need any other ‘incidents’ right now.”

I knew this was only part of the reason for which I was sent away from Great Arcan. Emilia was angry at me - and that was her way to put some distance between us. To make me understand she didn’t want me to hang around for a while. I understood what she felt, and I respected her decision. She wanted to be alone. But she was also offering me a way to gain back her trust: by finding who was plotting against both Great Arcan and Palaedra. Fortunately, the barons of the Wheel were at war against each other again, so I made good use of this chaos to sneak in the country. My only lead was the meeting place itself, where the stabbing had occurred.

“When you come back, we’ll have to talk” were her last words before I left.

I didn’t know, at the time, that I wasn’t coming back.

## THE MEETING SITE

The meeting place had been left in a hurry by the Palaedran delegation. Even the tents were still standing in the cold breeze. But we couldn't find anything of interest about the mysterious identity thief. No clues, no leads. That meant only one thing : I would need to question the people living in the region to gather as much information as possible.

## THE ADVENTURER'S TAVERN

When I went inside the tavern, I immediately felt all the customers' eyes turning to me. Conversations lowered to whispers. Some men just left their tables and exited the place. I went to the bar and asked for a drink. After I put a shilling on the counter, the barman reluctantly handed me a pint of ale. But before I could bring it to my lips, some boor jostled me, making me empty my drink on the floor. The other customers laughed heartily. I turned to face the man, a giant, red-haired barbarian.

"What you going to do, liddle blue man? You vant fight vid Olaf?"

"So it is a challenge that you want? Fine."

Olaf rushed towards me. I quickly took a step aside, grabbed his hair and knocked his head on the bar with all my strength (which, I admit, had been discreetly enhanced by a few spells even before I entered the tavern.) Olaf fell on the dusty floor, unconscious, having left the imprint of his head on the wood of the bar. The laughter didn't stop. I had passed some kind of test. I turned back to the bar, and found another tankard already waiting for me.

"On the house," said the barman.

"Thanks. I'm looking for an assassin. He's operating in the region, a master of disguise. Have you heard of him?"

“I have not. One of them may have, but you’ll need a strongly established reputation if you want them to talk to you.”

“A...reputation?”

“I could put a good word in for you... and, of course, old-fashioned corruption doesn’t hurt either..”

I quickly estimated I would need at least 10000 gold coins. I gave a good part of the gold to the bartender himself. He smiled at me and accomplished his end of the bargain - introducing me to the adventurers. I took a place at the table of some of the greatest heroes of the Wheel, and, after letting the booze flow and the gold change hands, asked them about the assassin. They hadn’t heard about him, but someone had. To my surprise, this someone was none other than my old pal Olaf (who had recovered from our previous encounter and was now called Olaf-broken-nose).

“Olaf know. Olaf will dell you. But you promise not hurd Olaf again, ja?”

“Agreed, Olaf, as long as you don’t try anything sneaky again. So what can you tell me?”

“Okay, lisdén to vhat Olaf has to say... I don’t know much, but there are rumours of an assassin who has been operating in the region for a few months. He killed a baron a little while back, masquerading as no less than his own victim. I think that’s the man you seek.”

## THE OLD MAN AND HIS GOLD

The mansion was in a poor shape. The family who had been living here certainly had been wealthy, but those days were long gone. I asked my men to wait for me outside, and I carefully knocked at the massive, if partially rotten, double doors.

“Who’s there?” asked a voice.

“I’m... a traveller, and adventurer. I wish to meet you. My name is Solmyr.”

I hoped the people of the Wheel didn’t know about the diplomatic fiasco - or at least the part I had played in it.

“Come in!” replied the voice.

I entered the manor. The inside was as dilapidated as the outside. I followed the voice through cold and empty corridors. I emerged in the lobby, where an old man was sitting in front of the fireplace.

“So you’re Solmyr, heh? The famous hero? What brings you to this poor man’s home?”

“I want information. I’m looking for an assassin. He’s operating in the region, a master of disguise.”

“I may have information for you... But you’ll have to help me first.”

“Very well. What do you want?”

“I used to be a rich man, but ten years ago, someone stole the source of my wealth - the Endless Bag of Gold. Bring it back, and I’ll help you.”

The old man had tears rushing to his eyes when I handed him his tattered old bag. His old wrinkled hands were shaking with the excitement of having his precious gold back home, at last! He emitted a joyful yet bloodcurdling sound, as he greedily forced the shiny gold coins in his already bulging pocket.

“Thank you! Thank you so much!”

“I believe you have some information for me...”

“Oh yes! I’ll tell you everything that I know about the man you seek... They say his name is Nazreem. He claims to be the heir of the legendary assassin Nazrim, who tried to kill Verhoffin five centuries ago. Of course that is probably just pure delusion.”

## THE VAMPIRE SLAYERS

During my travels, I set foot on a small island covered with trees. While I was exploring the woods, I stumbled upon a cabin. There was light coming through the window, proof that the place was inhabited. Maybe the folks living there would know something about my mysterious assassin ? I approached the door. My highly developed inner sense of danger made me jump aside just in time to avoid the quarrel of a crossbow. As I got back on my feet, I heard the sounds of an argument coming from inside :

“You moron! Didn’t you look before shooting? It wasn’t one of them, bloody fool!”

“How do you know for sure? He could be cleverly disguised!”

“In broad daylight? Oh, Krohn, give me strength...”

The door opened and a middle-aged man with a neglected beard and blond hair appeared, wearing armor of hardened leather, two swords on his belt and a crossbow and quiver on his back. He was also carrying various holy symbols (there was Hanndl’s cross, a bottle of holy water from Lindisfarne’s waterfalls, a goose figurine from the church of Honk, and others I couldn’t recognize.) Two words immediately came to my mind : vampire hunter.







“I’m sorry, my lord. My brother there is a bit nervous and, well, there’s not a lot of people who come through these woods...”

“You’re vampire hunters, right? Both of you?”

“Ayep, sir! Gabriel Schattenjäger, at your service!” answered the man, in a proud manner.

“You’re good at it? I mean, hunting?”

“Oh, yes sir. Well, reasonably good, sir.”

“I may need your talents then. I’m looking for a man.”

“Is he a vampire, sir?”

“I don’t think so. But he’s an assassin, and also a master of disguise. Not very different from a blood-drinker, I assume. Do you think you can help me catch him?”

Gabriel and his brother - I heard his name was Dieter - went back in the cabin to discuss the matter. I waited patiently outside, until both brothers came back out to give an answer to my proposal.

“I suppose we could investigate this assassin, but there are also vampires on the loose in this region, so...”

“If you have an idea of where I can find those night stalkers, I can kill them for you.”

Gabriel sighed with relief.

“Fine then, I pointed out on your map where I suspect their lairs to be. I think there are four Vampire Lords hiding in the region. We’ll try to have the information you need for your return.”

## BACK TO THE VAMPIRE HUNTERS’ CABIN

I found the brothers at their cabin, as they were trying to clumsily hide a large pile of gold coins.

“I killed the vampires. Do you have what I need?”

Gabriel tried to avoid my gaze when he said, a nervous grin on his face :

“Well, my lord, you see, we did find something, but it wasn’t easy, not easy at all... So we thought, well...”

“We thought you could give us a little extra for our efforts,” Dieter finished. Gabriel threw the figurine of Honk in his brother’s face.

“Moron. But yes, sir, that’s roughly what we want.”

I looked him right in the eyes.

“That’s strange. You see, when I was coming back here, I heard some villages paid you a lot of money for the death of the vampires I destroyed.”

I saw Gabriel’s smile beginning to fissure.

“Well, that’s- err...”

“And what amazes me, is that despite your ‘thorough investigations’, you were able, both of you, to

go together to all these villages and claim your reward.”

“We just, y’see, happened to pass by...”

I made a threatening step forward.

“Now let me put this straight, Gabriel. Do you have the information I need, or should I go back to those villages and tell them the truth?”

Ten minutes later, I was leaving the cabin with the information I wanted. And here is what Gabriel told me before wetting his pants...

“Apparently Nazreem dwells in a ruined tower on a small island in the south-west of this region and uses it as his base of operation. That’s all I know.”

## NAZREEM

I went to the ruins of the tower, hoping to finally confront the man who had tried to frame me. But the tower was deserted; its only inhabitant being the wind, his sorrowful complaint echoing through the dark stairways. This place was my only lead. If Nazreem wasn’t here, then the least I could do was find a clue concerning his whereabouts. But once again, I had no such luck. I was starting to despair.

But for once, I was proven wrong. Luck was still by my side, as during my second night on the island, I found the entrance of some old catacombs under the tower. On each side of the tunnels stood old doors leading to what appeared to be cells. It wasn’t the ruins of a lighthouse, as I had thought the first time I had seen the building, but some sort of jailhouse. The place had not been used for years, as given away by the stench of rust, rotten wood, humidity and decay. This is where I finally met my prey.

I surprised him as he was disguising himself. I immediately understood he was skilled in the ways of magic, using both make-up and spells to take up the appearance of someone else. I watched, fascinated, as he was turning himself into Lord Lysander, Palaedra's ruler. Then I must've made a noise because he leapt around and faced me.

"You! I should have killed you before assuming your identity. That would've saved me a lot of troubles."

"I came to uncover only one thing : who hired you? Speak, or face my wrath!"

Nazreem laughed while producing two long daggers.

"You should know an assassin never betrays his client. Killing you will be welcome training, before I take the place of that fool Lysander and kill that lovely queen of yours..."

"So be it. We shall end this... now!"

## VICTORY

I had been severely wounded during the fight, but nothing that wouldn't heal with time and a few spells. Luckily, we genies are magical creatures and as such we're not easy to kill. My opponent, on the contrary, was in a pretty bad shape. Still, he was trying to mock me, but his heavy breathing made his laugh sound like a horrible chuckling. My body ached, and my arm felt stiff, but I approached him, acting as if I felt no pain.

"Who hired you?"

"I... won't... talk," he hissed between his teeth.

“You know there are many magical means to make you speak. I could even kill you and extract the truth from your ghost.”

Nazreem started to laugh, then choked. He spat blood on my shoes, then looked me in the eyes, a terrible grin on his face.

“So I heard, but then... you would be betraying... the High Laws of Magic... wouldn't you?”

“Who cares about the High Laws--”

I stopped, realizing what he had just said. The High Laws of Magic had been promulgated in the early days of the kingdom of Bracada, and of course I had sworn to abide by them. But I didn't know of anybody old enough to have known these days and tell Nazreem about it. Except one.

I absolutely can't express in any way the feelings that ran through my mind when I understood who had hired Nazreem to engineer a war between Great Arcan and Palaedra. I clearly remember feeling a strange sensation of suffocation, and running desperately to the surface, gasping for fresh air, stunned by the revelation. I left Nazreem down there : he may have died of his injuries, or survived, it didn't matter to me any more.

And this is when I made the oath, the oath that changed my life. Kneeling on the beach, under the merciless stars, I swore I wouldn't return to Great Arcan before I had stopped the man who had been the instigator of all this.

I swore I would find Gavin Magnus and kill him.



## CHAPTER FIVE - THE SUCCUBUS

*After his defeat in Great Arcan, Malustar's position as king of the kreegan hives is in jeopardy. Already his lieutenants are plotting against him, and the loyalty of his troops is fading. Malustar needs to act quickly if he doesn't want to lose everything he worked so hard to obtain.*

### DAY ONE

(Transcription of a Memory Cube, part of Queen Iona Arran's personal collection.)

I said earlier that I learned from my past mistakes that an opportunity should never be wasted. But there is another lesson I had learned long ago but had foolishly forgotten since : recklessness leads only to disaster. I thoroughly realized how much of the loyalty of my troops I had lost when a promising young lieutenant sneaked into my tent to stab me in my sleep.

That cunning young man was, unfortunately for him, better at tactics than stealth. I waited until he was very close, and as he was about to strike, I attacked first. I snatched his arm, breaking it in the process, and sent him flying to the other side of my tent. Before he could come back to his senses, I was on him. I punched him repeatedly until my fists were covered in blood and his face was unrecognizable. He asked for mercy with a gurgling sound. I closed my hand on his throat and broke his spine. I then had his corpse impaled in the middle of the camp, as a warning to the unwise.

Nonetheless, marching on Great Arcan was a mistake. I cursed myself for being so hot-headed. After our relatively easy victory in Nekross, I had believed that nothing could stop us, that every nation would bow before our might. I was wrong. It was too soon, much too soon. It cost us dearly, and if I hadn't realized that until it was too late and given the order to fall back, the whole Kreegan race would have met its end there, at the gates of Arkania.

I wondered if that may have been Gauldoth's plan all along, making me believe I was stronger than I actually was, in order to send my troops into a suicidal attack against overpowering enemies. But I discarded that thought, as I knew whose fault it was : it was all mine.

Anyway, that left me in a difficult position. We had regrouped in the mountains. Half of my troops had perished during the assault. I needed a victory to restore the confidence of my people, and for that, I needed reinforcements, but I didn't know of the existence of any other Kreegan hives in Axeoth. I was assessing the best course of action, which was probably to go back to the Omega Hive in Nekross, and wait a few years until my ranks were full again.

That's when I heard of the succubus.

## DAY FOUR

I had sent spies - compliant and foolish humans that were all too happy to worship us - in the nearby villages to gather information about the forces that were most certainly after us. Soon, they brought back rumours about a demon army hiding in the mountains, and I would have assumed that it was none other than our army if not for something strange : according to those rumours, the demon army had retreated inside an ancient dwarf fortress and was being besieged by the Palaedran knights of the Order of the Dawn. That wasn't our case at all - and it was too precise, too detailed to be pure fantasy either.

My scouts soon located the dwarven fortress the rumour mentioned, relic of a time when the Red Dwarves' clans ruled these mountains. A Kreegan army was making a stand in those ruins, and their leader was a woman, or succubus, as humans call our females. I didn't know who she was, or how many troops she had under her command, but I immediately understood I had to rescue her.

Success would bring me the two things my army needed most : morale and reinforcements... and I always enjoyed killing two birds with one stone.

## EBORA

Masses of ravens were flying in circles, high in the sky, drawn by the stench of the corpses. The Palaedran knights were all dead, crushed between my forces and the succubus', or, to quote the dwarven saying, between the hammer and the anvil. The defenders welcomed us cheerfully : apparently they had never seen that many of our race at once. In a way, it was a disheartening sight : there were only one or two thousand of our people inside, mostly workers apparently digging the area for some reason. My dreams of finding reinforcements here were quickly fading. I was in a dark mood when I was finally invited to meet their leader.

She greeted me inside her quarters, and I immediately sensed she was old and powerful, yet she looked young - another proof of her magical power. As a further mark of her being an elder, she greeted me with my true name, a name that hadn't been spoken for nearly a millenium.

"I only use the name Malustar in this day and age. And it is under this name I come to you today."

She smiled, as if she was enjoying our encounter in a very bizarre way.

"Oh yes. 'The one who tainted the Bright Star', if my memory is correct?"

"That was a long time ago."

"Indeed. Please excuse me, for I have very few occasions to discuss with someone of my time. My name is Ebor, I was part of the Vanguard during the Great War."

The Vanguard! The elite warriors of the Kreegan fleet, heralds of death and destruction on thousands of worlds. If Ebor had truly been part of the Vanguard, she was a force to be reckoned with - but she could be lying to impress me.

"I guessed that much. Now let's talk about the present situation. The hives recognize me as their





king, and as such, I claim leadership over you and your people.”

This assertion didn't impress Eboria either, who grinned sarcastically.

“I heard that before. Do you honestly believe you'll conquer the world with, what? Twenty thousand men?”

“I am looking for more troops. Which is why I came in these mountains, when I heard about you.”

“Then you must be disappointed.”

I remained silent. She went to a nearby opening in the wall, and gave a quick look at her people.

“So this is a ‘join me or die’ proposal, right? Don't you want to know why my people and myself came here?”

“I noticed there were signs of recent excavations. You're digging, so I'll assume you're looking for something.”

“You've got the brains to match these... handsome looks of yours.” I ignored the flattery. “Yes, we're digging, and yes, we're looking for something. This place was once the home of a Red Dwarf clan. They came and invaded these mountains a few centuries ago, to exploit veins of a metal known as elemental thjorad.

“I heard about it. It is used to forge magical weapons and armor.”

“Yes, that's right. Eventually the dwarves left when when the veins were depleted, or maybe something drove them away or killed them, I don't care. The interesting thing is that they left their stuff behind.

Most of it anyway. We're trying to recover it."

She took a deep breath.

"But we encountered a problem. A problem you could actually help us solve."

"And what's in it for me?"

"Because the thing I want to find is the key to your own problem : reinforcements."

Was she lying? What kind of reinforcements could come from this? I realized Eborá had turned the odds on me : I found myself in a weak position now. That was a nice trick. Still, she knew I could kill her and her people without an afterthought. She was making quite a gamble, but if there were magical artifacts at stake here, it was wiser to follow... for now.

"So, what exactly seems to be the problem hindering your progress in those mines?"

"Oh, nothing really. Just a dragon."

## HERE BE DRAGONS

I hate dragons. They came from the Void with their own agenda, they're older than us and, I suspect, much smarter. Some believe dragons are the children of primordial entities. I think they're just annoying, overrated fire-breathing freakishly big lizards. And that's mainly why I enjoyed killing the one that was using the old dwarven treasure room as his lair. On top of that, even if she didn't admit it, I believe Eborá was quite impressed when I brought the monster's head back.

I followed her and her workers into the treasure room. There were no powerful artifacts there, sadly, only stone tablets covered with carved scripture. Eborá was very excited to find those, so I took the liberty of asking why :

# Ebora



“By the Creators, Ebor, is that what you were looking for? What is it?”

“This, my lord, will grant us victory.”

“Stone tablets?”

“No,” she said, with an avid grin. “Archives.”

I wanted to press her further, to make her reveal what was so important in the Red Dwarves’ archives, but that’s the moment the knights of Palaedra chose to make their second assault.

## VICTORY

After the battle, I summoned Ebor. I was tired of her little secrets, and it was time to make her talk.

“What is the link between those ‘archives’ and the reinforcements you promised me? Speak now! I am not known for my patience and I have already made tremendous efforts to control myself today.”

“The Red Dwarves are known for keeping archives of nearly anything. In this case, it concerns the whereabouts of a certain artifact that was entrusted to them a long time ago – and then disappeared.”

“What kind of an artifact then?”

“Its original name has long been forgotten, but for the dwarves it was known as ‘the Staff of Blue Light’.”

“It doesn’t sound very powerful...”

“If my recollection is good, it doesn’t look very powerful either. But that is not its purpose. You may think of it as... a key.” She smiled, triumphant. “The key to freeing the most horrifying army to ever set foot on Axeoth. The Kreegan Vanguard itself!”

## CHAPTER SIX - TREASURE HUNT

*Malustar, who has been King for nearly two years, follows Eborā to the Pirate Kingdom, in search of the artifact which will give him total supremacy over this world : the Staff of Blue Light. But to find it, they will have to fight against the pirates themselves and venture into the mysterious ruins of the Merfolk.*

### DAY ONE

I wasn't sure about whether Eborā's story was the truth or an outrageous lie, but she awakened my curiosity. It was a long tale, which partly comprised her own memories and was partly an attempt to piece together the various tidbits she had gathered during the last twenty years.

Her story began in the final days of the Great War, just after my own defeat at the Arc. I had never realized that this battle had decided the outcome of the war itself...

Back then, Eborā was a new recruit for the Kreegan Vanguard. The elite corps of the Kreegan army had been sent to the most recently colonized planets of the Ancients' space, like Axeoth, with a very simple mission : seize control of a portal, one of the mysterious gates allowing the Ancients to travel instantly through their worlds. Hopefully, the portal would lead to a Nexus from which the Vanguard could strike directly at the Ancients' homeworld. This desperate plan almost succeeded, but that's a story for another time.

The Vanguard was on the verge of conquering Axeoth, but as history tends to repeat itself, this conquest wouldn't last. There was no Guardian assigned to the planet yet - I'm unsure if one has been assigned since then - but the Ancients received the help of a Planeswalker to organize a counterattack. They managed to lure the main Kreegan forces inside the first city of the dwarves, making them believe this was where the portal was standing. When the Kreegans realized the city was in fact deserted, it was too late : the Planeswalker moved the whole place out of phase,

successfully trapping the Kreegans' greatest warriors in an astral plane.

Unfortunately for them, but rather happily for us, not all the Kreegans had been trapped, and some of them, including Ebor, tried to defeat the Planeswalker to free their comrades. She never knew the outcome of this fight, as she took a direct hit to the thorax, which sent her flying across the fight and crashing right into a mountain, which, due to the extreme violence of the impact, collapsed with an apocalyptic sound onto her unconscious body, trapping her under a ton of rocks.



## DAY FOUR

After the Vanguard was defeated, the artifact the Planeswalker had used to phase the city out was given to the dwarves. They kept it preciously (it contained a whole city, and the best Kreegan fighters, after all), until five centuries ago, when a schism occurred. Right after the event known as the Cataclysm, some dwarves thought it was better to retreat in their mountains, while others wanted to use this opportunity to move on and explore the world. Those renegade dwarves took the name of Red Dwarves, and left the northern regions to travel east, taking the Staff with them.

But, as the archives told us, they were attacked by the Merfolk while crossing the Gold Sea to the unknown lands of the south. To avoid certain death, the dwarves had to pay a tribute to the Queen of the Seas, and the Staff was part of it. The Staff of Blue Light ended up in a treasure room somewhere under the Gold Sea.

When the last Queen of the Seas was killed by the pirate Tawni Balfour a decade ago, her palace was plundered by the pirates, but as far as we knew, the Staff was never found. And that's the reason why we came to the Pirate Kingdom on this day, hoping the Staff of Blue Light was still there, lying somewhere on the ocean bed.



## REINFORCEMENTS

With the trail of fire and destruction we had left behind us, it was no surprise the Pirate Queen was already moving against us. According to our spies, she had sent one of her captains, the aptly-named Captain Blackheart, to deal with us. But Eborá was still sceptical and shared her doubts with me :

“I think Blackheart is only a decoy, a diversion sent to delay us. The Pirate Queen is too cunning not to have discovered what we are after. While we will be busy fighting Blackheart, I believe another of her agents will be searching for the Staff.”

“And unfortunately if Tawni Balfour finds the Staff before us, we’re not strong enough at this point to claim it back from her.” I pondered. “But as we have no clue where to look either, we’ll have to fight against this Blackheart, sooner or later. The only thing this changes is we now know we must act as fast as we can.

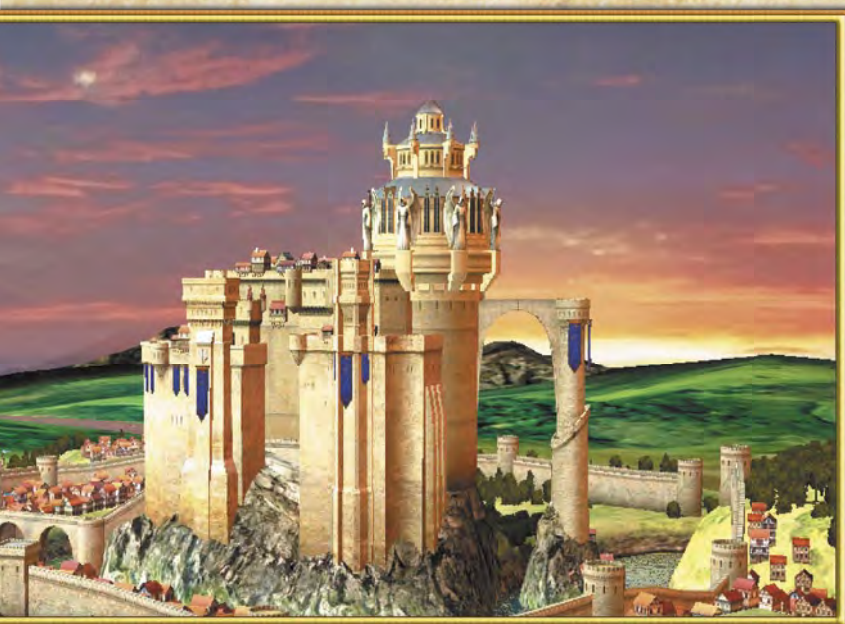
## MARZHIN THE PIRATE

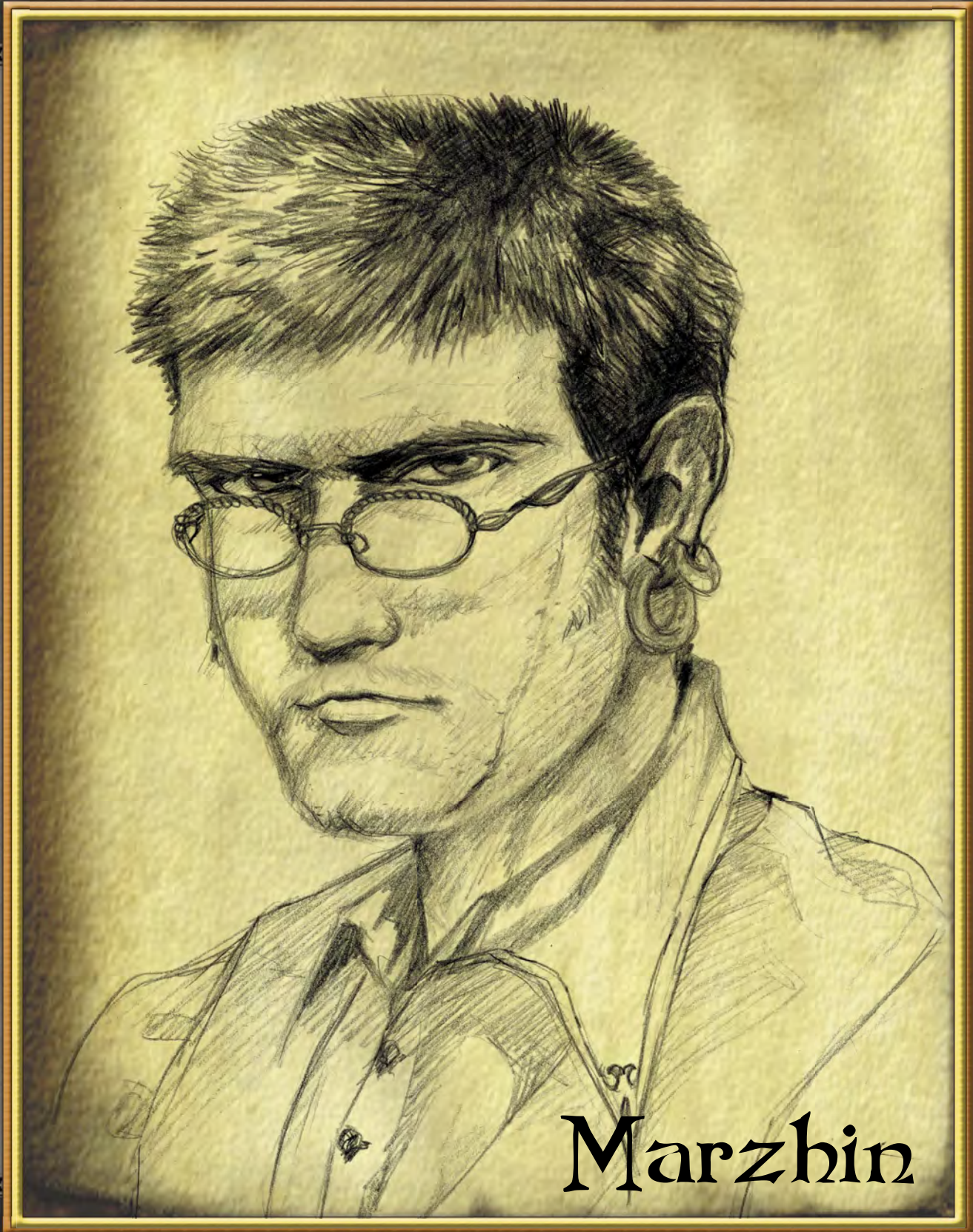
We stepped into the treasure room, deep in the undersea ruins of the Merfolk. The Staff was here, floating in mid-air over a pool of dark water. As I was about to walk into the pool to grab our prize, Eborá pulled me back.

“Elementals !” She shouted.

The waters of the pool started twisting and revealed the dancing shapes of the magical creatures.

“You were faster than I expected. I must say I am impressed.” Said a voice from





Marzhin



the shadows. A tall, red-haired man appeared, chuckling annoyingly. He was standing awkwardly, as if he didn't know how he was supposed to act. He was wearing small glasses, which seemed to indicate he was a scholar of some sort. This was going to be easy.

“So it seems you were right, Ebor.” I told her. “This is indeed another of the Pirate Queen's fools.”

“I am not a fool!” The man replied angrily. “I am the Queen's advisor for magical matters. Or one of them anyway. My name is...”

I silenced him by drawing my sword.

“Whatever. I don't really care who you are. I'm just gonna kill you and take my Staff.”

## THE STAFF OF BLUE LIGHT

I was a bit disappointed when we finally found the artifact. It didn't look impressive at all, and even less powerful. It was just a wooden stick, with a small blue jewel at its top, sending out a gentle glow. I understood its name was actually perfectly describing it.

When I reached to take it, the jewel started to glow more intensely, and I felt the broken Armageddon's Blade in my other hand becoming warmer. Ebor stopped me from going any closer :

“The Staff is reacting to your sword, and I don't like it. We shouldn't take the risk of any unwanted reaction between them.”

I remembered how the sword had caused the destruction of the other world, and cautiously took a step backwards.

“You're right. You'll be carrying the Staff for more safety.”

“Thanks, my lord.”

“So, now what ?”

Ebora took the Staff, which didn't glow this time. She took a few moments to turn it in her hand before answering :

“Now, my lord, we must go to the physical location of the Tomb to bring it back in this plane.”

“That means Chedian. Is there any other way?”

She laughed.

“Well, we could also travel to the astral plane and try to do this right under the gods' noses, but I already tried to go there and they kicked me out before I could do anything.”

“So it's decided then.” That's when I remembered the word she used. “You called it ‘the Tomb’. Why?”

“Because that is how it is called in the legends : the Tomb of a Thousand Terrors.”

The Tomb of a Thousand Terrors. I liked this name.

“We have what we were looking for. We must leave these waters without delay, as we're not yet powerful enough to fight the entire Pirate fleet, should they pursue us. A long road awaits us, and I won't let anything put a stop to the freeing of our brethren, may it be mere mortals or gods themselves!”



*So ends "Fires from the North",  
the first book of the Legends of the Ancients.*



# BOOK 2

## *The Sunken Kingdom*

*529 A.C.*

Since its foundation by the Exiled of AvLee, the elven kingdom of Aranorn never ceased to develop. Now it is expanding towards the west, towards the mountains of Blacksword and their abundant resources. But what the Exiled forgot to take into account is the fact there are other elves on Axeoth, natives who think the foreigners have no right upon these lands.

And deep in the Great Forest, the war criminal Lord Harke is willing to atone for his sins and start anew. But can one hope for a second chance ?

# Harke



## CHAPTER ONE - THE BLACK SAILS

*Since its foundation by the Exiled of AvLee, the elven kingdom of Aranorn never ceased to develop. Now it is expanding towards the west, towards the mountains of Blacksword and their abundant resources. But the prosperity of the kingdom is threatened by the frequent raids of the Pirate Queen, Tawni Balfour, who controls the trading roads of the Gold Sea, and so far King Elwin has failed to find a solution...*

### DAY ONE

(From the diaries of Lord Harke)

A hero.

I think that's what it's all about : how much you must pay to be a hero, and how much you must sacrifice. I think the greatest, hardest sacrifice to make in order to become a hero is actually very simple : selflessness.

Needless to say, I was never a true hero myself. I'm sure that if you read this, you heard about the things I did in the early years of the kingdom of Aranorn. This isn't a subject I want to discuss here - I wouldn't be a very objective source and others actually did pretty accurate testimonies of this period. I won't say I lost my mind, that's too easy an excuse, besides, I was perfectly aware of the horrible things I was doing. The truth is, while everybody was calling me a hero, I was in fact the very opposite: a coward. I had survived the Reckoning for a single reason: I had refused to follow Gelu the Demonslayer to his doom. I wanted so badly to safeguard the dirty little secret that made me the ideal candidate for the Crown, that I had become obsessed with the idea of failure, which had to be banished from every and any aspect of my life, at any cost necessary. I tried to win the love of Shaera, Lord Gramin's daughter - and the most beautiful woman at the court - but she was

deeply in love with another man and I couldn't stand it. The rest, as they say, is history. In the end, I lost it all: the crown, Shaera, my fame. I became a criminal, and Elwin, my rival, became King. I was put under house arrest in my manor, where I stayed for six years before seizing my chance to escape.

During the first years of captivity, I was consumed by anger. I plotted my revenge, tirelessly, wanting to get back everything Elwin had taken from me. Then one day, after five long years of uncertainty, I brutally came back to my senses. I was wandering in the corridors, aimlessly, and I suddenly found myself in front of an old man, wrapped in rags, with long, greasy hair, and the look of madness in his eyes. It took me a moment to realize I was staring at my own reflexion in the great mirror in the manor's hallway. Shocked by this revelation, I broke the mirror with my bare hands, as I couldn't bear to look at the wretched creature I had become. With blood spilling from my hands, I fell on the floor and burst into tears.

## DAY TWO

I woke up the next morning, my mind clearer than it had been for years, as if I had awakened from a subjugating dream. A resolution was made, deep inside me: I needed to leave Aranorn, leave Elwin and Shaera behind and start anew in some foreign land. Quite ironically, I had lived my own, personal reckoning. And now, like the refugees of AvLee, I needed to rebuild, hopefully for the better this time.

I shaved my hair, cleansed my body, and restored my former self to the state it was in before my fall. Then I devised a plan of action. Elwin had allowed me to keep some servants. They were very loyal and I knew they would help me escape. Some of them volunteered to accompany me in my quest. Even with their help, I was facing a major problem: a hardened garrison of soldiers was guarding the manor. Even if I managed to leave, they would be on my heels in no time, and, being veteran rangers, would most certainly catch me. I needed a diversion in order to get rid of them before I could think of sneaking away. Fortunately, half a decade of captivity had taught me patience, so I waited - and after nearly one more year an opportunity finally presented itself.



Elwin



Some believe I actually staged the attack of the pirates against Aranorn, but they're wrong. I had never had any contact whatsoever with the Pirate Kingdom before my arrest, so why would they have come to help me? No, the pirates' raid was pure luck. A servant brought back news from the town of Cedarmoon: a fleet was occupying the much disputed harbour of Yamathrae, and the king was gathering his forces to free the city from Tawni Balfour's armada. At the same time, black ships had landed somewhere on the southeastern coast, and raiding parties were scourging Aranorn's countryside.

I gave the pirates one week before Elwin could get rid of them and push them back into the sea, but still, that meant one week of chaos I could use at my advantage. I couldn't go north to Aranorn, and the elven army would come to the east soon, so only one option was left : the mountains of Blacksword, to the west. If I could make my way through these mountains, and the badlands on the other side, I had a chance of reaching Lodwar, where I would be safe.

## THE BLACKSWORD MOUNTAINS

A few decades ago, the Blacksword mountains were ruled by three warlords who happened to be brothers. The Blacksword brothers had been killed a long time ago by some barbarian hero, but the mountains were no less dangerous. The summits were ancient volcanoes, and lava flows had dug treacherous canyons through the dark, barren landscape. I had heard there were veins of gems and diamonds here, but any attempt to exploit them had been disrupted by a mysterious force. According to the rumors, the mountains were haunted. But, with gushes of blowing wind sounding like a distant wailing, I could understand where the rumor had come from.

And I was almost ready to believe it myself at some point. The first night we spent in the mountains, I couldn't stop feeling that we were being watched. Some of my former servants - I was calling them friends now - swore they had seen shadows just on the outer edge of the fireplace's light, but when we tried to look further into it, we found nothing. Still I'm sure I heard a faint noise somewhere above us, like tiny rocks rolling.

The second night, one of the sentinels went missing. We found the young man, my former gardener Jalvin, at the bottom of a nearby ravine, with a twisted ankle, and absolutely no recollection of what had happened. Whoever was playing this little game, they were pretty good. Still, they could not be any more supernatural than us. Ghosts suck the life out of people, they don't push them into ravines. With that in mind, I used my experience as a ranger of AvLee - and a pretty good one I must add - and tried to think of something to expose our unwanted guest. I had always been more comfortable in the role of the hunter than in the role of the prey.

### MENATHAT'S SPY

We were high in the mountains by now, and I was almost sure we were out of Aranorn's borders, but it was too soon to let our guard down. To begin with, there was still the unresolved mystery of our mischievous stalker. Then, it was certain that, by now, Elwin had sent troops after me. From our position we had an unrivaled point of view on the vast forests of Aranorn that lied below. In the past week we had spotted black columns of smoke here and there near the coast, coming from villages that had been attacked and set on fire by the pirates. But since roughly three days there was no more smoke to be seen, meaning Elwin had finally repelled them and had his hands free to deal with me.

It wasn't long before we had the confirmation of this. I noticed the hawk because it was a Red-Collar of AvLee, a species from the old world which was very rare in Axeoth, and as such I had a strong hunch it had to be someone's scout. Elwin wouldn't come in person, but our feuds had been so personal he had probably sent someone he fully trusted. My guess was he had sent old Menathat, his mentor and closest friend, after me. I remembered hunting with Menathat a long time ago, and he was very good with birds. He unfortunately was more proficient in the ways of the court than survival in the wilderness, because no true ranger would have made the mistake of using a bird from another world.

The bird circled a few times in the air above our heads and headed straight for the sea of trees far below, which meant Menathat was still at the bottom of the mountain, thankfully. We waited until the bird disappeared to continue our progression.

## THE PALE MARE

That night, we didn't break our progression and continued walking, with hoods covering our heads. My trap was in place.

We walked during two hours without any incident. I was concentrating on my surroundings, listening carefully. I had taught each of my companions to walk in a distinctive, yet casual pattern: they had to slightly scrape the ground with their right foot every three steps. Any witness who would have noticed the trick would have simply believed they were tired of walking. And if I wasn't mistaken, we were indeed being watched.

After a few hours, I realized someone among us was walking normally, and not only that, but also very silently. I waited a bit to confirm my suspicion, then, with a specific gesture of hand, I informed the others the fish had swallowed the bait. I counted to ten, and in a flash, my men had drawn their swords and surrounded the stranger, who let a faint gasp escape from under his hood. I approached and revealed his face. It was, in fact a woman, and not even that, but she was undoubtedly an elf, sporting the palest features I had ever seen. She had a dagger in her hand, but her posture was merely a defensive one.

"You're certainly the prettiest ghost I have ever seen", I said. "Who are you? Why are you spying on us?"

She stayed silent, and looked at me with defiance in her eyes. She was young - in her mid-hundreds I thought - but I could read a lot of determination and a strong will in the look she was giving me.

"We won't hurt you, so your friends with the crossbows up there can relax", I added.

For a second she looked genuinely surprised, even a bit worried. I knew she understood what I was saying. That was a start.

“Listen, we’re just passing through the mountains. We’re not here to annoy you, or steal your lands, or whatever. We’re just on our way to the other side. Let us go, and I can give you my word you’ll never hear of us again.” I turned to my men. “Let her go.”

The men took a step back. The woman nodded silently and disappeared in the darkness. Jalvin, still bearing unpleasant memories of his previous encounter with the mysterious elves, asked me:

“Do you think it was a good idea to let her go, my lord?”

“Harke is enough, Jalvin. What can I say? Women have always been my weak spot.”

## THE TRAP

I cursed Menathat for making a fool out of me, and myself for falling in such an obvious trap. The hawk hadn’t been a mistake from the old mentor: it was meant to be noticed, to lure us just where he wanted, while he was already in position in the pass. Caught off-guard, we were ambushed without a chance to fight back. I immediately ordered the men to surrender - better be captive than dead. Menathat didn’t cast as much as a glance towards me as I was thrown into the jail cart. My companions had been taken somewhere else : I hoped they hadn’t been executed, even if that wasn’t Elwin’s style. They would probably be forgiven, for having most certainly been manipulated by the evil fiend whose thoughts you are reading right here...

Hours passed. I tried to sleep on the straw couch, but without success. At least I hadn’t been chained down. The stars rose and the cart came to a stop. I could hear voices and laughter outside. I glanced through the small window and noticed they were setting up their tents. No nighttime marching for old Menathat then... Before long the voices faded and the whole camp fell silent, and, I guessed, asleep. Another hour passed slowly - as time usually does when you’re in jail. I heard a muffled noise outside the door of the cart, and I immediately thought of the pale elves we had met earlier. The door opened, revealing only young Jalvin, who had bested the guard and taken his sword. Alas, it soon became obvious that the young gardener was not skilled in the art of neutralizing a foe, for

we had only made three steps outside the camp before the guard came back to consciousness and sounded the alarm.

“Run, my lord!” the boy said, raising his sword.

Before I could say anything or make a move, he learned the most valuable lesson in life: a sword and courage are of little use when the enemy has a bow. Too bad he learned it in such a tragic way.

Using all the energy I had, I fled in the darkness, arrows darting past me. I ran as much as I could, before falling on my knees from exhaustion, and, as the initial adrenaline rush faded away, I realized the situation in which I was : alone, lost in a hostile mountain, and I could bet my pursuers wouldn't make the same mistake twice. I was sure Elwin had given instructions to take me alive, but accidents are known to happen when you use a bow in pitch-black darkness...

## THE TRUE ELVES OF AXEOTH

Menathat's troops were relentlessly tracking us, and were closing in on us. I headed towards a nearby cavern, hoping I could hide there and regain some strength. As I was advancing into the dark tunnel, the ground suddenly gave way under my feet. I fell into a hole, my head hit a rock and I lost consciousness. When I came back to my senses, I had a large, bleeding cut on my forehead and my leg was hurting like the pits of the damned. And there were three of those pale elves above me, watching me, including the woman from before. Yet another trap. It was definitely not my day.

The pale woman produced a rope and descended in the pit. She kept her distances and inspected me from afar for a long time.

“Do you think you can walk?” she finally asked.

“So you do talk.” I tried to force myself to smile but all I could produce was a grimace. “I think my leg is broken.”

# Menathar



“We’ll get you out of this.” She answered.

“You will? Why?”

“You spared my life when I fell in your trap. I would be sullied if I left you to die in mine.”

“Oh, come on. There is another reason, right? In my book honor is just an excuse for some to justify doing ugly things and getting away with it.”

The pale woman touched my leg, and pain brought tears to my eyes. I groaned.

“We kept an eye on you. It seems you are an enemy of the ones who are threatening our lands, and as such you may be useful to my people.”

“Your people? Who exactly are you, madam?”

She took a moment before answering.

“My name is Thalia A’Rikdun. And my people, stranger, are the true elves of Axeoth.”



## CHAPTER TWO - THE SOUL MAZE

*Harke has been living with the A'Rikdun elves in their underground kingdom for three years now and has almost become one of them. But some of the dark elves' leaders are tired of letting Aranorn increase their presence on their territory and want to start an open war. His allegiance put in question, Harke must gain the trust of his benefactors.*

### DAY ONE

There are fourteen native elven clans in Axeoth, who had fled and dispersed across the world following the destruction of the great elven kingdom of Etendar alongside the Ursanian Empire during the Cataclysm. With their great cities sunken to the bottom of the Sea of Verhoffin, the elves became a nomad species. Some went to live amongst the other races, some gathered in reclusive communities deep in the woods, and severed any ties they had with the outside world. And then there was the A'Rikdun - the Rikdun clan.

For all the other clans, the A'Rikdun were known as the "lost" clan, rumored to have been exterminated during the Cataclysm. Once, the A'Rikdun had been the guardians and watchers of the library-city of At'rann, where the whole of the elven knowledge and history was preserved. But At'rann disappeared under the waves, and the A'Rikdun disappeared with it... at least from the surface. The truth is, they had survived, but had decided to hide under the ground, far to the south of their previous home, secret keepers of the forgotten history of their brethren. Their underground nation, known as the Ar'Rikdun, or "lands of the Rikdun clan", spread from the furthest reaches of Devonshire to the deepest areas of the Blacksword mountains, unbeknownst to the surface-dwellers.

Like all other elven clans of Axeoth, the A'Rikdun were organized in families, or "sils". Each family had an Elder, and the Elder Council ruled the clan. I had been living with the sil of deneb for three years now. Life with the family of the woman who had saved my life, Thalia, was good. But troubles



Pryden a'menkar

were a' rising. My own kin, the elves of Aranorn, were finally colonizing the Blacksword mountains on a large scale, reopening the old mines, venturing deeper and deeper into A'Rikdun territory. Sabotage and terror tactics weren't working anymore. For five long centuries the Elders had kept the secrecy of their hideout, but now the younger elves wanted the right to fight openly, to protect their home from the invaders. They wanted war.

And among the A'Rikdun, some people were more than willing to give them one.

### DAY THREE

"This faker will only bring us trouble! We have to get rid of him, for the good of the clan!"

Once again I found myself on trial, this time in public. If the Elders were still overseeing justice, their influence had gradually faded during the last years and the fate of the clan was no longer theirs to decide. An era was ending, and the power was passing in the hands of young, charismatic and dangerously ambitious leaders such as Pryden a'menkar, the elf who was currently speaking. He was calling me a 'faker', the word they used to designate elves who are not natives of Axeoth.

"Harke has been living with us for three years, have you forgotten all about that? He gave us precious information about his people."

That was Thalia. Pryden opened his big mouth to reply, his lips trembling with rage. Instead, he took a deep breath and calmly asked:

"He's a faker. When war will come, whose side will he fight for? You'll let him stab us in the back? We can't trust him!"

A huge part of the crowd was sharing Pryden's point of view. Pryden had not only his own sil, but also the a'chernars and a'ctarus' with him. The only ones on my side were the a'denebs. If I wanted to get out of this alive, I needed to take the matter into my own hands.

“Then you can test my loyalty.”

Anger made Pryden’s skin turn paler - if possible.

“Who authorized you to talk, faker!”

“Well usually I authorize myself, thank you very much. And, by the way, I wasn’t talking to you, but to the Elders. You know, the actual rulers of the clan?”

I heard chuckles in the crowd. Good. The Elders debated over my proposal for a long time before coming to an agreement. They asked for silence.

“Then we shall put you to the test, Harke, guest of the sil of deneb. Minotaurs are currently occupying the northwestern part of our tunnels. You are to put an end to this potential threat, or die trying.”

That was better than nothing, still...

“Minotaurs? Am I supposed to deal with them all alone or can I take some troops with me?”

“The sil of deneb will decide this at its own discretion. We have spoken, and our decision will not be contested.”

Apparently, the crowd had another opinion on the matter and let their disapproving chatter fill the room, but the Elders simply left the assembly without an afterthought. Thalia and the others quickly took me outside. The young woman spoke with a very serious and concerned tone :

“You’ll have your troops. But you must not fail, Harke. It is the honor and allegiance of all the sil which is at stake now. Do you understand?”

I took a quick glance behind me. Pryden was watching me as we were leaving. If he could have killed someone just by looking at him, I would have been dead already.



## THE MINOTAUR SIGIL

I could see why the minotaurs were so fond of these caverns: it was a gigantic underground labyrinth of galleries and tunnels. Actually, I was quite amazed by the sheer numbers of the bull-like creatures. There were thousands of them, all equipped for battle. Minotaurs were not simply “occupying” this place: someone was building an army! The threat was bigger than the Elders seemed to believe. Sooner or later, they intended to march against the A’Rikdun, I was sure of it. If I wanted to succeed, and I needed to, my only hope was to strike at and defeat their leader. Without a single chieftain

in charge, I was counting on the fact the minotaurs would soon be divided into several factions and be too busy fighting each other to represent a real threat.

The minotaurs we encountered all had the same runic-looking letter on their armors and shields. I recognized it immediately for an ancient symbol from Nighon. That meant their leader was a refugee from the other world, just like me. The symbol was roughly equivalent to the letter “D” of the erathian alphabet.

I had a strong sense of *deja-vu* about this.

## DARKSTORM

A harsh battle took place in the tunnels as we ambushed the minotaur leader. As I suspected, he looked terribly familiar. It was a black-furred giant, with white eyes glowing with raw energy. He was also sporting big, intimidating horns. His body was covered with tatoos - or maybe some sort of ritual scarification. He was a practitioner of elemental magic - a geomancer.

“You should not have defied me, little elf!” thundered the giant.

“I think we’ve met before. You’re... Dace, right?”

Sparkles erupted from his eyes and the ground shook violently.

“Dace? I shall torture you during years and years just for this insult. I’m the great Darkstorm, geomancer of Nighon, warlord of the minotaurs. Your suffering will make you remember this name!”

“I know who you are, I was just teasing you. As I said, we’ve met before, at the battle of Pierpont to be precise. Surely you have not forgotten me?”

The minotaur examined me with his glowing glare, then calmed down a little.

“Can it be, in a place like this... Harke? Are you ill? You don’t seem too well, you’re far paler than in my memory.”

“Well, I haven’t spent much time in broad daylight lately, I must say. If I come to you this day, it’s because you owe me a favor.”

The fight had stopped around us, as if everyone was waiting for the outcome of our discussion to know if they needed to continue their mutual extermination. Darkstorm crossed his arms on his chest, as the tempest in his eyes turned into a brooding cloud.

“I know what I owe you, Harke of AvLee. What do you want from me?”

“Take your army and leave those caverns. Just go somewhere else, I don’t care. This territory is under my protection.”

Darkstorm frowned and grunted, but finally nodded in acceptance.

“Words are power, and as such I can’t betray my own word. But know this, Harke: I may be leaving today, but the next time our paths cross, I’ll kill you and wear your skin as a scarf. And that, too, is an oath.”

# Darkstorm



“Fine, I’ll do just the same thing. Although I’m not quite sure I’ll go with the scarf thing.”

When the minotaurs were out of sight, I let myself succumb to the fear that had been torturing my stomach all along, empowered by the knowledge he could have burned me to the ground with a mere twist of the tongue.

But I was alive and my mission was a success, so it was time to get back home, wasn’t it?

## PRYDEN’S COUP D’ETAT

It turned out it wasn’t.

An army was blocking the road back to Ar’Rikdun. At first I thought they were here to take care of the minotaurs in the case I had failed - but I had a strong hunch it wasn’t the case. They were here for me, to make sure I wasn’t coming back at all. At their head, I could recognize one of Pryden’s lieutenant, whose name was Genn a’chernar. The a’chernars were considered decadent by the other sils, and if the rumours were true, he would make a point of making my death last as long as possible. I supposed that was exactly the reason why Pryden had sent him.

Still, it came as a surprise to see he was sending people who could be directly linked to him. Maybe he had grown popular enough not to fear the Elder Council anymore. Whatever the reason, that meant trouble.

## THE TALE OF GENN A’CHERNAR

“I defeated the minotaurs and they left the caverns! For what reason are you doing this, Genn of the a’chernars ? Is it what the Elder Council has ordered?”

Genn had surrendered as soon as I had wounded him. It turned out he had a low pain threshold... which was actually hilarious, when you considered his sadistic tastes.



“The Elder Council is no more, faker! While you were away, your people attacked us. This shall not go unpunished! As the Elders couldn't seem to be able to make the right decisions, the people have entrusted a new leader with power! He has already led us to victory against the invaders and captured one of their officers...”

“This leader - we're talking about this Pryden, right?”

“Lord Pryden... soon to be King Pryden A'Rikdun!”

“I thought there would be no king for the elves until the kingdom of Etendar was restored?”

“The annihilation of your kind will be the first step towards the Restoration of the Sunken Kingdom!”

Whatever rubbish Pryden had been telling to justify his rise to power, this guy believed it wholeheartedly. I guess if you're smart, you don't let anyone else make you his henchman, especially if you can rule yourself... Well that's my philosophy anyway.

“There must be some who oppose Pryden's ambitions. What happened to them? Answer, or I'll cut your fingernail!”

“Please, not my fingernails! My beautiful fingernails! ...If you are referring to your friends of the sil of deneb, they have been arrested and are awaiting trial for high treason. Such is the fate of those who befriend the enemy!”

So the A'Rikdun were under martial law, and Thalia and her family had been jailed. His hands free at last, Pryden was gathering an army in order to march against Aranorn, in some sort of wicked crusade. The fakers, the 'impure elves', had to be exterminated. I realized that with the remnants of the adeneb army we were probably the last to oppose the new tyrant.

Ironically enough, after having been its worst enemy, I was now Aranorn's only hope.



Thalia a' deneb

## CHAPTER THREE - THE VEIL OF HISTORY

*While Pryden is leading the armies of the dark elves against Aranorn, Harke must attack the a'Menkar's dungeons to free Thalia and her family. In a second time, he will need to find a way to forbid Pryden of restoring the Kingdom of Etendar... with himself as king.*

### DAY ONE

With his newfound status as warlord of the A'Rikdun, Pryden didn't waste any time before leading his armies to the surface. He had left one of his lieutenants, a fellow named Mantis a'Ctarus, in charge of maintaining the martial law in the underground. Our contacts inside the Elders' Tower allowed us to discover the rest of the sil of Deneb was held prisoner right into Pryden's turf : the fortress of Menkar.

During three days, we played a game of cat and mouse with Pryden's patrols in order to approach the felon's fortress. Our goal was the fortress' dungeons, where Thalia and her sil of Deneb were being held. Rescuing Thalia was my first priority, for three reasons : firstly, she had offered me the hospitality of her family during more than three years, so helping her was the least I could do. Secondly, she was a friend, as simple as that. And thirdly, if I wanted to fight Pryden, I would need her and her clan...

### STORMING MENKAR

Our venture into the fortress was mostly succesful. I was amazed to find the place poorly guarded, and we managed to get inside and find our way to the dungeons pretty easily. The Denebs were there indeed : all the people in the cells were very young children or old men and women. They told me Thalia was held into Pryden's quarters, in the opposite aisle of the castle. I also learned that



Mantis a'ctarus had left the fortress with a contingent of soldiers for an unknown destination. That explained at least why there were so few guards... But that was strange nevertheless : hadn't Pryden entrusted him to stay here ?

On my way to the lord's chamber, I noticed a particular cell in another corridor. It was protected by two guards, which was a lot of them considering how deserted the fortress was. I remembered what Genn a'Chernar had said, about an enemy officer defeated on the field by Pryden, and wondered if this fellow Aranornian was in there. After taking care

of the two guards as silently as possible, I lockpicked the cell door, and to my surprise recognized a very familiar face.

"Well, well... If it isn't Menathat."

"Harke... Here?"

"Looks that way, old man. So... you're the infamed officer Pryden defeated. It figures."

"Keep your sarcasm for yourself, traitor. I'm not surprised to find you involved in this."

"Wrong guess here, my... friend. As surprising as it sounds, I'm one of the good guys right now."

He emitted a joyless chuckle. "You'll have a hard time convincing me of that."

"I'll start by freeing you. Can you walk?"

“I... don't think so. I haven't eaten for several days... since they understood keeping on torturing me would go nowhere.”

I took a closer look. He indeed wasn't looking in great shape. There were marks of burns on his arms, and bruises all over his face. I almost felt pity for the councillor.

“Don't worry, you'll see the light of day again. Litterally.” I asked one of my men to take care of the old man and resumed my search for Thalia. I finally found her in a locked room next to Pryden's.

“Harke! Ancients be praised, you came!”

When I opened the door to her jail and unlocked the chains she was kept in, she was so glad she gave me an emotional embrace. That was not unpleasant. Not unpleasant at all... Still I couldn't resist asking her :

“Why did Pryden want you to be a beneficiary from this... favored treatment? I mean... that's one luxurious cell you have here.”

Thalia gave me an angry look. I liked when she was mad. I always had a thing for women of character.

“What do you think?” she stormed. “The pig had a crush on me since childhood. He was hoping that, him king, I would have accepted to share his bed... What's so funny?”



“Oh, nothing, nothing really.” She had no idea of the irony of what she was telling me. “Well, that take care of that. Have you any idea what this a’Ctarus chap is up to?”

She looked worried.

“I’m not sure. I think he’s going to At’rann, even if it is forbidden. He’s going to unseal the City of Light. I don’t know what he is looking for, but that can’t be good.”

## DEVONSHIRE

We escaped the fortress without much difficulty and reached the surface two days later. The army was still where we had left it, fortunately. They rejoiced when discovering we had recovered their parents and children.

We traveled to the north to the border of the Devonshire, a quiet, neutral country in the central plains of Lodwar. During the journey, Menathat had regained part of his strength and I was confident he was now able to ride back to Aranorn on his own.


“I’m afraid you’ll have to get back to Aranorn by the long road, as the Blackswords are most certainly under Pryden’s control as we speak. You must reach Council Island and warn Elwin of Pryden’s plans.”

“The King--” started the old councillor. I silenced him with a gesture of the hand.

“I’m not done yet. Listen carefully : Pryden’s troops are not familiar with forest ground, so he ‘ll try to lure you into the mountains where he will have the upper hand. You must not fall in his trap. Keep your ground. Force a stalemate. Buy me some time, that’s all I ask.”

“Time? But what for?”

“To find a way to stop this nonsensical war. Only I have no idea how...”



“While I was held captive I heard the guards say this Lord Pryden had troubles to justify his claims to the throne... That he would need some kind of proof he can rightfully restore the kingdom, or something like that. Does it help?”

Who could have believed old Menathat would have the clues we were looking for? For I knew of only one place where such a proof could be found, and that was the legendary library-city of At'rann, where all the history of the elves was supposedly kept. That explained why Mantis a'Ctarus was heading towards the city. If we could prevent Pryden's henchman of recovering the proof he was looking for, then Pryden's ambitions would backfire at him.


According to legends At'rann was sunken somewhere in the south of the Sea of Verhoffin, not far from the coast of the former kingdom of Etendar, now a wild forest on the southern border of Mendossus... That was pretty vague, but it was a start.

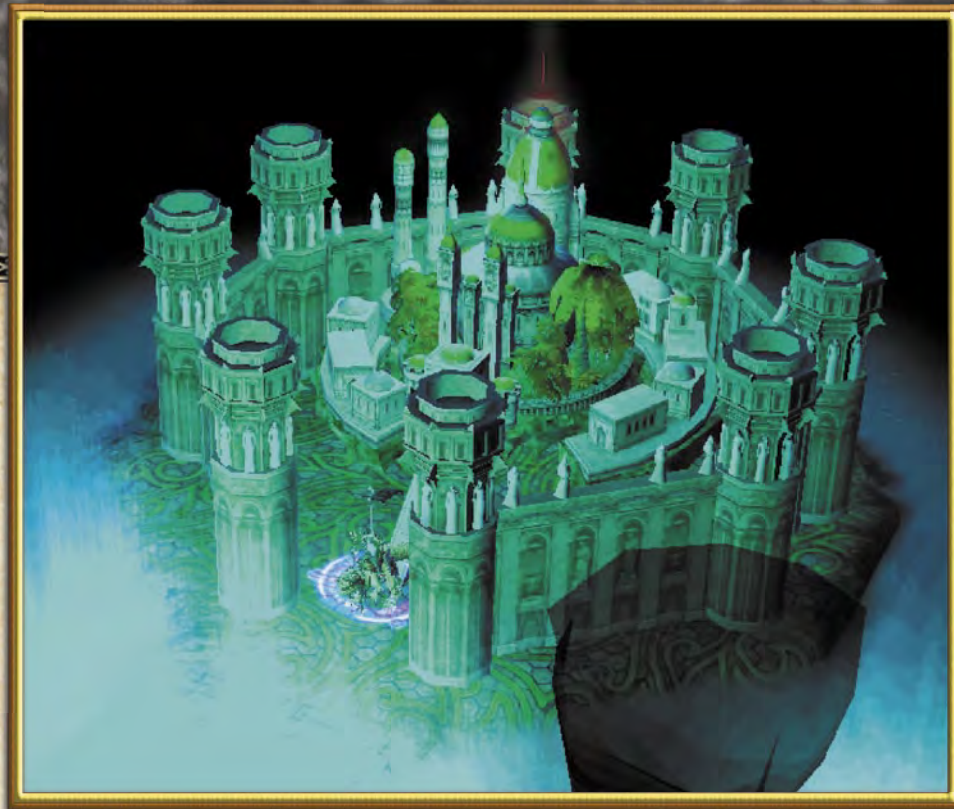
## THE CITY OF LIGHT

I was facing the most incredible sight of my entire life.

It took me a few moments to accept the fact that the ceiling was actually made of water. We were under what I'll call, in lack of a better word, a gigantic, magical dome, and beyond that dome there was an ocean. The tunnel had led us on the side of a cliff which was circling the whole area, and from there the path was a great stair of white marble. As we were descending the stairs, we saw, just above our heads, enormous fishes passing by. I had never seen any fish like those, they had sharp teeth and small, white eyes, and a small tentacle on their forehead was ending with a little, phosphorous light. And I swear I saw a creature so fantastic I can't really describe it, it looked remotely like a whale, but of a giant and mutated sort.

Below us there was a great, beautiful city of white towers, in the very center of the dome. The city was partly in ruin, but it was still a breathtaking sight. That was without any doubts the legendary At'rann, sunken during the Cataclysm but magically preserved by the sacrifice of the greatest elven wizards.





“It’s... so beautiful.” Thalia whispered.

“Yes, it is. But it also seems fairly desert to me. Where are Mantis and his men?”

“You’re right... Could this mean we reached the sealed city before them?”

“If this is the case, then we must not waste this advantage. If proofs there are, we must find them and destroy them.”

The only problem left was At’rann last line of defense : what I can only describe as a magical force-field surrounding the city, preventing anyone to approach it as surely as it was made of stone. I turned to Thalia and asked her advice on the situation. She smiled.

“The sil of Deneb was founded by one of the wizards who sealed the city underwater. There is a secret path we can use to reach the city, but for that we’ll need to decypher the clues left on several stelae. When we’ll have visited the six Stelae at the surface, the seal will be lifted and the path to At’rann will open.”



## LIFTING THE VEIL

With the secret words, we passed through the magical force field like it was thin air. But we had no time to search the city for information about the heir to the crown of Etendar. As soon as we had opened the gateway, Mantis a'CTarus and his army appeared right on our heels. They must have been hidden somewhere in the tunnels, spying on us, waiting for us to reveal the path. I realized I was wrong to mistake him for another goon like Genn. We quickly retreated inside the city and got ready for the upcoming siege. The fabled City of Light, the sanctuary of art and knowledge, was now a city of war and flames.

“Thalia a'Deneb!” Mantis was taunting us from below the city walls. “It’s still time to surrender. I give you my word you and your people will be well-treated. I am ready to forgive you and give you amnesty. I have only one request : you must lay down arms immediately. What do you say?”

Thalia was enraged, I could see it because she was awfully calm.

“I don’t negotiate with a-”



I had never heard that particular word in three years among the A'Rikdun, but I think it involved Mantis' mother and a goat in a way or another. Thalia had a very peculiar understanding of diplomatic talks. Our enemy was not smiling anymore.

“Then I should dispose of you. You opened the gates to At'rann for us, and I want to thank you for that, but then, I'm afraid, you became highly expandable. A pity really.”

And with that, the battle began.

## THE LOST TRUTH

Mantis was not only a fine tactician, he was a skilled warrior as well. We resisted as fiercely as we could, but soon we had to retreat in the great central tower. We had many losses, but so had Mantis' troops. At this rate, there would be no winner.

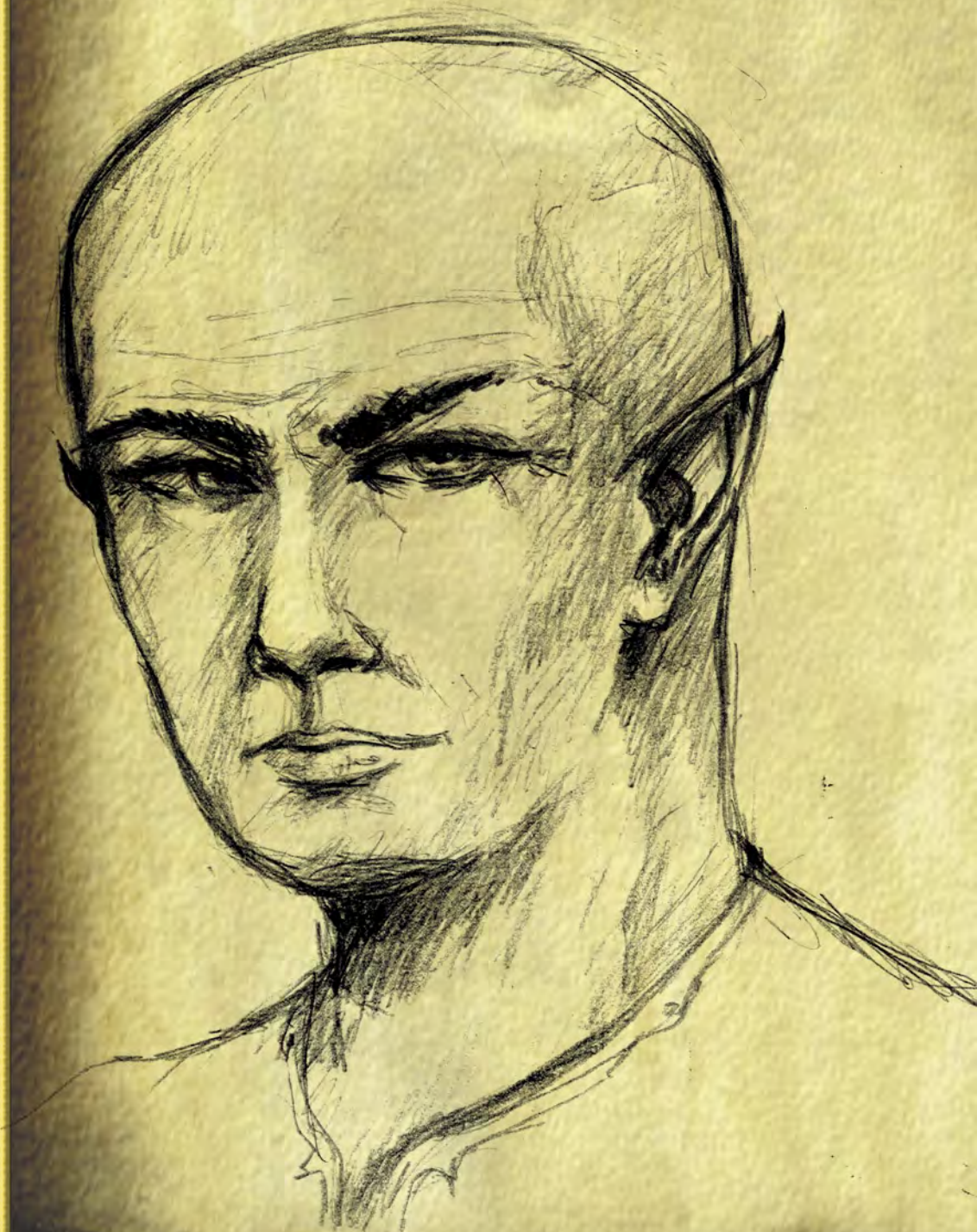
Mantis must have come to the same conclusion and decided eliminating me was the best way to win this battle before it turned into a disaster : he challenged me to fight him in a duel. We met in the great archive room. After a fierce display of fencing abilities of both side, I finally got the upper hand and seizing an overture, I sent his sword flying through the room while my own blade was slicing deep inside his chest. He fell on his knees. His troops hesitated, and that was enough for us to take the advantage, and force them to surrender to save their lives. A few minutes later it was over. Then I went back to their agonizing leader, hoping it was not too late to have some answers.

Mantis was still kneeling where I had left him, with a dazzled look. He kept looking at something behind my shoulder, like totally fascinated. It was probably the loss of blood which was making him hallucinating. I grabbed his hand to catch his attention.

“You purposely left Menkar unguarded, knowing we would then come right here, isn't that so?”

At last he seemed to notice me.

# Manlis a'clarus



“Oh... That’s right. I knew Thalia wouldn’t cooperate... So I needed to have you... open the gate for me...”

“But what were you looking for? I thought you were coming here to find some proof to back up Pryden’s claims to the throne...”

He chuckled, blood bursting through his teeth.

“Quite the opposite, actually... I wanted the proof for myself...”

“So you were betraying him all along? Unfortunately, it seems nothing happened the way you wanted.”

His hand was getting cold. I knew it was the end. In a weak, distant voice, he said :

“Ironic... isn’t it? All... fakers...”

Those were the last words of Mantis a’cturus, and as he passed away, I noticed, on the corner of his mouth, the faint echo of a smile.

That left me with even more questions while I was investigating the great library. There were niches on the walls of the room, filled with scrolls and runic stones, all part of the long history of the elves. But what was haunting my mind were Mantis’ last words. I was wondering about their meaning when I arrived on a balcony above the room, from which I could see the great wall painting in its entirety. It was hard to miss, still I had managed to do it somehow. Amazed by that discovery, I called Thalia to show her. Mantis was right.

“The war against fakers has no reason to be. There are no fakers. Or we’re all fakers.”

At first she didn’t understand what I was saying, but when she did she almost fell on her knees, muttering prayers to the Ancients. For the wall painting was representing the arrival of the first elves on Axeoth, fifteen centuries ago. And they were arriving through shining portals, the same portals used by the Exiled of Enroth to come to this world.

## CHAPTER FOUR - HEADING INTO LIGHT

*In the sunken city of At'rann, Harke and Thalia discovered that all the elves, both natives and exiled, came to this world through the portals, making the claim some are "true elves" and the others "fakers" preposterous. But there is much left to do, as an unexpected guest shows up...*

### DAY ONE

We spread the word of the discovery we had made in the city, backed up by accounts from the Days of Wonder we deciphered from the archives. From what we had gathered, it seemed the elves of Axeoth initially came from another place, a world ruled by the Ancients. At some point this world was destroyed in a terrible war between the Ancients and their arch nemesis, the Creators. The elves, and other creatures, escaped through the portals leading to this world. This story was incredibly similar to what the Aranornians had experienced during the Reckoning.

To my own surprise, the A'Rikdun seemed to accept these new facts very well. It wasn't that they didn't want to make war against Aranorn, which had been stealing their lands, but they realized they had chosen the wrong way to deal with the problem. The whole hatred of "fakers" had been fueled by fundamentalism and bigotry and because of that, and the manipulative actions of people like Pryden, their clan had been divided, their Elders were destitute, and their children were about to fight a meaningless war against what turned out to be the equivalent of long-lost brothers. The A'Rikdun were willing to set the things right and settle their territory dispute through negotiation rather than violence, at last.

There was nonetheless one remaining problem: Pryden. Lord Pryden, or King-wannabe Pryden, was still in command of the army and, if our information was correct, infuriated by the ongoing stalemate against Aranorn, a situation I didn't think he would bear for much longer. Apparently Elwin had taken some of my ideas and mixed them with his own strategy, and it seemed to work well to keep Pryden at bay. He knew what he was doing and to my own surprise, I discovered a newfound respect for the young king of Aranorn,

my old enemy. If only he had better taste in hats... Without any of Pryden's minions left to enforce the martial law in A'Rikdun, the Elder Council had been restored. Its first decision was unanimous: Pryden was to be arrested and judged for his coup d'état and what had followed. Thalia and I volunteered to capture him.

We gathered as many men as we could and marched east. There was still one decision to make.



“How will we cross the Blacksword mountains?” asked Thalia.

“Pryden is probably strongly entrenched in them as we speak, so we can't take the risk of being ambushed if we walk up into the mountains... That means...”

One thought had been worrying me since we started planning our path.

“We'll need to go underground.”

“You don't seem to like the idea.” As usual, Thalia had seen right through me.

“Call it a hunch, but I think the tunnels too are defended. But by a presence as least as annoying as Pryden.”

The last time I saw them, Darkstorm and his minotaur army were leaving the A'Rikdun territory. And they were leaving to the east... to the Blacksword mountains.

## DAY THREE

That morning, our scouts came back with worrying information about the situation on the other side of the mountains.

Pryden had already discovered winning this war wasn't going to be as easy as he had promised the Rikdun clan. Elwin's rangers were occupying the western part of the Great Forest and were not willing to fight him in the open. Each time Pryden had tried to advance in the forest, his troops had been decimated by rains of arrows coming from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. So Pryden had thought the best solution was to burn the forest down. I could have told him it was a bad idea: he angered the Spirits of Nature and was forced to withdraw to the safety of the mountains to escape their wrath, with only one possibility left : skirt around the forest and attack Aranorn from the north. But by doing so, he was taking an enormous risk: A'Rikdun troops were not used to fighting on open ground, as they were trained for hit-and-run tactics: their thing was harassing the enemy, not direct battle. So Pryden was only exposing them by doing this, and he had thus forced us to make haste, for I knew Elwin would try to trick him into direct confrontation now that he had have plenty of time to assess the A'Rikdun's strengths and weaknesses. There was no way for the A'Rikdun to win after the losses they had sustained against the rangers and the enraged spirits, and Pryden was too proud and stubborn to back off. He was leading his people to slaughter. The A'Rikdun would be crushed, and before long Aranorn would invade their territory.

I don't know if some God of Irony was playing with us since the beginning but the table had once again been turned: after trying to protect Aranorn against Pryden, we had now to save Pryden from Aranorn... Anyway, our goal remained unchanged, as Pryden had to be stopped quickly, before his madness endangered all of the A'Rikdun. If our information was right, that merely left us a month to reach the other side of the mountains before his army would meet Elwin's.

## THE RETURN OF DARKSTORM

I was partly relieved when we found the first markings left by the minotaur to claim the tunnels. The symbol was not Darkstorm's sigil, meaning he wasn't in charge of this group.

A few days later, as Thalia and I were leading a scouting party in the tunnels, we found other markings, bearing yet another symbol. It seemed the minotaur army had split into several factions, just like I was hoping it would when I had fought them.

"If Darkstorm is still alive, he will be in a terrible state of mind." I told Thalia.

"Who's this Darkstorm? You seem to be very wary of him."

"He's a geomancer, an Exiled just like me. Big, black minotaur, with a vast knowledge of the arcane. And very, very powerful and dangerous. He swore to kill me and he..."

"...never betrays his word." A familiar, thundering voice finished just behind us. Before we could react we were surrounded by a party of horned warriors. Among them was the black-furred giant, who was apparently very pleased to have ambushed us so easily.

"Hail, Darkstorm. I didn't see your sigil in these tunnels. I was starting to fear you were dead..."



The minotaur smiled. Miniature electric bolts jolted from inside his eyes.

"I am not dead. You won't be able to make the same claim for very long..."

An idea flashed into my mind.



“So if you don’t mind, I will use my last moment to make you a proposal.”

The black minotaur laughed.

“And what would it be? You have nothing I want.”

“What about... lands?”

A white maelstrom rose in his eyes. Thalia gave me the “are you insane?” look.

“Talk, but make it quick.”

“What about an alliance between our peoples? Just like there was in Alvar in the old world, elves and minotaurs can live together in harmony. You could have... you could have the Blacksword mountains! Think about it... Vast territory, both on surface and underground... A lot of unexploited resources...”

The minotaur’s glare went from me to Thalia.

“But is that yours to give?”

Thalia gave me another of her looks, this one I had learn to decipher as “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“These lands,” she said, “are the righteous property of my people, the A’Rikdun clan. Harke is right. We could all have what we want.”

The minotaur made a few steps around us.

“And what you want is... an alliance, then? Against who?”

Thalia didn’t hesitate.

“Against the outlaw, Pryden a’menkar. His army is threatening our eastern side, occupying these very mountains.”

“Your mountains to be” I added.

“So...” Darkstorm took a deep breath which seemed to come from the depths of the earth. “The house is mine if I help you clean it? But I’ll only accept if you help me first.”

“For what do you need help?”

“Repair the wrongs you did to me, of course. After I accepted your demands to leave your territory, two of my lieutenants betrayed me, and took a large chunk of my army with them. I can’t make an alliance with those rogues creeping around, threatening my people. So if you want us to discuss this further, you’ll have to eliminate them.”

“Your word... Do we have your word you’ll help us in return?” I cautiously asked.

Darkstorm had a predator’s smile.

“Not yet. Do I have yours?”

Smart guy.

## THE ROGUE BULL

“Were you out of your mind?” Thalia asked me angrily right after we killed the first rogue minotaur. “Why did you have to promise to give him the Blackswords? Since when can you make such a decision?”

“Just calm down and listen to me.” I replied. “There were three reasons.

The first one is, Darkstorm was about to kill us, so I needed to catch his interest.

# Calistar



# Gandross



The second one? You A'Rikduns are not exploiting the Blackswords. For you it's just a piece of barren landscape on your eastern border. For years it was occupied by the Blacksword brothers and it didn't bother you back then." "How dare you--"

"Am I not right? The only reason the Blacksword mountains became of any interest to you lately is because they are disputed by other elves. That's what is unbearable to you. It's your stupid honor that makes them suddenly important, if not for that there wouldn't be any problem!"

I realized I was shouting. It was the first time I ever lost my temper in front of her. She looked at me, surprised. I regained my composure before continuing.

"So... isn't it better to have an ally in the place rather than an enemy?"

"I hear you, still..." She said carefully. "What's the third reason?"

"The third reason is simple. If we manage to fulfill our goal, then there's hope to have peace with Aranorn. But peace doesn't last forever. What if history repeats itself in the future and war is waged again between the two countries? All that's between us is the Blacksword mountains." I grinned. "But if Aranorn wants to get us, they'll have to fight the minotaurs first..."

"So you... I can't believe it." I couldn't tell if she was impressed or shocked. Maybe both. "You're pretty devious, you know that?"

I sighed in relief. "Well, I'm me."

## TALES OF THE OLD WORLD

The second minotaur bit the dust.

"So... What's your history with this...Darkstorm?"

I thought carefully before responding.

“That’s a pretty long story. You’re sure you want to hear it?”

“Give me the big picture.”

“It all happened thirty years ago or so, in the other world... Enroth. At the time, the Dragon Queen Mutare, ruler of Nighon, was on the verge on conquering our land of AvLee with her armies of enslaved dragons. While Tarnum Dragonfriend was leading our own troops in a desperate counterstrike, the Forest Guard was trying to prevent Mutare’s forces from getting further inside our lands. Darkstorm was one of Mutare’s captains. He was one of the greatest minotaur heroes, and one of Nighon’s most fearsome geomancers.”

“I see. You were enemies, then.”

“Yes. During a patrol on AvLee’s southern borders, my unit was ambushed by Darkstorm’s troops. It is not a small feat to surprise a party of rangers, and that fact ultimately led us to the knowledge Mutare had spies in our ranks. Anyway, we managed to repel the minotaurs and I had to fight against Darkstorm himself... And I won, even if it was more by sheer luck than real skill, I realize today. For some reason I spared him, and made him swear he owed me a favor from that day on.”

Thalia seemed fascinated by my story.

“And what happened next? Was this Dragon Queen defeated?”

I smiled.

“First let’s see if we can reach a deal with him, then maybe you’ll have the opportunity to ask him directly.”

## A THICK-HEADED WARLOCK

I handed the horned heads of the two minotaurs to the black-furred geomancer.

“We have done what you asked for. Now it’s up to you. Will you rally to our cause, or not?”

Darkstorm turned to Thalia.

“Sweet lady. Do you swear the Blacksword mountains will be ours?”

“If you ally with us and help us bring Pryden to justice, yes, I swear on my name and sil that the ownership of the territory of the Blacksword mountains, both above and below the earth, will be handed over to your people.”

“Sil?”

“She means family.” I quickly answered.

“Then I accept your terms. This is a contract between you and me, elf Thalia. You have my word.”

Then he turned to me with a wide smile.

“Now if you’ll excuse me...”

One of his followers handed him an enormous trident, with each spike as large as my arm.

“What are you doing?” Thalia shouted, putting herself between him and me.

“Milady, I made an oath to kill this man. As you know, I never betray my own word, and as

nothing in our accords specified I should spare him, I must demand you to move.”

One of the minotaurs pushed Thalia out of Darkstorm’s way. Immediately my men stepped in to protect me, so did his minotaurs, and before we knew it, the battle had started.

## THE MEANING OF HONOR

Darkstorm fell on one knee, three arrows emerging from his chest.

“I can’t believe it. Defeated again... By you!”

My arm had been burnt by one his spells, but I was mostly fine.

“Let’s stop this madness right here. We’re supposed to be allies, remember?”

Darkstorm took the arrows and ripped them out of his chest. He groaned and stood up again, ready for another round.

“My honor is at stake! My honor as a warrior and as a sorcerer.”

“Oh, come on. Honor this, honor that. Is killing me so important you’d risk a newly-signed alliance to do it? What about your honor as a leader?”

Darkstorm stopped. At least I had given him something to ponder about. He looked me right in the eyes.

“You’re right.”

He threw the trident away, and it lodged itself into the ground. This ended the brawl.



“But I still have matters to settle with you. One day, I will challenge you to an honourable fight and we’ll know for sure who’s stronger.”

As if three beatings weren’t enough for him...

## REFLECTIONS

“Pryden a’menkar!” Thalia said in a loud voice. “You are under arrest for the crime of high treason. You will be taken back to Ar’Rikdun for trial by the Elder Council. Your troops are now under my command. It’s over.”

The chained Pryden was brought to the jail-cart. He was seething with anger and would not stop shouting. Three men had to master him.

“Thalia! How could you do this to me! I would have made you my queen!”

“I told you before : I’m not interested.”

Pryden’s crazed eyes moved back and forth between Thalia and me.

“So that’s it! I see it now! You prefer him, don’t you? That faker! You are a shame to your ancestors, Thalia a’deneb! You know what you are? A whore, that’s what you are!”

Thalia moved incredibly swiftly but I was expecting her to do that. I caught her wrist just before her dagger sliced through Pryden’s throat.

“What are you doing? He deserves death!”

“He will be judged. Don’t give him the last word.”

She let her dagger fell to the ground. I took her into my arms.

“It’s over, as you said. The time of violence has ended. The time of talks is at hand.”

As Pryden was taken away, I pointed my finger to the hill on the other side of the plains. I noticed a figure riding a unicorn, wearing an exuberant hat. Next to him, I recognized old Menathat. Elwin’s army was here.

“Do you want to come along?” She asked.

I laughed. “Better not. The king and I... well...let’s just say we are not especially good friends.”

She frowned. “When I come back, you’ll have to tell me about that.”

“I will... if you’re brave and mad enough to prolong your presence near mine.”

She smiled and gave me a shy kiss. Then, before riding away with her escort to meet Elwin, she turned one last time in my direction and said :

“You know, there is a legend about the circumstances under which the old elven kingdom will rise again. You know what the legend says? That the clans will be reunited when the elves will accept their own past. That’s the reason why the wizards of old wanted to preserve At’rann at all costs, so that one day, we could learn about where we came from.” She smiled. “So maybe the sunken kingdom will be restored, after all.”

“Then if it ever does, maybe it would be a good idea to keep the idea of the fifteenth seat. This time for Aranorn. That way we would prevent any other... lack of communication between our peoples.”

She nodded.

“Maybe. Maybe it is a good idea indeed.”

After her departure, I walked away from the soldiers and wandered a bit under the shadow of the trees, something I hadn't done in the last three years. I realized how much I missed the forest, but also the fact that the reassuring trees were my past, and my past only. I had to leave them behind me and walk into the future... into the sunlight. That's where I found Darkstorm, quietly meditating. That was a peculiar sight, given how he had joyfully butchered Pryden's troops earlier. Without even turning his bull-like head, he said :

“Don't give him the last word.' Very cute. But I know when you're lying, and I think she does too.”

“What's your point?”

“That wasn't really why you spared him, was it? I wonder what you've seen in that man that deserved life?”

From where we were standing, I could see the meeting on the distant hill. Elwin was making a reverence and waving his ridiculous cap to salute Thalia. It was like something that had puzzled me for the last nine years had finally found an explanation.

“A reflection. I saw a reflection, I think.”





*So ends "The Sunken Kingdom",  
the second book of the Legends of the Ancients.*

# BOOK 3

## *Demons and Wonders*

*537 A.C.*

In the northern region known as Hanndl's Grasp, two unlikely companions join forces to find the missing Queen of Framon. One of them is an old warrior, a mercenary without any place to call home. The other is a quirky man, who believes himself to be the lost prince of a faraway land.

Together, they'll face a threat so formidable it could destroy the world. For the Twilight of the Gods has come, and nothing will ever be the same.





Gawain Narligan



## CHAPTER ONE - HEART OF WINTER

*Fifteen years after the Chedian Alliance defeated the Beldonian Hordes, many things have changed in the northern region known as Hanndl's Grasp. At the end of 537 A.C., after nearly one year of never-ending winter, the people believe the frost giants have awoken from their slumber and are determined to engulf the whole world in ice... and a mercenary starts his fateful quest to find the missing Queen of Framon.*

### PROLOGUE

(Transcription of a Memory Cube, part of Queen Iona Arran's personal collection.)

After our escape from the Gold Sea, and a long and arduous journey through the plains of Lodwar, we were able to sneak successfully into the lands of Chedian. It was there, in the middle of the northwestern mountains, that we found what we were looking for.

There is a cursed place in those mountains that is known as the Cirque of Dwarrow, a valley so perfectly circular it is believed that part of the mountain was removed by the hand of a god. They couldn't be more right. If Eborá was right, this is where the great city of the dwarves once stood before it was used as a prison for the Kreegan vanguard and relocated to an astral plane by the Staff of Blue Light.

And now it was this same artefact which was about to bring it back to this world. As Eborá performed the long and complex ritual that allowed her to access the powers of the Wire to undo what Escaton the Planeswalker had done one millennia earlier, the gem atop the staff emitted a powerful blue glow. As if in response, the broken blade at my side also radiated with raw energy.

Was there even a shifting in the air ? One moment, there was the round hole of the Cirque of Dwarrow, the moment after we were standing at the feet of a gigantic fortress of granite and obsidian. The Tomb of a Thousand Terrors.

“My king, something is wrong. Why is the breeze so cold all of a sudden ?” Eborá whispered, shivering in the moonless night. But I felt nothing. In my hand, Armageddon’s Blade was burning, melting the snow flakes which were starting to form in the air around me.

## DAY ONE

*(Excerpts from “The Tale of Nurtigan”,  
compiled and annotated by Agraynel Talhaearn, court skald of Framon)*

One month after Queen Iona’s departure from Framon’s capital city of Arranir, the rumours began to spread. “She is dead,” the people were crying, “Our beloved Queen disappeared in the heart of winter to be devoured by the wolves.” The feudal lords, however, were more pragmatic, and lost no time making claims on the throne. Since her father Lord Maine Arran’s tragic demise in 525, Iona had been working tirelessly to turn his dream of a peaceful, unified Framon into a reality, a country which could stand against the new power of his neighbour, Chedian, if need be. For this reason, the young Queen never married, and had no heir.

But while the Framian nobles were preparing for the eventuality of a new succession war, the friends of the Queen decided to act. Once a mercenary, Gawain Nurtigan had proven a trustworthy ally to Iona’s father during the unification of the land, and for his services had been granted the duchy of Yorwick to welcome the people of Guberland, left homeless by the Mendossian invasion of their island. Nurtigan chose to pass the actual task of ruling to someone “smarter than him”, in his own words, but remained a close friend of the Arran family. After the death of Lord Maine, he swore to protect his daughter. And as such, it was he who gathered his best men into a search - and, Gawain feared, rescue - party.



One year earlier, in the last days of the year 537 A.C., winter became increasingly harsh. Winters are known to be harsh in the northern lands, so people thought it was just a bad year. They had no idea how bad that year would turn out to be, as months passed and winter stayed. Food became scarce, and people were starving... some tried to cross the Sea of Verhoffin to Mendossus in the east, or to the warmer lands of Nyb and Suldussar in the southwest. But even the Sea was wilder and stormier than usual. No ship ever came back. It was like the whole of Hanndl's Grasp had been cut off from the rest of the world.

## DAY TWO

Finally it became unbearable. People were dying of hunger and sickness. Others began to resort to barbaric ways, ransacking and pillaging villages for as little food as they could find. Human, orcish and even elven raiders gathered into savage tribes in the mountains, and according to rumours they were not above eating the flesh of their own kin. People started to fear the end was nigh. For the old prophecies foretold of a time where the Frost Giants would awaken from their timeless slumber and engulf the world of men into the cold oblivion of an icy death. Gods would die and this world would succumb to give birth to another. Between the seemingly endless otherworldly winter and the madness growing among men, it was easy to believe those dark times had come.

It was then that Queen Iona received a message from Eventide.

Eventide was a powerful wizard leading the young Church of Equilibris, who preached the value of balance in all things. Opinions were divided about Eventide. For some, he was a saint, and a healer. For others, he was a heretic, dealing in dark arts and necromancy. But whatever he truly was, he was

certainly powerful and knowledgeable. He claimed to know the origin of the particularly harsh winter and how to dispel it, but he wanted the Queen to visit the Church headquarters in person to reveal that knowledge. Iona hesitated, but decided she had to try everything in order to save her people. Gawain had been against that trip, but Iona had strong-will in her blood. Iona travelled south to Lindisfarne's monastery, where she held council with the Priests of Igdrasa, then departed to the west and had not been heard from since.

Gawain Nurtigan and his men embarked onto a fast longship and left Arranir in the first days of December 537, aiming for Lindisfarne. But the supernatural winds pushed their ship too far to the south, where it eventually wrecked. The Norns had chosen to spare the life of Gawain and his brave warriors, but they were now alone in barbarian territory.

## LINDISFARNE

The savage tribes were not foolhardy enough to attack Lindisfarne yet, so the town was unscarred - but from what Gawain had seen of the barbarians, war would come soon enough. Still his mission was more important. In Lindisfarne he would find some rest and maybe some new men to replace his comrades who had fallen bravely against the raiders, but he needed to ride quickly to Lindisfarne's monastery, up on the cliff. Lindisfarne's monastery was devoted to the worship of Igdrasa, the feminine aspect of the God of Nature that many Chedians used to refer to as simply "the Green Man".

During his short stay in the city, Gawain was deeply worried by an event that happened the first evening. A scouting party, or what was left of it, had returned from the east. The injured scout spoke of crazy, self-mutilated madmen, shamelessly worshipping Chaos itself during horrible and disgusting ceremonies. In the past, no one would dare worship Njam, the Meddler, the God of Chaos, breaker of families and starter of wars. But alas, this terrible development was not even the most worrying piece of news.

After his two fellow scouts were discovered and savagely killed by the Chaos worshippers, the

surviving man had seen the formidable creature which was leading them. It was a dragon, a gigantic red dragon sporting a armour forged of black thjorad, covered with demonic runes. The description of the beast was enough--everybody knew the legend, and at his mere evocation a name was already on every lip, with accents of fear and despair.

Hailing from the dawn of times, Guruthos, the Shadow of Death, was back to scourge the land.

## THE MONASTERY OF IGDRASA

The blessing of Igdrasa was on the Monastery, as its immediate surroundings seemed untouched by the supernatural winter. No doubt fearing the starving populace would soon try to raid this holy ground, the Priests had recruited strong and experienced half-orc mercenaries from the nearby Ta'Sar stronghold to protect them, enforcing strict criteria for entrance.

“Only true followers of Nature, wearing the Tunic of Igdrasa, may enter the holy grounds of this Monastery,” the guard explained. But, the half-orc hinted, a few days earlier a group of pilgrims had disappeared on the road back to the town of Lindisfarne. If Gawain could locate them, surely he could get a spare tunic from them - or, in the worst case, their corpses.

## THE TUNIC

With Gawain wearing the Tunic of Igdrasa, he could enter the monastery and when the priests heard of his quest, they quickly introduced the warrior to the High Priest of Nature. In turn, the holy man led him to a novice who had joined the monastery two years before. It was a man seemingly in his mid-thirties, with delicate, almost childish features only betrayed by a short beard and moustache. He was speaking in an educated, even specious manner, revealing his noble origins, but he also had a heavy accent--even Gawain, despite all his previous travels, could not quite place its origin. The man had a strange and charismatic aura, and Gawain was sure he had seen him somewhere before. The man said his name was Nicolai Ironfist.

“It was I who gave your Queen the directions to reach the Church of Equilibris,” he explained, “for before I came here, I was a student of balance for a while and thus knew the place quite well. Still, I did warn her of the dangers of journeying there in the winter. But as she remarked herself, those days winter seem everywhere.”

Nicolai explained the northern headquarters of the Church were located in a small valley called the Crystal Vale, up in the Ursa Peaks, on the Qassarian side of the mountains.

“So if we have to travel east, we’ll have to face Guruthos and his chaotic legions” cursed Nurtigan between his teeth.

“So the rumours are right, and the Shadow of Death is once again covering the land in darkness,” said the High Priest of Igdrasa.

“Aye,” Nurtigan said. “And how could we possibly defeat such a beast of legend? Not that I fear him, of course. I already killed a dragon in my youth - and what a fight it was, I assure you! But if I remember correctly even Askhelion, the very first Knight and best of them all, was toasted by this one.”

The holy man had a clue: “Maybe you should go to the Ta’Sar headquarters. We have a big library there, documenting all kinds of monsters and, more importantly, listing their known weaknesses. I’m sure there is some useful information on Guruthos somewhere.”

Gawain warmly thanked the High Priest and Nicolai for their help and departed immediately. As he was about to leave the monastery, he saw Nicolai Ironfist coming after him. “I’m coming with you,” the man said. “After all it is probably my fault if your queen is lost now. And to speak frankly-” his voice shrank to a mere whisper “I can’t stand the clerical life anymore.”

Gawain laughed and welcomed him into the fellowship.

Nicolai



## TA'SAR GUILD

Gawain and Nicolai were introduced to the Guildmaster of the Ta'Sar stronghold, a face not unknown to Nurtigan. Wearing an eye-patch, his features were more orcish than human, yet he didn't sport the proverbial horns of his people. His name, Gawain remembered from their previous encounter during the unification wars, was Ulrik Orkson. Ulrik had been another mercenary fighting for Maine Arran, and while his loyalty went first to the strict Ta'Sar guild of warriors, it didn't prevent him and Nurtigan from sharing a mutual respect. But despite this, the Ta'Sar were not willing to share their knowledge for free. The fee for accessing the library was no less than 10 000 gold coins.



“The Ta'Sar used to be proud to welcome visitors to their schools,” noted Nurtigan bitterly.

“True. But it all changed fifteen years ago when a group of visitors abused of our hospitality and stole our most prized possession, the Book of Rules.”

Nurtigan bit his tongue for he knew it was his own lord in those times, Jarl Markel of Guberland, who had hired the thieves. It had later proved to be his downfall, though, as Markel, believing owning the book would make him a perfect leader for the Chedian Alliance, was killed by Jarla Kira the Cold out of sheer annoyance during the Alliance's first war council. Remembering these events, Nurtigan suddenly realized it had been the turning point for all of Guberland as well. Left out of the Chedian Alliance, and thus of the unified nation that was born after the defeat of the invading Beldonian hordes, Guberland was easy prey for Mendossus, who needed an outpost to survey the young--and potentially dangerous--kingdom of Chedian.



## PAYING THE FEE

True to his word, Ulrik allowed Gawain and Nicolai into the guild's library. He also dispatched two scholars to assist them in their research - and also, Nurtigan thought to himself, to make sure they were not stealing any books.

It wasn't long before they found a dusty copy of Eadfrith's Great Bestiary. The Bestiary detailed how the wyrm Guruthos, a powerful and treacherous beast, had defied the Ancients at the dawn of time. Siding with the demons in exchange for forbidden knowledge, he seemed to be an unstoppable force of chaos. Askhelion, a hero who introduced the ideals of chivalry to the people of Axeoth, took arms to slay the monster, but it was he who met his demise.

Another book, however, revealed Askhelion had cursed the Dragon with his last breath. "I may die," the first Knight said, "but one day my spear will pierce through your evil heart." The silver spear, created during the Days of Wonder in the Heavenly Forges, had been buried with Askhelion's body in a tomb in the Deira Plains, where the battle had taken place.

"Where are the Deira plains?" asked Nicolai.

Few books told of the lands before the Cataclysm, even fewer written in a language Nurtigan could read. But he finally located a translated copy of the famous Ursanian explorer Eudoxis' Journeys. "Maybe the Gods are with us, lad," the warrior said. "Deira Plains is the old name of the lands just south of Lindisfarne."

## THE SPEAR OF ASKHELION

During the trip to Askhelion's cairn on the Deira Plains, Gawain and Nicolai had many occasions to engage in conversation. Nurtigan was puzzled by his new comrade's demeanour, slowly beginning to suspect the man was a bit... funny in the head. At times, Nicolai was as joyful and innocent as a young boy, and at other moments, he was brooding and sought loneliness. The problem was he could

be one and then the other in the blink of an eye, without warning. Frequently, he awoke from his sleep, screaming incoherent words and phrases. He was also often alluding to places and people totally alien to Nurtigan, and shared memories that seemed to be nothing but his own fantasies. One time they were discussing the Dragons, Nicolai abruptly stated he had worked for a Dragon when he was a child.

“Really, lad ? T’was an interesting experience, I ken,” commented Nurtigan, unconvinced.

“Actually yes. He was the leader of the Circus of the Sun. I was the prince of Enroth back then.”

Gawain couldn’t resist to ask: “You were a prince and still worked in a circus ? Ain’t that a bit... strange?”

“Oh, I had escaped my father’s castle with some help. Life in Ironfist was so boring. And my tutor was a pain.” He was briefly lost in his thoughts. “Poor old Wilbur... I wonder if he survived when the castle collapsed...” When Nicolai was out of sight, Nurtigan saw the looks on the other men’s faces and sighed. At least the lad was a pretty competent fighter, with a real talent for fencing.

But after they had found the Spear of Askhelion, their minds were focused on a much more important matter than Nicolai’s eccentricities: the upcoming fight against Guruthos.

## GURUTHOS

Deploying his leather wings, Guruthos stood with all his monstrous height over Nurtigan, Nicolai and the surviving warriors, laughing at their pitiful attempts to defy him. He taunted them: “Poor, deluded creatures. What are you fighting for? Your land is dying; your souls are already lost. Your gods are dead or will be soon. Don’t you understand? The Twilight is coming. This is the end of your sorry excuse of a world. We’re entering the age of chaos.” Devoured by panic, two men tried to run away from the gigantic beast. A sudden heat, a fiery beam, and all that was left were two cremated carcasses. “You can’t fight me. You can’t even hope to wound me,” the wyrm said disdainfully. “So you think !”



cried Nurtigan. And with a lightning-fast move, he thrust the silver spear with all his might towards the Dragon. The spear lodged itself in the beast's large breast, slipping through the smallest of joints in Guruthos' enchanted breastplate. The Dragon howled with surprise and pain.

"It can't be ! It can't be !" he roared. His huge claws were scratching frantically his chest, but the spear had already disappeared under the armour. It was Nurtigan's turn to taunt him.

"Did you recognize that spear? Askhelion cursed it to be your demise. Now that it has found its way into your flesh, it will dig deeper and deeper until it reaches your heart and pierces it. You're already dead... you just don't know it yet."

Stunned and shocked, his tail whipping madly in every direction, the Dragon took flight and disappeared into the night with a cry of terror. Already the men were congratulating Gawain for his exploit. Another wyrm killed by the mighty hero! And not just any dragon - the legendary Shadow of Death! But Nurtigan hushed them: "When we find the beast's corpse, then it will be time for that. I fear the wyrm will now use the little time it has left to try to harm us in any possible way."

The surviving chaos worshippers were fleeing to the mountains. Lindisfarne was safe for now. Without waiting any longer, the fellowship pushed to the east in the direction of the Ursa Peaks.

## CHAPTER TWO - THE ICY DEATH

*Making their way through the madmen and their chaotic tribes, Gawain Nurtigan and Nicolai Ironfist arrive in the Ursa Peaks. They must now travel through a treacherous glacier to reach the other side of the mountains, where the fabled Crystal Vale lies , and where they hope to find the missing queen, Iona Arran.*

### DAY ONE

For two weeks they walked, and it seemed that the cold was ever sharper in its bite as they slowly made their way up the mountains. Following Nicolai's instructions, they eventually reached the Ursa Peaks, standing like white blades defying the heavens. Some men didn't make it, though, beloved comrades who met painful deaths in hidden crevasses and under the fangs of maddened wolves.

A couple of times, Guruthos was spotted flying over the mountains, but the party was able to hide from the wyrm and he remained unseen after that. Nurtigan hoped it had finally died from the Spear, but he knew that was wishful thinking. Who knew how long a Dragon could endure pain ?

One day they found the remnants of a camp, testimony of someone else's passing. Alas, no flag or emblem was found to identify who had journeyed along this path. Still, with wild hope that they had indeed found the trail of Queen Iona's caravan and were closing in on her, the men gathered their energy to progress even faster. But their captain was not sharing their enthusiasm.

"My dear Iona", Nurtigan was saying. "I now fear you are dead somewhere in these cursed mountains. For the first time in my life I hope Gods truly exist, and that they are listening to my prayer, and acting for your safekeeping."



“The queen... Is she a close friend of yours?” asked Nicolai, who had overheard his friend thinking aloud.

“Her father saved my people. I am indebted to him for the rest of my life, and now that he has departed for Hallenhalt, that debt is carried on to his only daughter. I saw her grow and become everything a father would want his child to be. I had many women, but no children - none that I’m aware of, at least. I came to love Iona as if she was my own.”

Nicolai nodded gravely. “I wish I too could be what my father wanted me to be. But I’m not half the man he was.”

“You still have plenty of years to fill that other half then. All you have to do is give it a try. You’re a good man Nicolai.” He smiled, “Alright, maybe you’re a bit weird. But I’m sure your father is proud of you.”

“I’m not so sure. He wanted me to be a beacon of hope for the people. I’m just a lost soul,” Nicolai said, with a deep, sad tone in his voice. Then he raised his head, bearing newfound determination in his eyes. “We’ll find your Queen. She’ll be all right. If she managed to reach Eventide, she’ll be all right. I promise.”

## DAY SIX

One night, Nicolai awoke screaming like a madman, frightening even the bravest men. After he had come back to his senses, he said he had had a vision of his father, who was telling him he needed to go to a place called “Dvergalhalt”. Unfortunately, none of the men knew what Dvergalhalt was supposed to be, much less where it could be located. Gawain, who had some dwarven blood in

his ancestry, came up with a possible answer: “It is dwarf tongue; I think it means the Hall of the Dwarves, but I could be mistaken. Why the gods are telling us that now, I don’t know. Maybe they’re hinting at looking for dwarven tunnels in the mountains?”

The next morning, the scouts reported sights of strange and malevolent creatures roaming the mountains. They described them as red, horned monsters, some of them sporting four arms or leather wings, all wearing dark armor and wielding evil-looking blades, axes and scythes. Their aspect was similar to the legends of the Demons of old times and it could only be further proof of the decline of the world. But Nicolai seemed to have a better idea.

“Kreegans.”

“What are they?” asked Nurtigan.

“Devils. They ravaged my land when I was a boy. Destroyed everything in their path, and held my father prisoner for seven years. He warned me I would have to fight them one dayÉ looks like that day has come at last.”

Gawain wondered if this unbelievable story Nicolai was telling, that he used to be a prince in another land, could actually be the truth, against all odds. Nevertheless, he knew Iona would be in danger as long as those creatures were in the mountains.

## THE SUMMIT

One night, they made a halt near an old stele roughly the size of a human, partly covered in snow. Covered with old runes, it seemed to represent a man in armor looking to the west. At dawn, Nicolai found Gawain standing next to the stone monument and looking in the same direction. He joined him and couldn’t help letting a faint cry out. Under them, they could see everything from the lands around the Sea of Verhoffin to the grey peaks of the Dragon’s Backbone in the distant Lodwar. With the sun rising at the horizon, it was a breathtaking



sight. Slowly all the men gathered around the stele to contemplate the wonders of their world. Some of them were crying at so much beauty.

“The figure carved in the stone is Hubris,” Gawain explained to Nicolai, and he told him of the first Ursanian Emperor. An oracle had told Hubris, a warlord who was ruling a small tribe in the region now known as Channon, that a great destiny was awaiting him, and that he would find it on the Ursa Peaks. Hubris climbed the mountains during a thick snowstorm, and found nothing at the summit. Enraged, he turned back, determined to slay the oracle who had tricked him into such an arduous journey. But then, the storm ended, the clouds were lifted and he was now staring at the lands beyond the mountains. Understanding the destiny the oracle had spoke about was to rule those lands, Hubris didn’t turn back, and went on to build the Ursanian Empire, the greatest nation Axeoth had ever known.

“For Hubris, this was a sign of fate,” concluded Nurtigan. “For me, it is some solace, at last.”

“How’s that?” asked Nicolai.

“What countries are covered in snow? Framon is, and also Chedian. Mendossus seems to be too - that’ll teach them. But look beyond the Sea of Verhoffin and you can see there are still green lands.



Crag Hack



So this cannot be the end of the world,” the warrior said. And in mid-voice, as if to himself, he added: “Unless it is only for us.”

## CRAG HACK

While exploring the dungeons of the pesky White Dwarves, Nicolai and Nurtigan found a cell where a very peculiar character was being held prisoner. While obviously a dwarf himself, the prisoner’s features had nothing in common with the White Dwarves - he was as different as if he had been from another species. Sporting a short beard and red hair - with hints of grey here and there betraying he was starting to slide towards the autumn of his life - he had the brown skin of the hardened traveller and the muscular arms of the warrior. Besides which, a few scars around his face were testimony of an adventurous past. Feeling any enemy of the White Dwarves could make a providential ally in those tricky mountains, they freed him. Grateful, he introduced himself :  
“My name is Hremdack Silverpick, but most people simply call me Crag Hack.”

“Crag Hack ? Like the barbarian hero ?” asked Nicolai, genuinely surprised.

“Yes, yes,” said the dwarf. “We coincidentally share the same nickname, albeit we earned it for totally different reasons. I used to be a bit... reckless... in my youth. Jumping into adventure head on. Hence the name. But I’m proud of it.”

“You don’t look to be from those parts, master Crag Hack,” remarked Gawain.

“You could say that, my friend ! I was born on Mount Keystone in a land... let’s just say it is very, very far from here. I was on my way back home, when I tried to... take a shortcut.” He paused. “A magical door, if you like. Didn’t work well, I’m afraid, and I ended up in these mountains. When I found fellow dwarves living up there, I thought they could help me find my way, but I then realized they were not very fond of giving charity to lost strangers.”

“We kinda noticed that,” said Gawain.

“They arrested me because I was on their territory without the right papers and authorizations. What kind of nonsense is that ? I answered. Long story short, I was put in jail. I’m strong, but not strong enough to defeat a whole clan all by myself. The only reason why I’m still alive is because none of their stupid laws and dumb rules states what to do with a dwarf stranger. The poor fools truly believe they are the only dwarves in the universe !”

Crag Hack offered to help Nicolai and Nurtigan find the queen and fight any foe on the way, to repay them for freeing him.

## MALUSTAR

The battle was epic, and the Kreegans proved to be formidable opponents. But the most terrifying of them probably was their leader.

He was a powerful red giant, wielding a broken sword. At the battle’s pinnacle, Nurtigan fought against him with all his strength and courage, but it quickly became clear it would not suffice. The Kreegan’s eyes were cold and expressionless, moving with a deadly accuracy. While the other monsters were screaming and shouting in their evil language, their leader was as silent as the steel he was wielding, and it seemed the wounds the monster was receiving from Gawain were not even bothering him. It reminded Nurtigan of the golems he had seen near the Magic School in Yorwick. Acting like some kind of machine, the Devil didn’t seem to be alive at all. How do you kill something that isn’t living to begin with?

At last, when Nurtigan felt that his strength was fading and that the fight against the Demon Lord was going to be his last stand, the Devils, as if in response to some signal, withdrew their forces and retreated into the mountains. Ultimately, the Kreegan chief turned back, without even casting an eye towards his wounded foe. The creatures quickly disappeared into the snowy fog, and if not for the many corpses from both armies scattered on the battlefield, one could have had the impression the monstrous horde had been a mere bad dream, vanishing in the first rays of the sunrise.

## CRAG'S FAREWELL

After the battle, Crag Hack took Nicolai apart from the others to speak to him privately.

"You look a lot like your mother, lad," he said. "Don't look so surprised. I guessed who you were after you mentioned my barbarian homonym. Not many people on this world know about that guy, while back on your homeworld everybody kept asking me if I was somehow related to him." He smiled. "I didn't make the connection with your last name at first, though. I remember your mother under the name Catherine Gryphonheart, she wasn't using her husband's name a lot."

"So you are from Enroth too?" asked Nicolai, excited at the idea to have, at long last, found someone from his own world.

"I'm afraid not, my friend. I come from yet another world - a place named Terra. When I was younger, me and a group of friends took arms against an evil tyrant named Sheltem. This story would be quite long, but we eventually arrived on your world, Enroth, where there were... divisions, between us. It degenerated into the Occult War, during which I sided with your mother and the Immortal King against our former comrades. After the Occult War was over, we had found four new companions to join our party and so we resumed our quest to find the mythic Ancients through the Web of Worlds. We looked for them on dozens of worlds for fifteen years. Even one where bloody dragons are revered as gods, can you believe such nonsense? Anyway, I grew tired of it. I felt it was time to head back home at last, so I bid my friends farewell and started my journey towards my homeworld. Unfortunately the Ancients' portals are not the simplest of tools to master, and I was never very patient." He shook his head sadly. "I took a wrong turn somewhere and found myself here, with the way closed behind me."

Nicolai nodded, understanding all too well the homesickness the dwarf was feeling. "So, what will you do now?" The son of Catherine asked.

"I think I will stay here for a while," Crag Hack said. "I will try to teach those White Dwarves

how to be better people. And maybe then, they'll be able to help me locate that Nexus Gate that is supposed to be on this world."

"What is a Nexus Gate?" asked Nicolai.

"The Web of Worlds has many layers. A Cron is linked to its Varns, and a planet is in turn linked to its Crons. Then the planets of a same star system are linked together through a webstation, just like Enroth and Axeoth are. But only one planet in each system is linked to a Nexus, which is in turn linked to every system in the Spinward Rim." He caught Nicolai's expression and burst into laughter. "You don't understand a word of what I'm saying, am I correct?"

"Not a single word," Nicolai admitted. Crag Hack laughed all the more, and then he removed the object he was wearing as a necklace - which resembled a little black cube.

"This is a gift I received a long time ago from a chap named Corak the Mysterious," he said. "I somehow feel it is your turn to have it. Don't ask why, or when it will come into use - I just know it will, someday. Farewell, Nicolai Ironfist. Maybe we'll meet again..."

And then Crag Hack, the mysterious dwarven hero from Terra, left that story to pursue his own destiny.

## EVENTIDE

Despite his wounds, Gawain rejoiced at the Church gates, for they were greeted by no other than Iona Arran herself. "My Queen! I'm so glad to see you alive and well. I feared so much for you... Framon is collapsing in your absence." Seeing tears in the eyes of her father's old friend, the Queen couldn't help but laughing: "By Krohn, when did this great warrior become such a sentimental old man?" But she was laughing with tenderness, not mockery.

She explained she had reached the Church of Equilibris only two weeks earlier, just before the Devils appeared from nowhere and started roaming the mountains. While Eventide's powers kept them at

some distance of the Church, they were blocking the road back to Framon, leaving no other choice to the young queen than to wait for NurtiganÉ and Nicolai. “I see you finally decided to come along. Alita predicted you would,” she said to Roland’s son.

The great nave of the Church, full of disciples, was brilliantly lit, but perhaps what was shining the most was the stunning dark-haired beauty that seemed to rule the place. “I am Alita Eventide. I welcome you in the Church of Equilibris, especially you, Gawain Nurtigan, dragonslayer. I am forever in your debt for saving us all today from Malustar’s horde.”

“So that’s the name of that creature then,” said Gawain, absorbing the fact that Eventide was actually a gorgeous woman. “Next time we meet, I’ll have the upper hand and destroy him, I swear!”

“He is nothing like the great king he once was. He is only a mindless puppet in the hands of the Chaos God.” She paused. “For the moment, Njam is still trapped in the Tomb of a Thousand Terrors, but the Kreegans foolishly opened the gates of that timeless prison and fell under his will. He is bent on breaking his chains and unleashing all the forces of Chaos to destroy the world. It has already begun.”

“But I thought you had a solution!” shouted Nurtigan.

“I have. It is... you.”



# Iona Arran



## CHAPTER THREE - A DISH BEST SERVED COLD

*Magically travelling back to Framon, Iona and Nurtigan are now on their way to Chedian to find the Lorekeeper Dwarf and ask for the help of the twin thrones of Ice and Steel. But Chedian is already under siege from the forces of Chaos: the Frost Giants have awakened and have decided to avenge the death of their brother Yanmir.*

### DAY ONE

Nurtigan was the first to admit he wasn't the quickest thinker in the land, but he was pragmatic and had planned a way to bring Iona back to Framon quickly in case she had been injured. He had asked the wizards of the School of Magic of Yorwick to craft for him a scroll of Lloyd's Beacon linking back to the Framian mainlands. In the blink of an eye, Iona, Gawain and their armies were transported back to Yorwick from the frozen summits of the Ursa Peaks. Unfortunately, it seemed the weather in the countryside was only getting worse and it was as cold, if not colder, as it had been up in the mountains.

Messengers were quickly dispatched to Chedian to ask for the help of the twin thrones. After the various clans allied against the Beldonian Horde led by Tamur Leng in the year 521 after the Cataclysm, Chedian formed a united nation with an interesting twist: to keep the balance of power and the dynamics of the inter-clan politics, the rulership of the land was given not to one, but two distinct thrones. The Throne of Steel, held by the powerful King Sven "Forkbeard" Svenssen, was located in Thjorgard, while the Throne of Ice, which had been entrusted to Sven's wife, Queen Kira the Cold, and was located in Thronheim.

The messenger came back with bad news. Chedian was under an attack by supernatural forces - but not from Njam's demonic minions. The popular rumour was proving itself to be true: the frost giants had awakened in the Chedian mountains. After the fall of the Sky Fort and the death

of Yanmir, the giant who had been terrorizing Frosgard, everybody believed the giants' threat was over. Alas, some power, most probably Njam's, had freed three of Yanmir's brothers from the slumber in which they had been plunged for centuries, and now the three brothers were willing to avenge their lost sibling by destroying all the people of Chedian.

Queen Kira, pregnant with the first royal child (who was destined to greatness, if one took heed of old prophecies), had been sent to safety with the ever-loyal clan of Sturmford, whose Jarl, Bjarni Thorvaldssen, had been a long-time friend and ally of the royal couple. Left alone in charge of the young kingdom, the brave Sven Svenssen was willing to join the fight against the forces of Chaos - but could not spare any soldiers while the threat of the Frost Giants was still lurking at the very doors of Chedian.



## DAY THREE

“It is you.” Alita Eventide’s gaze had moved from Iona to Nurtigan, then to Nicolai. “All three of you. I can’t understand the workings of Destiny but I know you were somehow chosen to fight this battle,” she had finally said.

“But how can we defeat a God?” Iona had asked, after a moment.

“That I’m not sure of, but I know this: the battle will have to be on two fields. The physical world, and the spiritual one. You, Iona, and you Gawain Nurtigan, will have to travel to Chedian to gather allies and find the Lorekeeper Dwarf of the Thjorgard clan. He’ll know the location of the Tomb of a Thousand Terrors, where you’ll have to take the battle. After all, it was a dwarven city once.”



“Dvergalhalt,” Nicolai had said, darkly. Alita smiled: “Precisely. And you, Nicolai, for some reason it seems you have the unusual faculty to travel to the spiritual world. You know what I’m talking about, you have already experienced this power: powerful dreams and visions, terrifying because they seem so real. And in a way... they are.”

Nicolai had said nothing. He and Alita were looking at each other with intensity, and Nurtigan had wondered what their history together was, before Nicolai had abandoned the Church of Equilibris and travelled to Lindisfarne two years earlier.

“Your mission is maybe the most important of all, for you’ll have to travel to Arlesgard, the palace of the Gods, and persuade them to join the fight against their evil sibling. Yes, the people are right - the Twilight of the Gods has come. But I believe the outcome is yet to be written.”

## DAY SIX

The legends tell of an era before the Ancients came to Axeoth on their ships of light, seeding the world with the first men and women, when the land was still owned by the elder gods. There were four of them: Pyrannaste the Lord of Fire, Gralkor the Lord of Earth, Shalwend the Lord of Air and Acwalander the Lord of Water, who were waging an eternal war against each other. Even after being tamed by the power of the younger gods, the elemental lords continued their eternal fight through their minions, monsters and the creatures they had spawned.

From an alliance with Shalwend against their common enemy Pyrannaste, Acwalander had given birth to his mightiest servants : the Frost Giants. From their Sky Fort, the Frost Giants scoured the land, looking for foes to slay in the name of their father and master. Most of the time, the Frost Giants had little interest in the affairs of mortals, but their battles against the servants of Fire devastated whole regions. When Shalwend and Acwalander broke their alliance, the Sky Fort fell from the heavens in northern Chedian. From there, the numbers of the Frost Giants started to diminish. Some of them were slain by the servants of Earth, others were caught off-guard and killed by mortal heroes, and the remaining ones started to fall into a mysterious and unshakable slumber. Two centuries after the Cataclysm, only one Giant was still living in the ruins of the Sky Fort:



Yanmir the cold-hearted. And finally, Yanmir's appetite for little children was brought to an end when the giant was slain by a group of heroes. For the last seventeen years, the Sky Fort had been deserted and silent.

But now, three Giants had awakened in the mountains. They were the oldest and most powerful of their brethren: Firùn the Elder, Delùun the Strong, and Dùnorgain the Manslayer. And when they heard of Yanmir's demise, they got angry. Very angry. And cast their rage at the small, insignificant creatures who had dared raise their swords against their beloved sibling.

## THE LOREKEEPER

In the thjoradic mines of Thjorgard lives the biggest Dwarven clan of northern Axeoth. The Lorekeeper is not the chief of the Dwarves, but he is greatly respected among his kind, for he is the one who keeps the knowledge and history of his people. At the time of Nurtigan and Iona's quest, the Lorekeeper was Master Hjarrand, the eldest engineer of the mines. At first, he was suspicious of Iona and Nurtigan, but when he heard that Gawain's great-grandfather had been Hreidmar the Conqueror, he talked.

Asked about Dvergalhalt, he searched through the old and dusty books that constituted the dwarven lore. Then he told them of the story of King Svalinn, a great ruler of the Dwarves who lived long before the schism. The demons were scourging the land, and a warrior descended from the heavens to fight them. The name of the demigod was Escaton, and he had a plan to destroy the Demons by using the dwarven city of Dvergalhalt as a trap. Svalinn was heartbroken at the idea of losing the city, but he was also wise and before long gave his agreement to Escaton.

Still, when the battle was over and Dvergalhalt, with the Demon host trapped in it, banished into

Oblivion, King Svalinn of the Dwarves mourned over the loss of the great city which had been the pride of his people. Seeing this, Escaton, gave him his great staff:

“I don’t know if this is worth a city, but I entrust you with this. It should give your people power and knowledge, if you use it wisely. But you must know some day in the future a Guardian will come to this world and claim the Staff as his. You will have to give it to him, for this is the Worldcrafters’ will.”

When Escaton had departed, returning to the distant stars that had spawned him, Draupsnir, the King’s advisor, argued they should instead use the Staff to undo what the Planeswalker had done and bring back Dvergalhalt from the Astral realm. But Svalinn dismissed him, arguing that :

“There is no more city, what is left is a place of darkness where only evil dwells now. We should forget the name of Dvergalhalt and remember it only as what it is now: a Tomb of a Thousand Terrors.”

When Hjarrand had finished his tale, Nurtigan asked where they could find Dvergalhalt. According to legend, the Great Hall of the Dwarves was located in the Cirque of Dwarrow, in the Nidafjöll mountains northwest of Framon.

## WALKYRIES PEAK

With the angel wings on her back, one could have believed Iona Arran was a Valkyrie herself, a beautiful and deadly warrior from the heavens. She entered the sacred Shrine in which the daughters of Krohn were assembled. But the Valkyries were crying and singing songs of death and fallen loved ones.

“Ladies of war, princesses of battle, why are you so sad?”

“Alas ! Alas !” chanted the winged women. “The Gods are dead! They have been slain by the agent of Chaos. Nothing can prevent the undoing of the world now.”

Iona felt a shiver running down her spine at such terrible news, but she was not one to succumb to overwhelming fatalism.

“You can!” She was surprised at her own voice and her commanding tone, but it was too late to turn back now. “Maybe your fathers and Gods are dead, but you are goddesses yourselves! Rise and fight! We can defeat Chaos, or at least die trying. But this is not the time to sit idly: you can chant for the dead when they are avenged!”

Iona believed the Walkyries would rip her apart with their flaming swords for her insolence, but instead they bowed before her. One of the battle-maidens, who appeared to be their leader with her armour of gold and carved thjorad and winged helmet, said:

“I am Brynhildr, oldest of Krohn’s daughters. We will follow you, sister, to battle and glory, to blood and vengeance, and final death if that is our fate. Lead us, sister. To the end of the world!”

And chanting songs of carnage and victory, the Walkyries took their flight like ravens into the moonlit night.

## THE ROOTS OF LIFE

The giant ash-tree located in Frosgard’s forest was believed to be the World Tree, linking together the various planes of existence. Its roots are said to go as deep as the Underworld and its branches are supposed to reach the Gods’ domain in Arlesgard. Nurtigan and Iona were a bit disappointed to see that the ash, if of a respectable size, was not of incredible otherworldly proportions. But the legends about its mythical dweller were indeed real.

Sitting in the tree’s trunk, the Green Man ignored the two visitors until they addressed him directly. The Green Man was an old spirit of Nature, one of the sons of Igdrasa, walking the earth to dispense her gifts and, sometimes, her wrath. His cult had become popular again around Frosgard, and as such the town had been protected from the cruel winter. Protected, but not entirely spared



from the evil influence of the God of Chaos. Still, Nurtigan and Iona were hoping the Green Man could help them against the local threat of the Frost Giants. “Weak is the power of the Green Man, weak is the power of Nature. People have remembered the old oaths but their belief won’t be enough. The Green Man can help, but for this he needs you to perform a ritual of old.”

But when they heard about the ritual in question, they shivered: it was a sacrifice. The sacrifice of a Silver Unicorn.

## THE SACRIFICE

“The Green Man accepts your sacrifice. In exchange, he will awaken the trees themselves and they’ll fight for you against the enemies of Nature and Life.”

But while those reinforcements were welcomed, the cost was high: many of the men had lost their trust in Nurtigan and Iona Arran when they had performed the sacrifice... And the two heroes themselves could hardly look at each other in the eye.

(The hero who performed the ritual receives a -3 penalty to Morale)

## ELVEN REINFORCEMENTS

News came of an elven ship coasting into Thjorgard’s harbour, bringing with it a battalion of warriors from the elven kingdom of Etendar, in the south. Etendar had heard of the situation in Hanndl’s grasp and was sending help against the Chaos threat. After all, there was a great number of elves still living in Chedian. The Elf leader was a strong man of undetermined age, with pale skin but rough features and sharp eyes.

“I am Harke, friend and ally of the A’Rikdun of Etendar. I was sent here by Lady Thalia, regent of the elven kingdom, to assist you in any possible way. Crossing the Sea of Verhoffin proved tricky, though, with blizzards all the way north from Lodwar, icebergs and other... funny encounters, so I’m sorry to hear you already took care of two of the three giants. But we’ll provide help for all the remaining battles to free your lands of the Chaos spawns and their unnatural winter.”

“Funny encounters ?” asked Nurtigan, curious.

“Well, I especially liked the giant crystal whale and the sea dragons with their icy breath. Very original, I might add.” Then he made a predator’s smile and whispered to Nurtigan, in a conspirator’s tone: “But I’m not complaining about a little action. The last five years or so have been pretty dull.”

## SVEN SVENSSEN

Ever true to his word, Sven Svenssen joined forces with Framon’s heroes. The unexpected reinforcements from Etendar brought some hope to the hearts of Nurtigan and Iona as they were riding northwest, to the Nidafjöll mountains and their Cirque of Dwarrow. The Tomb of a Thousand Terrors was waiting for them, bulging with demonic influence, bellowing demonic legions onto the world.

They could only hope Nicolai had been successful in gathering supernatural help, for they would badly need it against the might of the God of Chaos...

# King Sven



## CHAPTER FOUR - THE TRIALS OF NICOLAI

*Sometimes it takes fire to fight fire, and so Nicolai Ironfist must use his strange gift to travel to Arlesgard and convince the Chedian Gods to join the alliance against their sibling Njam and his demonic army. But even the Gods' realm is not spared from the influence of Chaos...*

### PROLOGUE

*(Excerpts from "The Tale of Nurtigan",  
compiled and annotated by Agraynel Talhaearn, court skald of Framon)*

While Gawain and Iona were in Chedian fighting the Frost Giants, what dangers was their friend Nicholai facing? Not much is known about it, and the little I do know is what both he and Alita Eventide agreed to share with me. I have known Alita since childhood and we have shared many adventures since, but she stays very secretive about the circumstances under which she met Nicolai, even with me. From what I gathered by questioning (and bribing) some of the Church members, Nicolai arrived at the Church of Equilibris for the first time in 531. He had been wandering the land since the fall of Guberland, in 523, feeling an increasing confusion in his mind. Nicolai was lost and alone in a world that was, according to him, not his. More and more often, he was having terrifyingly vivid nightmares of an ominous nature. Confused, he travelled far to the south to renowned places of knowledge - the magistracy of Uludin, Bohb's school of wizardry in Devonshire - but to no avail. Desperate, he looked for help of a less magical and more spiritual kind.

Eventually, he heard of the young Church of Equilibris and travelled to Darashann to meet its leaders. Darashann, a small mountain country in Lodwar, had been the theatre of religious wars between the sects of Life and Death for centuries. During her quest to destroy the evil sorcerer known as Hexis, the young priestess Alita Eventide had fought and defeated both



cults. At that time, she was trying to reconcile them in order to bring peace to the region, with the guidance of an elder wizard known only as Magister Alamar—that's how the Church of Equilibris came to be.

Strangely enough, Alamar had refused to meet Nicolai in person when he came to the Church in Darashann, and instead sent a messenger to the young man advising him to go back north to meet Alita Eventide in the new headquarters of the Church in western Framon. Nicolai followed Alamar's advice - he actually had no better plan for himself - and would spend four years with the Church. They say he stayed more for Alita than anything else, and rightly so, as miraculously the ever-lonely Eventide reciprocated his affection. I still don't know why Nicolai finally fled from the Church one day in 535 and took shelter in the Lindisfarne Monastery for the next two years before fate finally decided to reunite them...

## DAY ONE

*(A letter from Nicolai Ironfist to Solmyr ibn wali Barad.)*

My dear friend Solmyr,

For years now you have asked me to recollect my experiences in the realm of the Gods. You know I've always been hesitant to do so, because I don't really understand what happened there myself. But at long last I feel writing it down will help me find some rest, and maybe you'll be able to make some sense of all that, because of your trade.

As you already know, Alita and her priests performed the ritual that sent me to the strange plane of existence known as Arlesgard. I say they sent me, though actually only my spirit travelled there - but I assure you it felt as real as anything, and Alita actually warned me death in that plane would most certainly result in death in this one. At the time I didn't know why I had this strange capacity to travel to the Astral plane and for me it really was a terrifying experience, a blind jump into an unknown world. Had I been master of my fate back in

# Hannu



the day, I probably would have refused to take this endeavour—out of sheer cowardice, I recognize.

I closed my eyes facing the ceiling of the ritual chamber in the Church of Equilibris and opened them sitting on a rainbow bridge surrounded by white clouds. At the other end of the bridge was a gigantic and magnificent castle that seemed to be carved of shining white marble and gleaming crystal. Feeling - and even somehow knowing - it had to be Arlesgard, the castle of the Gods, I crossed the bridge and knocked on the heavy gates...

## KNOCKIN' ON HEAVEN'S DOOR

A judas hole opened and a grumpy old man appeared on the other side. I couldn't quite see him, but there was something definitely elvish in his features.

“What is it ?” he blurted out.

“I'm Nicolai Ironfist, prince of Enroth, and I come pleading for the Gods' help against Njam...” But before I could say more, he stopped me : “Wait right there, lad. What did you say your name is again ? Nicolai Ironfist ? Now let me see...”

Long minutes went by. Finally he said, quite angrily.

“I have no Ironfist or Nicolai in my lists. Who are you really ? Do not force me to scan you.”

I had no idea what this 'scan' was all about but I had to stay firm : “Then I'm afraid you'll have to, because my name really is Nicolai Ironfist. Look, as we speak the Meddler's forces are spreading across the land...”

But once again he silenced me. Without a sound, the heavy doors opened, revealing a somewhat short, elflike humanoid, wielding a long spear. Alita had told me about the

Chedian gods, and from her descriptions this one had to be Hanndl. "Stay where you are!" he said. I obeyed as his eyes started to scrutinize me. I can swear they were glowing red when he was doing so. And suddenly he became angry.

"Chaos spawn!" he shrieked. "Did you think the likes of you could enter Arlesgard like this, servant of Njam? Guards! Destroy this intruder!" At his summons, winged soldiers appeared all around me, already drawing their swords. The only escape was to jump from the bridge, which I did in a panic. While I was falling through the clouds to certain death, I felt a presence surround me, and I was transported elsewhere.

## VORR

I came back to my senses in a room that looked very familiar - in fact, I was back home, back in Castle Ironfist. At first, my heart was overwhelmed with joy, at the idea that this whole life in Axeoth had only been a bad dream. Surely good old Wilbur Humphrey was going to appear any minute now, or even my father. But the place was empty except for an eerie looking man I had never seen. His bald cranium gave him a severe look, and he was wearing long, white robes without any visible decoration. Even stranger, he was somewhat translucent, like some ghostly apparition, yet I didn't feel frightened by his presence. Quite the opposite, actually: there was something familiar and comforting in him, but I couldn't quite place what it was. As though he had been reading my mind, he spoke first :

"Unfortunately, Nicolai Ironfist, you are not back in Enroth; this is only a mere memory of Enroth that goes on living in your very soul," the bald man said.

"Who are you?" I asked, trying not to let him see how depressed this false hope had left me.

"I am one of the Ancestors - but that won't mean much to you, I believe. I was sometimes called Vorr, so you can use that name if you wish. You are in the Astral plane called the Dome, of which the palace of Arlesgard is part. This small part of the Dome has been modelled after the memories of the people who survived the destruction of Enroth. But it is

Fre



slowly fading. When the last of this generation passes, so to will this place.”

“So... ‘he’... was right... Enroth has really been destroyed. But how can you know these things ? What are you exactly ?”

“We Ancestors were the equivalent of what Chedians call the Gods - but it is hardly a fitting name. We are, more accurately, the Forces of the Dome. On each of the Ancients’ worlds, a Dome is summoned with five Forces to rule over it. Our purpose is to keep the elemental balance and prevent the souls of the Ancients’ children from being devoured by Oblivion after death.”

“But if the Chedian Gods are those ‘five Forces’ in this world, what are you doing here ?”

“An insightful question, “ Vorr said, “And the very heart of the problem at hand.”

The severe Ancestor then tried to explain the problem to me, and this is how I recall it :

“It seems we were transferred with the people of Enroth to this world. Normally, only the databases should have been shared between the two worlds, but there is an anomaly in this planet’s Dome and, wrongly believing it was empty, the backup program copied everything, including ourselves. Now this Dome is even more of a mess than it was before the Reckoning, because there are two separate systems that are sharing its assets...”

“Alright, stop right there, because I don’t understand a single word of what you are saying.” Solmyr, my friend, I certainly hope you won’t think I’m crazy after reading all this. I can swear it is what this Vorr told me.

Vorr smiled : “The opposite would be quite surprising, I believe. We lack words to explain these concepts to the people of the planets which suffered the Silence and forgot the old lore. All you need to know is this : to the Chedian Gods, you are as alien and unknown as they are for you. They won’t help you, but we will. But you’ll have to help us in return.”

## VORR'S QUEST

Vorr had more to say about the task he wanted me to perform before he would grant me his help.

“There are other Ancestors hiding in Arlesgard. The Chedian Gods are tolerating them for now, as they need to focus their powers against Chaos, but if they could they would probably erase them as an anomaly - something we can't allow to happen as it would endanger the souls of the survivors of Enroth. Two of our Forces have already been eliminated during the Reckoning. Lerad, our Force of Nature, was most likely destroyed with the planet, but it seems part of him survived by responding to some old worship. He took shape as the Green Man, who used to be an old aspect of this world's Force of Nature, Igdra. Nevertheless, he has no connexion to this world's Dome and is little more than a nature spirit nowadays. Then Uni, our Force of Life, dissipated soon after the Reckoning as any new birth on Axeoth's ground was already marked by her counterpart, Fre.

That leaves three of us, including myself. You'll need to explore Arlesgard and find Urko, Enroth's Force of Death, and also Divus, our Force of Order. Help them, and they'll give you their powers. When you have received the powers of both Urko and Divus, come back to me and I'll give you mine. But be careful, Nicolai, as the inhabitants of Arlesgard will be hostile towards you and do anything to destroy you. I can only grant you some warriors' souls to protect you on the way, but you should find Urko as fast as you can.”

## URKO THE BOATMAN

Outside of Arlesgard, I found a river that was flowing into the clouds. This is where I met Urko, the Boatman, who used to be the Force of Death in Enroth. The skeleton, translucent as Vorr had been but clad in black, was not looking especially friendly, but at least he wasn't trying to eliminate me as the dwellers of the palace of the Gods wanted to. True to his namesake, Urko was standing in a small boat.

“I greet you, Nicolai Ironfist. I am Urko, but I prefer to be simply called the Boatman. Did you come to help me ?”



# Skraelos



I said yes and the skeleton chuckled.

“That’s good. Oh yes, that is.” He looked at me, and I noticed the small fires burning in his eye sockets. “As you know, many have died in the Reckoning, but because they were not recognized by this world’s Gods, their souls were lost to the demons of the Underworld. This world’s Hallenhalt won’t shelter them, so I want you to bring them back to my Paradise - even if it is only a mere shadow of the Paradise of Enroth. In return, you’ll have my powers, and the souls you rescue will help you in your quest as well.”

“There will be danger, I believe ? You spoke of demons - the Kreegans ?”

The Boatman laughed at my lack of knowledge :

“Oh no, I’m not talking of the alien devils. The demons I’m speaking of are souls corrupted and distorted by the powers of Oblivion. They inhabit a small area in the fringe of the Dome, a small backdoor we call the Cerberus Gate through which Oblivion can unfortunately exercise a mere fraction of its evil influence. They sometimes sneak into Paradise to snatch away some souls to bring them to the Underworld, their gateway to Oblivion. The Underworld, or Halja as the Chedians call it, can actually be reached by crossing this very river.”

As I was about to climb on his boat, he added :

“There is also another problem : the Cerberus Gate, the very door of the Underworld, has been sealed and Skraelos, the Chedian God of Death, and he is the only one to have the key...”

## SKRÆELOS

As I was facing Skraelos, I was surprised as how similar he looked to the Boatman. But instead of a lantern on a staff, the only item Urko seemed to carry on his frail boat, Skraelos was wielding a great scythe. Yet the intimidating God of Death seemed less hostile than the rest of his kin, and even talked to me :

“Ah, yes, the young Chaos spawn. I figured I’d see you sooner or later. Allow me to welcome you to the House of Death. What can I do for you ?”

I decided an honest answer was the best choice available.

“My lord, I humbly come to you to borrow the Cerberus Key,” I said. Skraelos laughed, but it was the kind of laugh you have for a little child who just said something stupid.

“The Cerberus Key is not an item you can borrow, young man. To travel to Halja and back, you have to light the six fires of penitence - surely you know that.” He caught my expression and continued : “Then again, maybe you don’t. Six fires - three on this side of the Gate, three on the other side. Each fire responds to a virtue : humility, courage and wisdom. The three fires of Arlesgard are in this very room : find how to light them up and I’ll open the Cerberus Gate.”

I couldn’t resist to ask him : “My lord, since I came on this plane, all the Gods have tried to destroy me, except you. Why ?”

He smiled - if it is possible for a skeleton to do so.

“Order, Chaos, Might, Nature and even Life itself - ultimately they all come before me to be judged. I can already see many powers trying to shape your fate, yet you somehow manage to carve your own path, which is an interesting feat to say the least. I’d rather watch the outcome than interfere.” He chuckled. “Actually, I think I’ll see you soon enough.”

I wasn’t particularly reassured by this statement, I must say.

## THE THREE PILLARS ARE LIT UP

“Ah, I see the Cerberus Gate has opened. Now I can take you to the plains of Halja. Don’t forget, though, you’ll have to rescue the souls of the Enrothians before I can grant you my powers, and

you'll need to light up three other fires on the other side in order to come back. Take your time to prepare yourself before we cross the river."

## THE LAST SOUL

I can't describe the emotion that surrounded me when I recognized the last soul trapped in the Underworld. For more than fifteen years she had been valiantly fighting against the demons bent on torturing her forever, and she had been protecting the souls of her people. Solmyr, you have to understand the strange mixture of joy and sadness I felt by finding her here : it was my mother. It was Catherine Gryphonheart, as beautiful as she had been the last time I had seen her. When her tired eyes stopped on me, she tried to restrain herself from crying, but tears started to roll down her cheeks

"Nicolai, my son," she said. "Is it really you ? Or are you another illusion summoned by those demons to haunt me ?"

"It is me, mother !" I cried.

"Then you too are dead," she nodded sadly.

"No, I'm not!" I cried. And all of a sudden it was like everything I had had on my heart for all those years was bursting out by itself. "Even though I'd rather be dead if you could be alive instead. I tried to be the man you and father wished me to be, but I'm a bad seed just like uncle Archibald was. Everywhere I go, people die because of my foolishness. You, father, Wilbur, everybody in Enroth - they died because I was not up to the task ahead. I'm so sorry for failing you, mother. I'm so sorry !" But my mother had this kind smile and embraced me, just like when I was a young boy. It was like her mere presence was removing all my pain, and she said : "Don't say such things, my beloved son. Surviving tragedies doesn't make you the murderer of those who didn't have such luck - instead, you offer them a chance to be remembered. And only one kind of man defies the Gods and Demons, travels to the Underworld to rescue the souls of his people and still believes he's unworthy."

Tears were now flowing in my eyes. “What kind of man is that ?” I asked.

“The best kind,” she answered.

On the road back, she asked how I found myself working with supernatural beings and travelling into the Underworld. I answered : “I’m doing what father told me in a dream I had. I’m gathering allies to go to Dvergalhalt and destroy the Kreegans !”

But my mother only gave me a puzzled look : “It is strange, because I never saw your father in this place, so I always assumed he was still alive somewhere. I’m also worried to know the Kreegans are still on the loose after all the effort we put into eradicating them back on Enroth. Hopefully you’ll succeed where we failed.”

As we reached the boat, I noticed one of the pillars of penitence was now burning brightly under the grim sky of the Underworld.

## URKO GRANTS HIS POWERS

At last, the souls freed from Oblivion were entering the small Paradise Urko had managed to create for them in the Dome, and it was time for the Boatman to fulfil his promise. “Even if this plan works, we’ll have to work hard to merge Paradise and Hallenhalt together,” he said, mysteriously. “My powers are yours, Nicolai Ironfist. But be careful, as I can feel you are already marked by a power which I can’t quite identify. Your trials are far from over yet.” And with that, the Boatman walked right into me and disappeared. But I could somehow feel his presence inside my own body, the Force of Death flowing through my veins. I bid farewell to my mother, and while I felt a sadness that I can’t really describe, I was also feeling somewhat better to see her one last time.

“You should go to Paradise, mother. You deserve it more than anyone else.”

# Igdrasa



“I’m proud of you, Nicolai, and your father is too, wherever he is. Never doubt that.”

I took her into my arms, something I had wanted to do for more than twenty years, since she had departed to fight the Restoration Wars in Erathia, so long ago...

“I love you, mother,” I said.

“I love you too, my son. Now you should go. You have a world to save.”

## DIVUS

I found the Ancestor known as Divus hiding in a remote part of Arlesgard. As with his counterpart Hanndl, he looked a bit like an elf, but like Vorr, he only appeared as a floating spirit.

“Chaos is everywhere !” he whispered, “Will you help me restore Order in the Dome, Nicolai Ironfist ?”

“Well, that’s why I’m here,” I said.

“Good, good !” he said. “The power of the Forces is diminishing and now there is an elemental leak here in the Dome that threatens its integrity. You must find and control the four Elemental Confluxes in the area before it is too late. Be careful, though, wild elementals are protecting the Confluxes, and they could be dangerous. I’d advise you to search for the Boatman if you haven’t done so already.”

“Why is the power of the Forces fading ?” I asked.

“I have no answer,” Divus said. “It shouldn’t. They are the Forces, true to what they were meant to be: Bellum the strength of Might, Esoterica the gift of Life, Cosmonium the regent of Order, Lurkane the silent hand of Death, and Gaiam the father of Nature. Or mother, actually, because

Gaiam can be male or female at will depending on the time. I can't calculate how it is possible a sixth power could exist capable of threatening the five others."

"You're talking about Njam, the God of Chaos, right ? Is he the avatar of a Force as well ?" My question took Divus by surprise and he appeared confused and incoherent as he answered :

"Unknown parameter detected in the Reference. No Force of Chaos should exist. Error, does not compute. Please refer to your Wire administrator."

"All right, all right, I think I'd better leave then. I'll come back later. Please have some rest or whatever your kind does."

Vorr was right, the Dome was certainly going mad : Divus was living proof of it.

## THE FOUR ELEMENTALS

After securing control over the four Elemental Confluxes, I came back to Divus to claim my reward.

"Everything's in its right place. Thank you, Nicolai Ironfist, you're greatly improving the percentage of Order in the Dome. I'm now 58% confident the issue can be solved. Hello world !"

And then he disappeared and I could feel his powers in my body. He may have lost his mind, but he had kept his word.

## THE POWERS OF VORR

The bald Ancestor was pleased with my return.

"Congratulations, Nicolai. You are everything we hoped you would become. I'll now give you my powers, as promised."

Krohn





“Fine. Now how do I leave this plane ?”

“That’s the tricky part. You are considered a major threat by the Gods and they are closely controlling the data fluxes between the Dome and the physical world. You won’t be able to escape without being detected by the Gods. So there is only one possible solution.”

“Which is ?” I asked.

As he was fading into me, I heard his voice whispering to me :

“You must challenge Krohn and bargain for your safe exit. Normally you wouldn’t stand a chance, but now you have the powers of three Forces - as weak as we are. It is time to see if it is enough to defy a God..”

## CONFRONTATION WITH KROHN

I entered the throne room of Arlesgard, the power of at least three Forces inside me. Nothing could have stopped me, or so I believed. But when I laid my eyes on Krohn, I felt very small and weak in front of such a massive warrior. When he spoke, his voice was like thunder rolling off the top of mountains.

“So you come at last, Chaos spawn. You have some courage to stand before me, I recognize. Why do you dare present yourself to the King of the Gods ?”

“I came here to challenge you.”

“Challenging a God ? You are either very brave, or very foolish. And what are your terms ?”

“If I defeat you, you will allow me to exit this plane unharmed.”

Krohn laughed - and I guess somewhere in the mortal world, the earth was quaking in response. The other Gods appeared at his side to watch what was happening.

“I agree to those terms, Chaos spawn. But know that if you lose, your soul will be sent to Oblivion forever. Now draw your sword and fight me !”

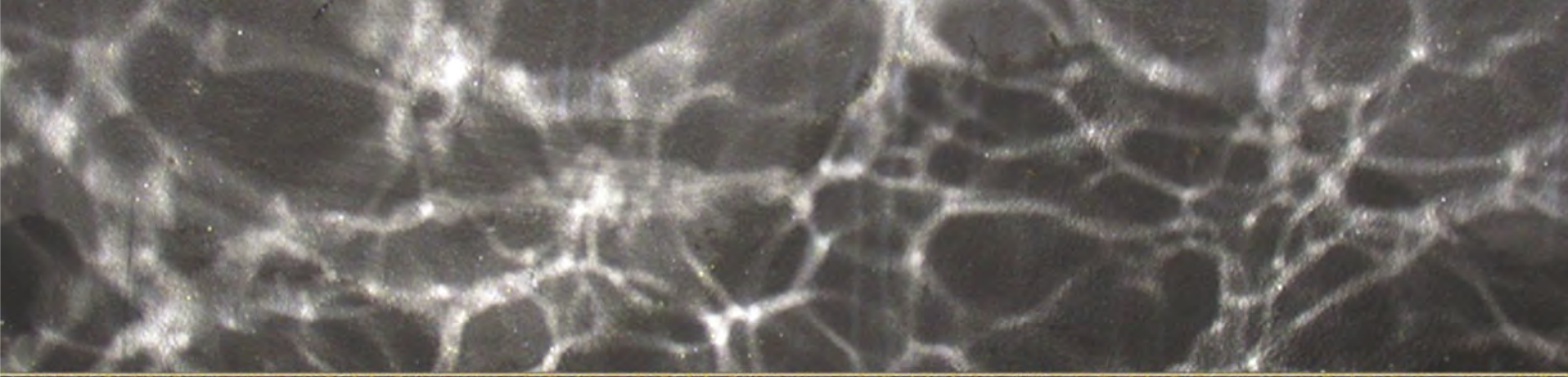
## KROHN DEFEATED

Right after I started fighting against Krohn, I must have lost consciousness or something, because I can't remember our fight. I do remember putting my hand on the hilt of my sword, but after that, all I felt was emptiness: like I was lost somewhere outside of everything, a single flame caught in the furious winds of a tempest.

I suddenly came back to my senses and opened my eyes with an ominous feeling. Before me, the Gods were all dead. Krohn's ethereal body was still impaled on my sword. What had happened ? Around me it seemed the whole place was becoming less real, less believable, like the creatures you can see in the clouds which then disappear as smoothly as they took form. It took me a few seconds to understand I had killed Krohn and the Gods, as unlikely as it seemed. The instinct of survival had the better hand over my sense of guilt about what had happened, and I rushed towards the gates of the palace, and the rainbow bridge beyond.

How could everything have gone so wrong so fast ? I didn't know, and couldn't remember. It was as if a short but crucial portion of my life had been removed from my memory, like I wasn't there at all during the fight. I asked Vorr to manifest himself to help me, or at least give me some explanations. And when the Ancestor did respond, his voice was weak and distant :

“We are sorry, Nicolai Ironfist. Some power managed to briefly use you as a vessel to kill the Gods. It was a being of incredible strength, and in our weakened state we were not able to do anything against it. It is like he had always been hiding inside of you since the beginning. We couldn't detect it. We have nothing of the sort in the Reference.”



I instantly remembered my previous encounters with Hanndl, then his counterpart Divus. What had possessed me was nothing the Ancestors from Enroth could identify, but something the Chedian Gods had always detected : Njam. Somehow, the God of Chaos had marked me - and now he had managed to use me to assassinate the Gods.

“Only another Force from the same Dome - or someone marked by them - has enough power to do such a thing. Normally there are safeguards to prevent a Force from destroying its siblings, even if it becomes erratic or corrupted. But I sense the sixth Force that exists on this world, the one we can't see or detect, is somehow unaffected by those boundaries,” the voice of Vorr explained, responding to my thoughts. “Now that the Dome is left without protection, nothing can prevent the Force of Chaos from accessing this world's Wire - the great energy network of the Ancients. If it manages to connect to the Wire, who knows what it will be able to do to this planet ?”

Was I responsible for dooming the whole world because of Njam's trick? More than ever, it seemed to me my whole life had been a waste. As Arlesgard was collapsing on itself behind me, I crossed the bridge and fell into darkness.

## CHAPTER FIVE - THOUSAND TERRORS

*In the heart of the Nidafjöll mountains lies the Cirque of Dwarrow, the heart of the supernatural winter which is threatening to destroy all life in the northern lands. With the Gods dead, it's up to the mortals to stand against fate itself and forbid Chaos from emerging victorious !*

### PROLOGUE

*(Excerpts from "The Tale of Nurtigan",  
compiled and annotated by Agraynel Talhaearn, court skald of Framon)*

For Nicolai Ironfist, the awakening was as brutal as if he had had one of those nightmares that had been plaguing his nights for so many years. He was deeply agitated and when Alita tried to calm him down, he only shouted : "I killed them ! I killed the Gods !"

But Alita smiled gently and took him in her arms. "I know. I felt it."

"What are we going to do ?" Nicolai asked, in a whisper.

"We'll join Nurtigan and the others and fight. What choice do we have ?"

Alita had summoned an air elemental to travel to Chedian and bring them news of the war. When he came back, the spirit told them of the battle against the Frost Giants, the arrival of the elves of Etendar, and, most importantly, the location of Dvergalhalt.

Soon thereafter, Nicolai, Alita and the wizard-priests of the Church of Equilibris left Crystal Vale and started a long journey north, to the Nidafjöll mountains. There, in the evil hole known as the Cirque of Dwarrow, the Tomb of a Thousand Terrors was waiting for them, vomiting its legions of demons into the world.

# Alita Evertide



## DAY ONE

It took almost thirteen days for Nurtigan, Iona, Sven and Harke to reach the Nidafjöll mountains. Three more days were needed to travel past the icy and deadly peaks, white daggers lacerating the very sky. The winter seemed to be harsher than ever, but that wasn't the most disturbing danger the northern army was facing. From the blizzard came eerie voices and ancient warnings, distant howls and frightening screams. It was said the Cirque of Dwarrow was cursed, and now the heroes knew why. Evil was at work here, and before long they could see it with their own eyes.

Floating above the rocky ground was a gigantic fortress of granite and obsidian. Dvergalhalt. It was bigger than Nurtigan had ever dreamed, a testimony of the might and the genius of the first dwarves. But it now it was nothing more than a lonely tomb.


Hjarrand, the Dwarf Lorekeeper, who had followed them from Chedian, noted gloomily : "It was our pride and our identity, the symbol of the dwarves as a people. When the old ones decided to take it from us, they broke us. They broke our unity, they broke our people. Maybe it was part of their plan all along."

"What do you mean by that, Master Hjarrand ?" asked Harke.

"The old ones, the Ancients... Old manuscripts tell that this world... and many other worlds... were part of something they called 'the Great Experiment'. They were observing us, our achievements, our struggles. I always wondered if they made us suffer new trials just to see if something interesting would happen ?"

"Better not to think too much about it right now," interrupted Nurtigan. "This battle is gonna be tough."

And he was right. The former dwarven fortress was a sight to behold, but right before its gate



a terrible army was gathering. Demons and barbarians were fighting together in the name of Chaos. At their head, the hulking silhouette of the Demon King Malustar was ready to lead them to the very ends of the universe.

## DAY TWO


A plan was quickly decided. Nurtigan and Harke would attack from the north, making their way through the ranks of the Demons. Iona and Sven, on the other hand, would fight the barbarian hordes, and reach the Tomb of a Thousand Terrors from the east. If the messengers were right, Nicolai and Alita were arriving from the south. Attacking from three places at once, the northern alliance could hope to claim victory over the Chaos worshippers.

But soon a new threat was revealed, to even the odds. The scouts spotted a flight of dragons arriving from the southwest. Guruthos had not been inactive. Gathering around him the epitome of evilness and nastiness among his kind, he was now leading a flight of dragons to the battle. Thanks to the Spear of Askhelion still digging to his heart, the Shadow of Death knew this was going to be his last stand. And he would not die without defying the universe one last time.

This was it. The forces of good and the servants of evil were now ready for the greatest battle of this age. It was, indeed, the twilight of the gods. But the gods themselves were absent : their final war was waged through the mortal bodies of their champions. Gawain, Nicolai, Alita, Iona, Sven and Harke, and even Malustar and Guruthos... They were heroes, all of them, heroes of good, of evil, of order and chaos, heroes of might and magic. They were making legends. They were the new Gods.

## THE DEFEAT OF A DRAGON

The Chaotic Dragons were crushed, but for the heroes of good, victory had a sour taste : once again, Guruthos had escaped. But everybody could see the thjorad-clad Dragon, who





once defied the Gods themselves, was living his last moments. Panting and breathing heavily, his evil eyes haunted and crazed, the Shadow of Death, at this moment, was nothing more than a shadow of himself.

## DEATH OF A DEMON KING

So many good men have died today, Nurtigan thought. So many of them followed us here, ready to fight to save their world. For them, this war was not about abstract concepts such as good or chaos

: it was about survival. To triumph here, was to free their land from the undying winter; to ensure their families, their people, would have a future.

Those were his thoughts as he walked towards the Demon King. Malustar was a giant even among his kind. Alone, he had killed many soldiers of the northern alliance. The silent warrior, leader of the servants of Chaos, was waiting for him. Gawain knew fate was at work here. Their fight had been written a long time ago, and Malustar knew it as well.

It was a fight that would be remembered for ages to come. Already tired and wounded from the long battle, it seemed Gawain Nurtigan could not stand a chance against the quiet ire of the Demon Lord. Again and again the broken sword ripped the scales of Gawain's armor, but the proud Guberlander stood, a frail tree caught in a furious thunderstorm.

But the Demon had more than just a sword with which to fight.

He rammed his head into Nurtigan's chest, and whipped Nutrigan's legs with his metal-coated tail, making the warrior lose his balance. Nurtigan finally fell backwards, and Malustar approached, ready to deal the last blow. Then something unexpected happened.



“Puny demon ! I told you that one was mine !”

With a roaring battle cry, Guruthos fell from the skies and pushed Malustar aside. But as he opened his terrible mouth, ready to vaporize Nurtigan with his fiery breath, he stopped. “No...” he muttered, and froze, his monstrous head deformed by sudden pain. Then he slowly crumbled to the ground. Prophecy moved in for the kill. The Spear of Askhelion, after three thousands years of searching, had finally found its mark.

As the lifeless Guruthos fell dead in the bloodied snow, Malustar was back on his feet, but the distraction had given Nurtigan the momentum he needed to change the tide. With a cry of “Guberland !” he threw himself against the Demon King, pummelling him again and again with his heavy warhammer. Then, with a powerful blow, he sent the broken sword flying away. Now disarmed, Malustar looked Nurtigan in the eyes, and the northern warrior saw something there he didn't expect to find. Hope.

“Free me,” the Demon asked, in a tired voice.

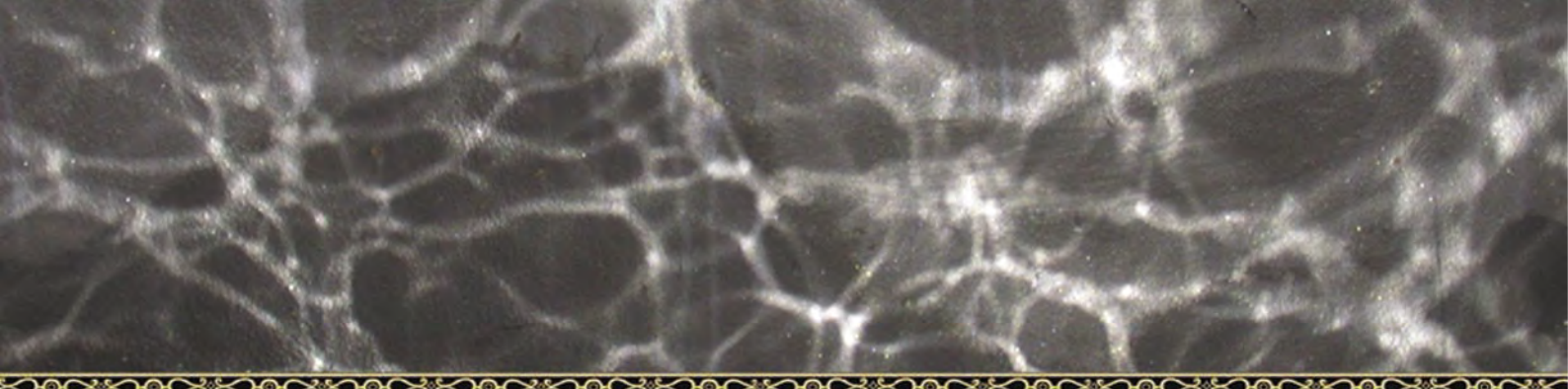
And Nurtigan brought down his hammer, crushing the head of the demon under its dwarven steel. When he raised his weapon again, the demon moved no more. The great King Malustar was dead.

## EPILOGUE

The battle was over. The barbarian hordes were escaping towards the mountains, and the remaining Demons were now retreating into the Tomb. It was over.

Or was it ?

In the turmoil, nobody noticed Nicolai. He quietly picked up Malustar's broken blade, and started walking in the direction of Dvergalhalt. The demons stepped out of his path and the



doors opened for him. The noise made by the heavy thjorad doors as they moved alerted Alita.

“Nurtigan !” called the priestess of Equilibris. “Something is happening to Nicolai !” Gawain jumped to his feet, almost knocking over the wizards who were attending his wounds.

“By the ghost of Markel, you’re right ! What’s wrong with the lad ?” It took him a couple of heartbeats to realize what Nicolai was doing. “He’s not going in there all by himself, is he ?”

“We need to help him ! Quick, the doors are closing !” Alita shouted.

Gathering some loyal men, they rushed towards the black fortress. Most of the demons had already disappeared into the Tomb, but some of them had stayed behind to stop them. But the Kreegans were no match for Gawain’s might and Alita’s magic. Gawain and Alita entered the cursed city of the dwarves just in time for the doors to close behind them, trapping them in darkness.

## CHAPTER SIX - THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

*The battle of Dvergalhalt is over, and it seems the forces of good were victorious. But the God of Chaos, Njam the Meddler, still occupies the Tomb of a Thousand Terrors. With Nicolai Ironfist already inside, it is up to Gawain Nurtigan the warrior and Alita Eventide the sorceress to brave the perils of the cursed fortress and put an end to Njam's evil schemes.*

### DAY ONE

Gawain and Alita entered the cursed city of the dwarves just in time for the doors to close behind them, trapping them in darkness. However, after a few moments, they realized, relieved, they were not in pitch black obscurity. A soft, blue light was pulsating in the corridors of Dvergalhalt.

“Where is Nicolai?” asked Nurtigan.

“I have no idea”, Alita answered. “He can't be far ahead of us. We must be very careful. This is a lair of evil, and the God of Chaos is still somewhere in there. Hopefully our victory over Malustar and his army weakened him... at least enough for us to destroy him.”

### THE FROZEN REMAINS OF A GOD

Gawain and Alita entered a large room which was located near the very center of the fortress. Above them, a large chimney lead into darkness. And under the chimney...

There was a man made of ice, frozen in the middle of a threatening gesture. But it was not an ordinary man. He was taller than most, and his features had something alien to them. He was beautiful, in an unsettling way.

“Who is that ?” said Gawain aloud. And a mocking voice answered.

“Behold the remains of a God... Caught into the very trap he intended to use against his rivals. Fortunately, he had another plan...”

A silhouette emerged from the darkness on the other side of the room. Clad in intimidating armour of black and red thjorad, wielding a long fiery blade, his face was hidden behind a horned helmet. Yet Gawain recognised the hilt of the blade. Not long ago, he had seen this blade in the hands of the Demon King, only it was broken then... Gawain was not an intellectual, but his brains were working well enough to reach the only possible conclusion.

“Nicolai ? Is that you ?” Gawain said.

The silhouette removed its helmet. That was indeed Nicolai Ironfist... or at least the body of Nicolai. For his eyes were now two black pits leading into oblivion. Alita was the first to understand.

“It’s not Nicolai anymore. It’s Njam... Njam was inside Nicolai’s body all along !”

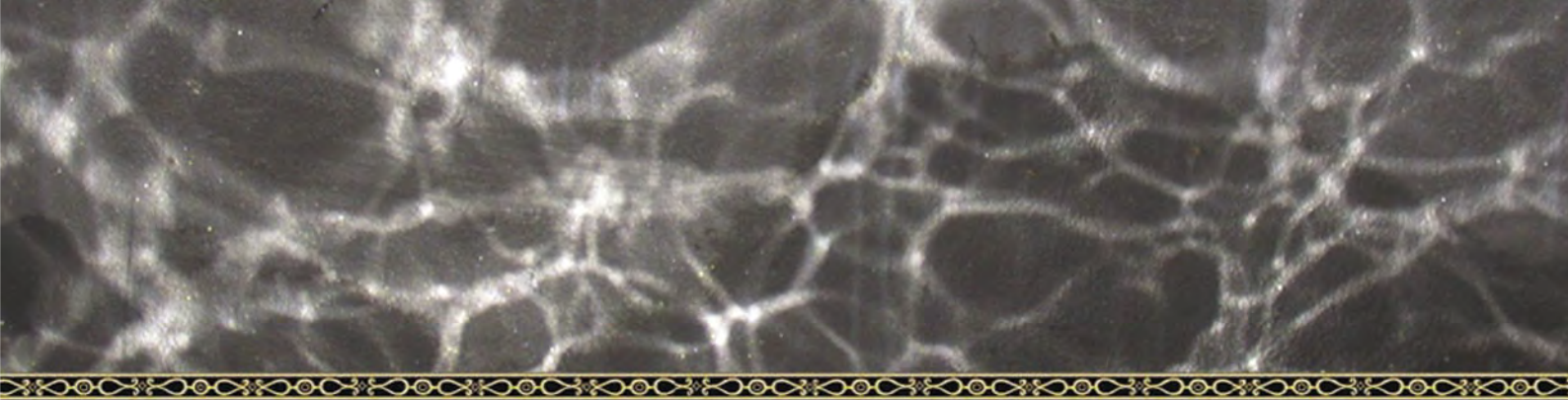
“What ?” Nurtigan exclaimed, bewildered.

The thing that was Nicolai laughed.

“The woman is right. I was Njam... Now, I am much, much more... Even a God has its limitations, after all. Now that I inhabit this new body, my powers are limitless !”

Nurtigan could still not believe it. “But how such a thing is possible ?” he asked.

“I was weak, an anomaly with no real power over the Wire. Yet I knew I needed to fulfil a greater role... my duty to the Source was to destroy this world, to destroy all life! To do that, I needed first to shut down the Dome and its puny Gods. Before my first attempt was foiled and my ‘body’ trapped here, I took the precaution of downloading myself into a young boy... your Nicolai.



You see, Nicolai is not from this world. I could see he was unknown to the other Gods, and that I would be safe, hidden in his mind. Of course, he resisted me. I didn't expect to find such a strength in his spirit. He resisted me so well I realized I needed to bring him here to take full control of him.

You see, part of my consciousness was very well alive in this frozen husk... slowly, I reached the minds of the demons trapped in the tomb... They were already half-crazy from centuries of imprisonment. Before long, they were all my slaves. When Malustar opened the tomb, he soon fell under my power as well. Ehora, was smarter though, and she managed to escape from me. It doesn't matter. She fulfilled the role I wrote for her well enough the day I allowed her into Arlesgard and told her of the Staff of Blue Light..."

"And so, using Nicolai as a vessel, you managed to sneak into Arlesgard to slay the Gods," said Alita.

"That was unexpected, I must say. I found out the mysterious force that had been protecting his mind so far was weaker in the realm of the Gods. I didn't waste my time reflecting over that strangeness, however. I seized that opportunity and killed them. And now, it's your turn. That's sad, actually. I can feel in his heart Nicolai really loved you, Alita Eventide..."

Then he raised his sword, and a beam of flames erupted from its steel, rushing towards Alita and Gawain. But at the last moment, it was deflected and struck Njam's frozen body instead. The ice statue exploded into a thousand shards. Nicolai fell on his knees, and his eyes reverted back to normal.

"Run!" he said. "I don't know how long I can contain him..."

Gawain grabbed Alita's arm and fled the room. A few heartbeats later, another fiery beam hit the wall and the corridor collapsed behind them. They were safe from Njam, for now, but lost in the labyrinth of the tomb.



## THE CHAOTIC REALM

“By Markel’s pants, where are we ?” said Nurtigan upon discovering the strange place they now found themselves in. They had taken a wrong turn somewhere, walked through a strange archway, and were now in this bizarre landscape. Dark islands were floating in a whirling, fiery sky. It was a disturbing and sickening place.

“I think this is the Plane of Chaos.” Alita explained. “I think this is where the Planeswalker banished the Tomb of a Thousand Terrors at the dawn of time... it has never been completely brought back into the world. Dvergalhalt is still partly out of phase, a portal between the planes. We’re not on Axeoth anymore. That is why Gods can be killed here...”

“Great. So what do we do now, young lady ?”

“There seems to be some sort of building up there, isn’t there ?”

Indeed, they could spot what looked like the ruins of a castle on one of the islands. Only the castle looked like it was made of the skull of a giant...

## EBORA’S HIDEOUT

As they approached the skull-castle, they saw Demons on the walls. Nurtigan reached for his hammer, but Alita stopped him. “I don’t believe they are like the Demons we fought,” she said.

She was right. Malustar’s legions were brutal and mindless killing machines. The ones that lived inside this castle, at least, were talkative. One demon-woman addressed them : “Who are you ? You are not servants of the God of Chaos.” Alita and Gawain looked at each other and decided to answer honestly. They told the succubus their story, and she nodded.

“We were used,” she finally said. “I wanted to save my people from extinction—I ended up

hastening it. Those who live are nothing more than puppets, and the others are condemned to stay here for all eternity, in this wasteland.” She sighed and ordered the gates to be opened. “They call me Ebor. I am responsible for all this. If you want to slay me, to avenge your comrades... then go ahead. I feel I have lived too long anyway.”

But Gawain spoke, with his deep, thundering voice : “There is only one being on which I will exact my revenge, and that being is Njam the Meddler !”

Ebor had a sad smile : “Do you think it is so easy ? Then I should show you something. It will teach you what you’re up against.”

She led them to a room under the skull. There was a body here. It had the appearance of flesh, yet it had been ripped in places, revealing a skin made of metal. The metal man was lifeless, yet Ebor pressed a strange design on his chest, and the ghost of the man appeared, talking in a voice that seemed to come from very far away...

## ESCATON’S LOG

*“0245.095 – Even after the destruction of the Kreegan fleet in the A.R.C. system, the Great War is not over. The Worldcrafters have sent me on the Advanced Xylonite Orbital Seed, or A.X.O.S., to assist in the fight against Kreegan forces. I can’t allow the Enemy to take control of the Nexus located on this planet and am authorized to perform any steps necessary to remove the threat as quickly as possible.*

*0246.112 - Despite my efforts, it seems the Kreegans managed to breach the Web of Worlds, forcing the Worldcrafters to take drastic measures to quarantine all the worlds located in the Spinward Rim. Nearly 87 worlds are now severed from the Web of Worlds. The Inner Circle ordered that any new world touched by the Enemy should be purged by fire rather than letting this catastrophic turn of events happen again.*

*0249.051 - I was summoned to A.X.O.S. once again. It seems that banishing the Kreegans into the Plane of Chaos had an unexpected side-effect. When I moved the city of the dwarves out of phase, I actually*



*created a breach in the local Dome. Had it been noticed later, it could have allowed the Source to corrupt the Soul Management System and endanger the Great Experiment.*

*0301.087 - The corruption of A.X.O.S.' Dome by the Source led to the generation of a new Force. The Inner Circle decided to keep it that way as it represents a unique opportunity to observe the effects of the Source on our systems. As such, A.X.O.S. is now removed from the Great Experiment.*

*0401.151 – Observation of the corruption on A.X.O.S. led to the conclusion that the Source could virtually infect any of the artificial intelligences created by the Worldcrafters – including myself and the other Guardians. I am now to assist Highfather Einar in his research to create Guardians impervious to corruption by the Source.*

*0456.331 – Highfather Einar believes he has found a way to create a new batch of Guardians. The Inner Circle asked him to conduct his experiments on remote worlds of the Spinward Rim. Einar chose the worlds of A.X.O.S. and A.R.D.O.N.*

*0461.145 – The first of the new Guardians is born. Being a hybrid, he should be unaffected by the Source.*

*0595.025 – The hybrid Guardian is a failure and went insane. Highfather Einar hopes the next one will be a success. It better be, or the Inner Circle will put an end to his experiments.*

*0621.222 – The new hybrid, a girl, is far more stable and shall make a fine Guardian for A.X.O.S.*

*0806.999 – It seems the Worldcrafters' fears were justified. The Source managed to take control of the Wire of the moon of H.A.V.E.C. through the artificial intelligence of one of its seedships. Furthermore, the Guardian of T.E.R.R.A. has been recently showing signs of erratic behaviour and is believed to have been corrupted by the Source as well. Two other Guardians have been sent to shut him down before further investigation.*

*1024.055 – A disturbing event has taken place. It seems the natives of C.O.L.O.N.Y., one of the*

*quarantined worlds of the Spinward Rim, have managed to repair their connexion to the Web of Worlds. Examination of their Dome showed traces of Kreegan presence on this planet. The Inner Circle does not want to take any risks. As the bearer of the E.S.C.A.T.O.N. personality module, it is my mission to destroy this world.*

*1026.589 – I arrived on C.O.L.O.N.Y., but the Kreegan threat here has clearly been addressed by the locals. Yet the Inner Circle ordered me to fulfil my mission. I can't go against it, but I feel killing the inhabitants of this world is 'wrong'. I made my decision – I'll shut down the Dome and summon the Conflux of the Elements, but before that I'll activate the emergency portals to ensure a way for as many people as possible to escape the destruction. I programmed the emergency portals to lead to A.X.O.S. : as that world is out of the Great Experiment, they should be safe there, even if some Kreegans manage to escape as well... ”*

## EBORA'S TALE

When the ghost of the man called Escaton disappeared, Gawain and Alita were left speechless.


“Everything was true,” Nurtigan finally said. “Nicolai's stories, about how he came from another world which was destroyed... it was the truth.”

“Yes,” replied Alita. “But what is that Source he kept talking about ? Njam mentioned it as well.”

Ebora smiled.

“Let me tell you one of the oldest legends of my people.

They say a long time ago, even before the Creators came into existence, the universe was just a great Nothing, the Void. But even in the Void there were things that needed to exist, powers that wished to manifest themselves. You call them the Elemental Lords. We call them the Creators.



The Creators were making planets, slowly re-conquering the Void. And on one of those planets, they created my people. And they warned us not to venture too deeply into the Void, as there was something in there... Something malevolent that was still trying to devour the whole universe, to return it to Nothing.

The Source. The Source of the Void.

After centuries, we were able to make ships to venture in the sea of stars... We settled on other planets, expanded our empire... And one day, we met the Ancients. They too were the children of the Creators, but they were arrogant and full of themselves. At first we didn't pay too much attention to them except for trade, but after a few more centuries we discovered what they were doing on the other side of the Void.


They were using their wicked science to accelerate the birth of new planets... And for that they were enslaving the Creators, our fathers. Before long, the priests convinced our people that the Ancients were mad and dangerous, that their "experiment" was a sacrilege. Our sacred mission was to destroy as many of the Ancients' worlds as possible, because they were artificial and made against the will of the Creators. And that's how our holy war, the Great War, started.

We lost the war, but in the end, it only nourished the Source..."

Alita nodded.

"And Njam was created when the Source corrupted this world. We need your help, Ebor. You heard Escaton's words : this world is no more a part of the Ancients' Great Experiment. You and your people could have their place on Axeoth."

"I doubt it." Ebor said, sadly. "But I'll help you, if only to undo my mistakes and find an honourable death... There is a way to destroy Njam, I think, without killing your friend. For some reason Njam's powers are nullified in the skull-castle – that's why we took refuge here in the first place. If we could lure him close enough, it should be enough for your friend to fight his influence..."



## NJAM DEFEATED NEAR THE SKULL-CASTLE

Ebora was right. As the heroes were fighting the God of Chaos in human form, he started to become more and more agitated. Realizing the trap into which he had fallen, he started to retreat, but his body was not obeying him. Gawain jumped on him and pinned him down.

“Fight him, lad ! You can do it !” he shouted.

But even the strong Guberlander had trouble keeping him on the ground. Shouting and cursing, Njam was trying to release himself. It took several men – and some of Ebora’s Kreegan warriors – to hold him still. Njam – or was it Nicolai ? – screamed, a heart-piercing scream that hinted at the terrible fight that was taking place inside his soul...

## THE END

It was Nicolai who opened his own eyes. “It’s over. I defeated him... for now at least.”

Gawain sighed of relief and released his friend from the three men who had been sitting over him for the last few hours. “For now, heh ? So what happens next ? We can’t tie you up in the skull-castle for all eternity, lad.”

As if to answer Nurtigan, three ghostly figures appeared around Nicolai, as if they were stepping out of the Ironfist’s body. A bald man, a bearded elf and a... was it a skeleton ?

“You did well, Nicolai Ironfist. Thanks to you and your friends, the last Force of the Dome has been revealed and subdued. We can now perform the rebooting of the Dome. It will erase us, and the Force of Chaos, and build a new, clean Dome from scratch.”

Nicolai asked : “But what will happen to the souls in both Paradises ? Will they be erased as well ?”

The bald man explained : “Don’t worry, Nicolai Ironfist. The databases won’t be touched. All the souls will be safe... But there is something...”

“What is it ?”

“Njam linked himself to your soul. We cannot erase him as long as you live.”

Nicolai had a tired smile : “That was part of your plan all along, wasn’t it ?”

The wraith didn’t answer. Alita shouted : “I’ll never let you kill him !”

“Neither will I,” said another voice. It was a noble, charismatic voice. A fourth ghostly figure arose from Nicolai’s body. He looked a lot like Nicolai, but older.

“Father ?” cried Nicolai, bewildered.

Gawain whispered : “Just how many people were hiding in that boy ? No wonder he is a bit crazy in the head !”

“Yes, my son,” said the newcomer. “I was in you all this time. When I died, I felt my mission was not over, that you needed me. I found you in Castle Ironfist, about to be crushed under the rubble. I briefly possessed you and managed to pull you through one of the portals... As you were now safe in this new world, I was about to depart to join my beloved Catherine in the afterworld, but I felt that chaotic presence trying to take control of your mind... So I decided to stay and fight him the best I could. I mostly managed to keep him at bay all this time, but he finally overpowered me. I am sorry, my son.”

The ghost of King Roland then looked defiantly in the direction of the other three spectres :

“You don’t have to harm my son. Actually, Njam never linked himself to Nicolai’s soul... I managed to trick him into bonding with mine instead. So erase me, if you need, and erase him from this

world once and for all. But let my son live. I think he deserves it.”

“Father, no !” screamed Nicolai.

“We agree to your terms, Roland Ironfist. Initiating the rebooting of the Dome...”

There was no display of magic, no explosion, nothing of the kind. The four ghosts simply vanished. The Twilight of the Gods was over.

“They left me...” sobbed Nicolai. “They both left me.”

And with tears in his eyes, he hurled the once-broken sword, the one that was known as Armageddon’s Blade, into the chaotic netherworld below.

## EPILOGUE

They stepped outside, the heroes of Axeoth, into the warm light of the sun. Somewhere, in the distance, birds were singing. Spring was about to begin. And even if it would only last three months, for the people of Hanndl’s Grasp, that spring was going to last forever in their hearts.

Ebora mourned over the corpse of Malustar and gave him a proper burial. There was a bit of anxiety in the ranks of the Northern Alliance when the soldiers outside saw their heroes leave the cursed Tomb of a Thousand Terrors alongside a party of Demons. But Alita managed to calm them down : Equilibris, after all, was also about accepting the Other and his differences. Before leaving to parts unknown, Ebora offered to Queen Iona a small cube containing Malustar’s memories, to ensure he would not be forgotten. Only time would tell if the last Kreegans would be able to find their place in a world created by the Ancients...

Harke returned to Etendar. Before long, the thirst of adventure returned, and he left the elven court and its intrigues again to explore the distant continent of Aalondor. He is now considered the

greatest traveller of Axeoth since Eudoxis, and his memoirs helped the people of Axeoth to better know each other.

Gawain Nurtigan was already a hero, and he became a legend. This new status allowed him to convince Sven and Kira to help him free Guberland from Mendossus. Once the “Land of Braggers”, the island is now known as the “Land of Heroes”.

Queen Iona Arran and King Sven managed to create a lasting peace between Chedian and Framon. The Northern Alliance was meant to last – but this wouldn't be the last threat it would face.

Now sole master of his heart and mind, Nicolai learned to accept himself and was finally ready to start a new life, with Alita. A few years after, they married, and dedicated their lives to helping others in need. Nicolai also learned to forgive a certain person...

And without anybody noticing, someone quietly snatched an artifact from the spoils of war : a long staff, decorated by a glowing blue gem...

But those are stories for another time...

*So ends  
“Demons and Wonders”,  
the third book of the Legends of the Ancients.*







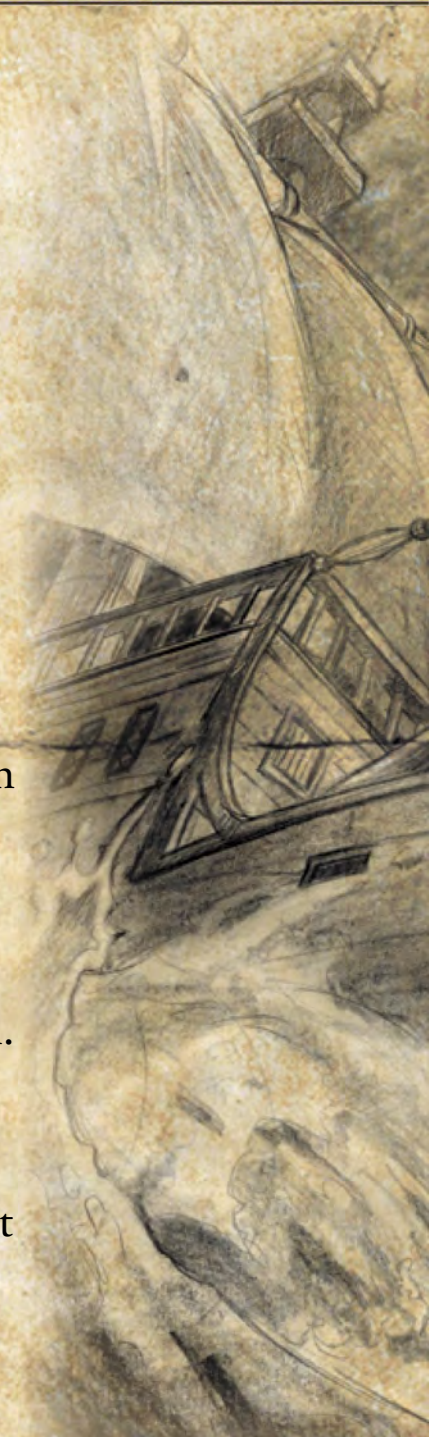
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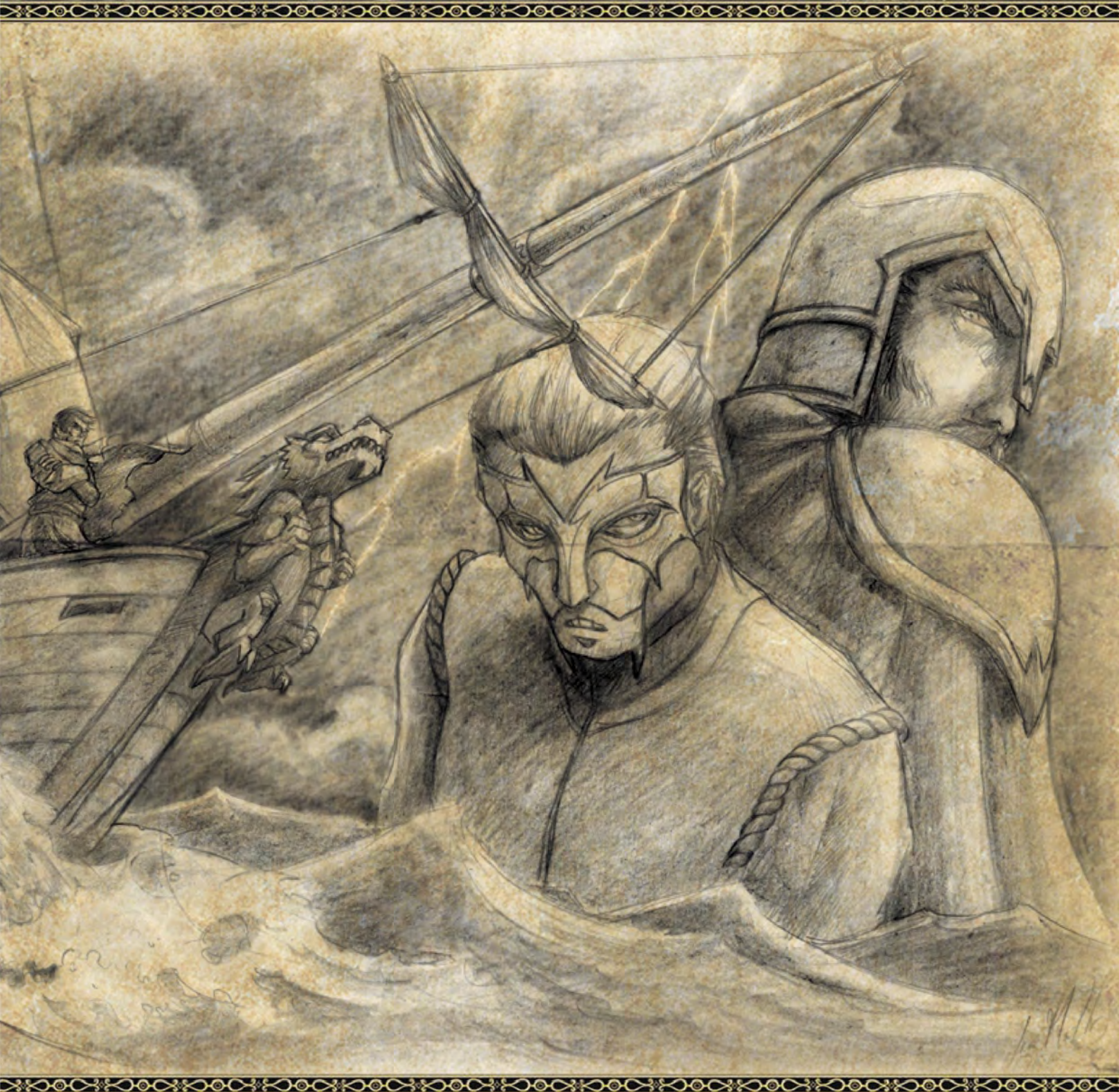
## *Heirs of the Dead*

*540 A.C.*

The Winter of the Gods is at an end, but King Mysterio the Magnificent's growing insanity envelops the Kingdom of Channon, the recently-conquered jewel of the continent of Rysh. Rumors of ongoing power struggles lead Solmyr ibn Wali Barad to believe his master, the Immortal King Gavin Magnus, is operating in the region.

As Solmyr forges an alliance against Channon with the enigmatic Magister Alamar, he quickly learns this conflict of ideologies is sure to decide the future of Axeoth, for better or worse. The immortal heroes of Axeoth unite as the final journey begins...







Gavin Magnus

# CHAPTER ONE: MASKS AND DAGGERS

## PROLOGUE

My name is Alamar.

It is not my birth name, but it is a good name. It is an old name, older than memory. A name meant for kings, for wizards, for heroes. For visionaries. In the Ancients' long-forgotten language, it means "the one who dreams".

All my life I dreamt. I dreamt dreams of grandeur, of domination and rulership. I dreamt dreams of imprisonment, of betrayal, of exile. I dreamt dreams of fire, of death, or darkness. I dreamt of a whole new world, a whole new life. A better life.

Sometimes I wish my dreams could bring back those I lost, by accident or by my own actions. Those I didn't learn to love before it was too late. But death is not the end. I see them, when I close my eyes and make the great leap to the unknown world of sleep. I talk with them. They are always there.

It is a strange twist of fate that I, of all people, should be the one to tell you about the Final Days, when all the old stories came to their ends and new stories found their beginning.

But everything in its own time. To begin, we must first travel back to the magistracy of Uludin, the pearl of the west, and walk alongside a very special man. He is not human, but in many ways he is the most human of us all.

His name was Solmyr ibn wali Barad.

This his story. The last Legend of the Ancients.

## DAY 1

(Manuscript found in a bottle in the middle of the Sea of Merlion.)

I stayed in Uludin for almost a year, studying the old manuscripts of the magistracy's library, bidding my time.

All the clues led to Channon.

I found the man who had hired Nazreem on Magnus' behalf, and made him talk. One by one, the remaining pieces of the puzzles were falling into place. Magnus had received help from someone in Channon, someone powerful. My suspicions were on the King of Channon himself, Mysterio the Magnificent. Mysterio had made no mysteries of his own quest for immortality, going as far as to conquer Channon in the process. But by all accounts, the Kingdom of Life didn't bring him any conclusive answer. It would be a logical next step for him to want to meet an actual immortal.

I remembered Mysterio's visit to Great Arcan three years earlier, his interest in Gavin Magnus and his urge to meet him. Magnus had been a prisoner, a wreck of a man in a catatonic state. Now I realized it was after Mysterio's visit that Magnus' state had started to improve. I wondered if this was when they started putting together their plan to free Magnus... at the cost of a war between Great Arcan and its neighbor Palaedra. But Mysterio had already proven that war was a price he was willing to pay to achieve his goals.

But once I reached Uludin, I was stuck. I couldn't sail directly to Channon; it would have been too risky if Magnus was indeed under the protection of the King. And even with the power to take the shape of a bird, I simply could not fly over such a distance. The only other option was to sail to Korresan, south-east of Channon, and reach the Kingdom of Life across the Rust Desert. Once, Korresan had belonged to the necromancer Von Tarkin, which had been destroyed by Mysterio. Korresan was now only a wasteland, unpopulated -- and so the best place to sneak into Channon unnoticed. But it wasn't so simple: the winter was so harsh the sea itself had frozen, and no ship could cross the Sea of Verhoffin and bring me to Korresan.

But finally spring came... And with it, Channon came to me.

## DAY 2

The first thing that struck me when I came in the western part of the world was that the Church of Equilibris was a big thing here, and growing. Having united the various cults into a single religion dedicated to balance, the Church had become very powerful in a very short time. Their official leader was Alita Eventide, a well known hero who had defeated some evil sorcerer in the past. But in Uludin, the people were saying the real mastermind of the Church was a man called Alamar.

Alamar had been offered a seat of honor at the magistracy, despite the fact that many mages of Uludin were wary of him. I only caught a brief glimpse of the man during my stay in Uludin. Always followed by his bodyguard, a tall goblin warrior clad in black armor, Alamar was a secretive fellow who hid his face behind a golden mask. Some said he had been horribly burned in a terrible magical experiment. For others, he was just a dangerous necromancer, and inviting him into the magistracy was a hazardous mistake. But whatever they thought, the Church of Equilibris was more popular every day. Granting Alamar a magistership was a logical political move.

Alamar did bring problems to Uludin though, because for some reason Mysterio the Magnificent, King of Channon, wanted to put him behind bars. That's what the emissary from the Kingdom of Life told the magistracy when Channon's armies were at Uludin's doors. Or more accurately, it was by order of Navi Sulman, Great Vizier of Channon.

Navi Sulman. By the Ancients, one could hope an immortal would have some imagination when crafting a fake identity! But as I reflected on this, it gave me an idea.

But before I could try to tell Alamar of my plan, he surrendered to Channon, apparently hoping Mysterio would spare the magistracy. That was nice of him, but for me it complicated things immensely.

## DAY 3

Sulman's men have built an outpost on the Isle of Pyre. They're taking Alamar there before sending him to Channon by boat. For my plan to work, I must free him before they do. I think I have no more than three months to act.

## ALAMAR FREED

While the battle was raging on the Isle of Pyre, I sneaked into the outpost. As I was hoping, I found Alamar in a cell. I left one of my lieutenants outside to survey the corridors.

“Well, that’s unexpected. Solmyr ibn wali Barad, the prime minister of Great Arcan in person, flying to my rescue. Did I make such an impression on you in Uludin?”

No wonder Alamar was keeping his eyes and ears wide open. The voice was muffled by the mask, but the tone was oddly familiar.

“Listen, magister. What do you know about Navi Sulman?”

“The new Vizier of Channon? Nothing, really, except that he certainly seems to want something from me. What do you know about him?”

“I know I must find him. And for that, I need to take your place.”

“Obviously you could take my mask, but don’t forget we also have a significant difference in height...”

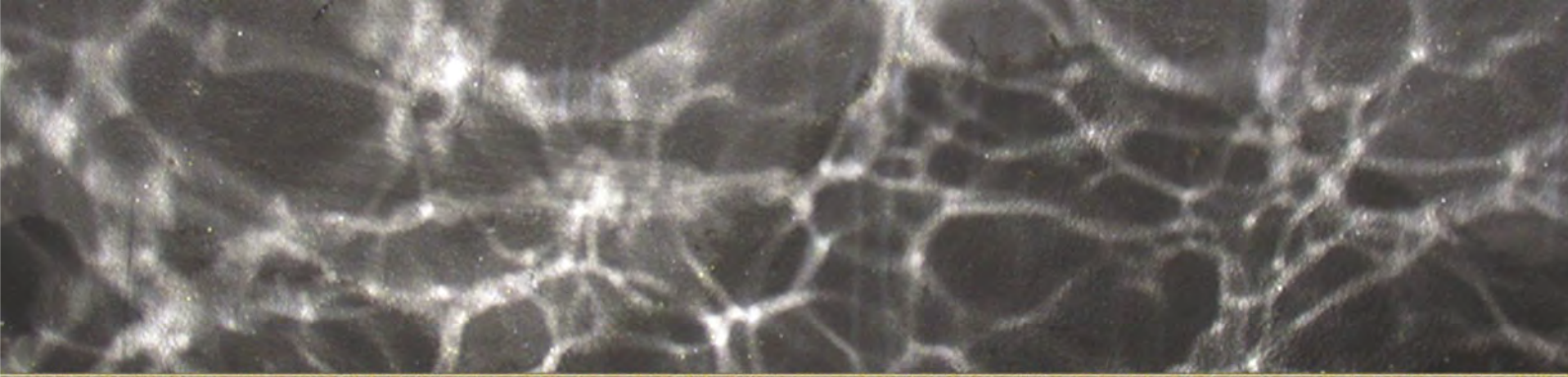
He was right, but there was another option. I concentrated myself. And then, there were two Alamar in the room, exactly similar, in every aspect.

“Ah, shapeshifting. What a great ability. That’s why genies make excellent spies, wouldn’t you agree?”

It was said casually, but suddenly I found myself wanting to take his mask off and know who he was. I restrained myself and looked at him carefully, trying to find the eyes in the golden mask. Whoever he was, he was good, and had done his homework pretty thoroughly. I turned back into my favoured appearance and called my lieutenant.

“I have found everything I was looking for, it’s now time to retreat. Follow the plan, and everything will be fine.” I turned to Alamar. “They’ll escort you back to the continent. We’ll meet again.”





“I’m sure we will, my friend. And I am now in your debt.”

As Alamar was following Tariq outside of the cell, I called him:

“By the way, did you choose the name Alamar because of your father’s war stories?”

He stopped, if only for a second, but didn’t answer. And I knew I had guessed right.



Chandra

## CHAPTER TWO: THE GREAT ESCAPE

*Posing as Alamar, the mysterious leader of the Church of Equilibris, Solmyr has been taken to Orilios, the prison island. He now must find a way to escape, with the help of an unexpected bunch of allies.*

### DAY 1

They found me in “my” cell, after a “failed” attempt to rescue “me” by “my” followers. Apart from taking the forms of birds from time to time, I hate shapeshifting. Assuming another man’s identity disgusts me. I swore to myself I would never do it again. And yet in order to find and kill Magnus, I didn’t hesitate long before assuming the appearance of Alamar.

There is a bitter irony in this, or even a form of poetic justice. Magnus often ordered me to take a human appearance and act as his spy, observing the events in Enroth from afar. I saw many events of the history of the world... and many wars, of course, nations rising to glory by the might of their swords, and disappearing into the mists of time. A past long forgotten, centuries before Lord Ironfist’s conquest of Enroth.

My life.

And now Magnus was in Channon, under the guise of Navi Sulman, if my hunch was correct. What was he trying to achieve by allying with Mysterio? The Magnificent had better be careful, because I couldn’t picture Magnus quietly staying second-in-command for long.

Unfortunately for my plan, they didn’t bring me straight to Channon, but instead to Orilios, the dreaded prison island. A wasteland of dry sand and sulphuric fumes, where Mysterio’s political opponents were thrown, never to be heard from again.

“Can you hear me?”

That’s when I heard the voice in my head. A woman’s voice. Tired, broken, but definitely real. She said:

“Is it true? Do you have it? The thing they are looking for... do you have the Staff of Blue Light?”

## DAY 2

Forced labor: that's what Orilios was all about. No need for cells or chains to restrain the prisoners: just make them work in the sulphur mines until they die from exhaustion, their lungs burned by the fumes. The wardens tried to remove my mask of course, but without success. Instead I received the beating of my life, and they locked me in an antimagic cell. I knew they would come back soon with new tools to remove the mask, but it would not last long in this cell anyway. Slowly but surely, the magic would wear off, negated by the very fabric of the walls. I needed to come up with a new plan, fast, or only a miracle would save me.

Surprisingly enough, the miracle came first.

Someone opened the door to my cell and rushed inside. It was a warden, a middle-aged human with dark skin, but not one I had seen before.

"Can you walk?" he asked

"Why?"

"I must get you out of here."

I hesitated. If I left, that could mean I would never have my chance to meet Sulman, or Magnus, or whatever he was calling himself. But at this rate, I would be dead before he would ever come to this island. If he had even intended to come.

"Okay, lead the way."

He took me outside of my cell. Then I saw the bodies of the other wardens in the corridors, dead. My new friend had not been afraid to cross the line in order to free me. We escaped some patrols and ventured into secret tunnels under the wardens' fortress, the old Castle Maticus. For hours we walked through pitch black darkness, always forward. Then we reached a large grotto with an underground lake.

"Don't try to drink that water. It would burn your stomach as surely as acid."

“Thanks for the advice,” I replied. “And for rescuing me. So, why?”

The dark man shook his head, sadly.

“My name is Adama. I lived in Nyb a long time ago. My tribe was at war with the Suldari, so we allied with Mysterio against our enemy. I fought at the battle of Channon. For the price of my loyalty, I was sent here. A warden, yet a prisoner.” He sighed, lost in his sad memories. “Then I met her. The woman who talks in your dreams.”

I jumped at this mention. “You know of her?! Who is she? Is she on this island?” He silenced me with a gesture.

“I’ll lead you to her. She asked me to do it. And she also told me who you really are. You don’t need your disguise with me, Lord Solmyr.”

So much for the shapeshifting. I reverted back to my favored appearance. He nodded, then continued:

“As for who she is... Don’t you have an idea?”

I shook my head negatively. He game me a solemn look.

“She is Chandra, the Guardian of Axeoth.”

### DAY 3

The revelation took me completely by surprise. The Guardian of Axeoth, a prisoner on this hellish island? Adama explained Mysterio had hoped to learn how he could become a Guardian himself, all-powerful and immortal, so he attacked Channon. Chandra had acted as the protector of the Kingdom of Life since the fall of the Ursanian Empire so it didn’t go as well as Mysterio had hoped. Since he couldn’t kill Chandra, he exiled her to Orilios.

Chandra didn’t resist. He threatened to destroy all of Channon and kill all of its inhabitants if she did.

“Mysterio was not so bad before we reached Channon. Full of himself, certainly, arrogant,

and impatient. But not a bad man. It changed after the battle of Channon. He changed. He became cold and merciless. Many of us, who had followed him through the Winds of War, started to have doubts about his sanity. Before we could act, we were scattered. I was lucky enough to be sent here rather than executed.”

Chandra had been imprisoned in a special cell in the subterranean labyrinth below the island. I needed to find her and, more importantly, find a way to free her from Orilios.

## CHANDRA

I found Chandra in her cell in the heart of Orilios. She was a beautiful woman, yet her features were strangely inhuman. Her forehead was a bit too long, her eyes a bit too big. It was disturbing and mesmerizing all at once.

“I was waiting for you, Solmyr,” she said.

“Lady Guardian, how can I free you from this cell?”

“Listen to me.” Her voice was sharp and commanding, the voice of a leader. “I’m bound to this place by four foci of power, each one located in the depths of the sulfur mines, protected by a powerful fortress. The time has come to start a revolt in Orilios and storm the four fortresses at once. Everything is already in place, Adama and I planted the seeds of the insurrection a long time ago. There are three leaders among the prisoners you must find and rally under your banner to raise an army: they are Kadeg the Barbarian, Radcliff the Red Dwarf and Jamshid the Efreet.

“Rallying an Efreet under the banner of a Genie. Now that is going to be fun,” I noted gleefully.

“Nobody said it would be easy, Solmyr.” I felt like I was being scolded like a child. “Be especially wary of the Warden General. His name is Adiran Sarek and he dwells in Castle Maticus. He is effectively the new king of Orilios, entirely devoted to the master of Channon. Now go, Solmyr.”

My mission was clear. I turned to Adama and asked him to come with me. That made him laugh.

“Asking prisoners to collaborate with a warden simply won’t work, my friend. I’ll stay here until you take control of the island.”

### KADEG THE BARBARIAN

I found Kadeg the Barbarian in the bowel of a sulfur mine. He was a big, impressive fellow, with a nasty scar running over his face, yet his eyes burned with a fierce cunning and he spoke with passion and charisma. It was easy to convince him to put our forces in common to start the revolt.

### RADCLIFF THE RED DWARF

Radcliff the Red Dwarf had become a lord among the prisoners by ruling the black market of Orilios. He had the reputation to be able to find anything a prisoner could want, except freedom. I came and told him we could work together to have freedom. Fortunately, the Red Dwarf was all too happy to forget his “empire” if that meant leaving the hellish mines of Orilios for good.

### JAMSHID THE EFREET

Jamshid had been a general in King Maticus’ army during the War of the Five, and he became a prisoner of war after Maticus’ army was crushed during the climatic battle. Efreet and Genies usually don’t get along, but we discovered we did have something in common: both of us craved freedom and were ready to forget our old enmity for it.

### THE FINAL FORTRESS FALLS

The last fortress had fallen. The all-powerful Warden General Adiran Sarek had been made prisoner and thrown into one of his own sulfur pits by the vengeful prisoners.

Chandra urged us to sail to the continent to put an end to whatever Mysterio and Magnus were plotting together. She was anxious to know the whereabouts of an artifact called the Staff of Blue Light, the one she suspected was in the hands of Alamar.

It was obvious she knew more than she was telling. I would have to play along in order to find out what was going on.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE EYE OF GOROS

*Solmyr and Chandra have finally arrived in Korresan. They need to venture through the badlands and sneak into Qasar, the homeland of Mysterio.*

### DAY 1

It was almost my original plan: we journeyed through the wastelands of Korresan and the Rust Desert to reach Qasar, the former kingdom of Mysterio before his conquest of Channon. Yet our objective was somewhat different: Chandra was obsessed with ensuring Mysterio and Magnus did not find an artifact she called the Eye of Goros.

We quickly realized it would be harder than we had thought. Von Tarkin had been destroyed, but his undead legions still roamed his lands. And as if that were not enough, the Rust Desert was the home of vicious Dragons of unusual size, and Qasar was probably heavily defended as well.

I realized how far I had come to stop Magnus. More than ever, I wished I had stayed in Great Arcan with my dear Emilia and the people I knew and loved. Yet I could not turn back. If Chandra was right, the future of Axeoth was at stake.

### DAY 3

During the trip through Korresan, I learned a lot of things about the history of Axeoth. I learned how the Ancients created Chandra as a new type of Guardian, different from the ones from other worlds. The Ancients feared a power called the Source, which could corrupt their Guardians.

“The Source is the voice of the Void, the great uncrafter, and it wants to return creation back to nothingness. The Ancients discovered their servants – artificial beings, not dead nor truly alive – were vulnerable to the Source,” Chandra explained. “Of course not all of them were affected, to my knowledge only one of them actually was, but that was enough to force the Ancients to create a new generation of Guardians. I was the second one. My older brother, the first Guardian of Axeoth, proved too quirky, too unstable. Our father could have destroyed him, but what kind of father can gather the will to kill his own son? Instead he



erased his memory and reduced his powers. In the end, my brother destroyed himself before my father or I could help him.”

I suddenly understood what she was talking about.

“Verhoffin. Verhoffin was your brother.”

She smiled.

“He was. He found a way to use a highly destructive weapon called the Eye of the Storm. It destroyed the Ursanian Empire and created the Sea of Verhoffin in its place. I learned Mysterio and his new ally are actively looking for one of the keys to unlock the Eye of the Storm. There are two keys: one is the Staff of Blue Light. That one is in the hands of the man they call Alamar, and that’s the reason Mysterio wants to capture him.”

“So the other key... it’s this gem? The Eye of Goros?”

“Yes. There are actually two gems, two Eyes. They have one of them. If they bring the two Eyes to the Island of the Ancients, this world will be in grave danger.”

“So what’s the Eye of the Storm exactly? It doesn’t sound like a spell.”

“It’s not a spell. It’s a cannon. A weapon of the Ancients located in orbit of this very planet since the last days of their Great War against the Kreegans. And now it is pointing towards Axeoth.”

## DAY 8

I also learned a lot about the necrolord who had once ruled over this wasteland. Baron Gaius Von Tarkin had once been a noble of the Ursanian Empire. He resisted the decadence of the Empire, preferring to study the ways of magic and the lore of the Ancients. That’s how he came in contact with Verhoffin, Chandra’s brother—and the infamous mad sorcerer who would bring the Empire’s downfall.

Gaius became the student of Verhoffin, learning the secret history of the world and how to control the energies of the magical network called the Wire, harnessing its power to

defy death itself. Yet Verhoffin grew increasingly brooding and unpredictable, his madness becoming every day more evident. Finally Gaius decided to flee the tower of the mad wizard. Some months later, Verhoffin defied the Emperor, and the sea of Verhoffin stands like a scar on the face of the world to remind everyone of what happened next.

Von Tarkin's own estate was destroyed in the Cataclysm, but he took refuge at the court of the Emperor. He soon became the leader of a secret cult devoted to the dark arts. Also during that timeframe, Gaius took the final step and embraced undeath, becoming a Lich whose power would rival the likes of Sandro. Some years later, Emperor Trandis was assassinated, and Gaius fled to the green lands Korresan, which he turned into a wasteland of death and putrefaction.

Five centuries later, Gaius Von Tarkin was destroyed before the gates of Channon by Mysterio the Magnificent, yet his hordes of the dead were still walking, restless. That was strange, and I was beginning to have a bad feeling about this.

## TARNUM

Immortality. Curse or blessing?

To some mortals, eternal life is an attraction so appealing that they'd sacrifice anything to achieve it - that's probably why liches and vampires are so populous. But as I told you several years ago, we genies have an eternity to live with our regrets. In fact, most of my people choose never to interact with short-lived creatures in the first place. Think about it: a misguided action beyond redemption - even just one single great, unreformable failing - haunting you for years, centuries, millennia! Unless you learned to forget, such a burden would surely erode your sanity. But that's the truth of it: to us, eternity is not really a choice.

For whatever reason, I had been pondering this while we drew battle with this Barbarian horde, and still hadn't expelled it from my mind as the fight mounted. That's probably why, against the odds, it didn't come to me as a surprise when I was brought forward to learn the identity of our attacker. The man was a tall, hulking warrior, broad-shouldered and rugged, displaying more than enough scars to cover a human lifetime... several lifetimes at that. And luckily, even though he wasn't immediately recognizable, I knew he was in fact a very old friend.

“Tarnum, the Immortal Hero,” I greeted him, smiling. “I was wondering where you’d been these past few decades! It’s heartening to see a friendly face out here.”

He was solemn, far more so than I remembered him. “Our meeting here is no accident, Solmyr, nor is my attack. I’ve been searching this continent for your Immortal King, and apparently I’m getting close.”

“I am no longer the miserable slave of Gavin Magnus,” I replied. “In fact, we’re working against-”

“I’m aware. I’ve been to Great Arcan. That’s exactly the reason I’m here: if anybody in all the world can destroy Magnus, it is you.”

I was puzzled. “Then we’re on the same side! If you’re aware of our goal, why attack us when Magnus is your enemy?”

“Because he isn’t my enemy,” Tarnum snarled, clearly dismayed. “The Ancestors have instructed me to protect him. They told me to destroy you first!”

## THE IMMORTAL HERO

I knew how to tell when Tarnum approached his goals with conviction, and there had been no heart in his attack - he is at least a thousand years old, and has almost never been defeated in battle. Whatever I had done to offend his Ancestors, he was still reluctant to carry out his orders. It didn’t take much convincing before he ultimately decided to join us in our siege of Jumeirah, though he remained wary of me and outright refused to oppose “Navi Sulman”.

“With Waerjak in a position to control the Tribal Lands alone, I couldn’t turn down the opportunity to embark on another journey. But it’s strange... since their last command, the Ancestors have been completely muted. It’s as if they’ve fallen silent altogether, though it seems I’m still immortal. Something is clearly undecided in the Hall of Judgment, and for now, so am I.”

Without much success, Chandra attempted to explain the same rudimentary concepts to him that she had revealed to me: the role of the Ancients in our history, the truth behind the

Ancestors, the story of Verhoffin. Much as I respect him and know him to be a resourceful and intelligent man, however, it seemed he didn't really trust or believe a word she had to say.

After he and Magnus joined forces long ago to battle the Elemental Lords, I unwisely tried to offer him a gift of a blaster pistol we had hoarded in the Bracadan treasuries. Judging from his... negative reaction back then, I knew he preferred to ignore Ancient technology and everything to do with it - passion versus logic, some would say. Even Professor Marcus Finch's chronicles of his life story reflect this view. He is a Barbarian, after all: a person of tradition.

As Chandra's frustration mounted, I stepped in to summarize her point. "Well, you're probably still the Immortal Hero, but I think it's best that we didn't try to find out."

## THE TRUTH

Almost everybody in the old world had been touched in some way or another by the exploits of the Immortal Hero, and I had personally known Tarnum for several hundred years. He and Magnus had been born in the same era, and both became immortals during that time, albeit in very different circumstances.

Although I still had no idea why Magnus could not be killed, I knew Tarnum's powers stemmed from his link to three Barbarian gods: the Ancestors. According to Chandra, these deities did indeed exist, but were simply "super-advanced artificial intellects" created to guide and maintain the integrity of our world. This didn't matter to Tarnum, and I suppose he may be right.

After all, when the Ancients are involved, what is the difference between magic and technology?

"Not long after I refused Paradise, the Ancestors came to me in a vision for the last time," he elaborated. "Only two were present, and one spoke nothing but meaningless nonsense. The other, Vorr, implored me to seek out the Immortal King and protect him from harm, stating that events have been set into motion and that you must not yet be allowed to impede his progress at any cost."

This was confusing. By all accounts, the Ancestors had perished alongside after Njam the

Meddler's defeat during the Winter of the gods. "Whether Mysterio or Magnus is behind this, I don't know, but you've been manipulated. This sounds like the instability Chandra spoke of, the type of corruption spread by the Source that drove Verhoffin mad."

But she wasn't so certain. "Whatever you want to call them - the Forces of the Dome, or Ancestors, or gods - they can't really be compromised in the same way. After a fashion, Njam himself was the Source: the Forces were developed to embody principles that give Order to the universe, and Chaos is the negation of those principles. If one of the Forces themselves were corrupted, the others would focus on amending the flaw rather than issuing death requests. So if Tarnum is being truthful - and your accounts suggest that he usually is - it seems likely that the Ancestors did indeed want you dead... and Magnus alive."

"But why?"

"I can't even begin to speculate. The only person capable of answering that question is you."

I had dreaded such a reply, because she was absolutely right. Somewhere deep within, I knew exactly why.

## THE DAY OF FIRE

All the Exiled cultures know of the legend of the Fall, the Day of Fire; aside from the Reckoning, it is the most starkly destructive and unforgettable event in our history, even defining Enroth's calendar. Our dirty, unforgivable secret.

Almost twelve hundred years ago, during the Time of Wonders, the Promised Land - Enroth - was blessed with incredible creations and powers, far, far beyond the paltry swords and sorceries we wield today. But all this glory had its price: the Colonial Government, our world's rulers, were entrusted with phenomenal weapons (similar to the Eye of the Storm itself) in case of an invasion from the Kreegans or other enemies from the Void. To ensure that we never strayed from our vigilance, our masters and gods - the Ancients - commanded that only the Government could be permitted to wield these secret armaments.

Of course, one such weapon fell into the hands of bandits, and was summarily confiscated by Alan, the mayor of the southerly land of Aliant. Contrary to common belief, Alan was neither a monster nor a villain: he was simply a man, capable of love and hate, flawed and

ignorant like the rest of us. His daughter Alanna was brutally murdered, and some... idiot in the Government learned the identities of the perpetrators, taking it upon himself to see that justice was done. Mayor Alan received a message accusing his peers, Aliant's elders, of the crime. He arrested and executed one man, but the other four sought sanctuary in the northeastern realm of Vissias. Craving vengeance, Aliant attacked Vissias under Alan's command; his son, Michael, was killed in the ensuing battle.

His grief and hatred prevailed: Alan turned the confiscated weapon on Enroth itself. The ruinous fires of heaven surged forth, utterly wiping Vissias, Aliant and all their inhabitants from the face of the planet. So absolute was the fire of the forbidden artifact that only a scorched, unnatural wasteland remained where it had impacted: the Dragonsand Desert. And 1,175 years later, the rest of the world was similarly marred in the Reckoning.

Until very recently, it was believed that the Day of Fire had appalled the gods so deeply that they simply gave up on our world and its civilizations, electing to abandon us forever to our own folly. Their voices fell silent, the Heavenly Forges died, and might and magic came to triumph over instrumentation. In the end, it was their nemeses - the Kreegans - who enlightened us, explaining that the Silence was mere coincidence - they somehow managed to destroy a Gate Nexus, pivotal to our communication with the Ancients, shortly after Vissias was destroyed. But this fact was of little comfort to us: the damage had been done. We despaired then, and our guilt was absolute.

I am a student of human history, for I have lived through many of the events of the past millennium... but for some reason I was incredibly uncomfortable in dredging up this particular history, and I felt a strange compassion for my former master amidst my usual anger against the man. Just like Mayor Alan, Gavin Magnus was not truly evil, and even though I could never agree that there was any real sanity in his foul plot, I certainly understood what had motivated him to seek out the Rainbow Crystal, to try to banish free will. He probably felt that massacres on this scale are simply too disgraceful to be excused, that we should learn from our mistakes or face the consequences. And when the Reckoning took place, he decided once and for all that such violence should never, ever be repeated.

## SEARCHING FOR A DREAM

Like it or not, I suppose it was inevitable that I would have to confront my past someday, but I always hoped it'd be later rather than sooner. I've never spoken to anyone of the life I

led before Magnus released me from my timeless prison; I'd say that I had lived before the Silence, but always claimed that I just couldn't remember anything from those times. And it was partially true - the fact is that I vowed to forget. It is a skill which takes decades of practice, but anyone can succeed in mastering it if they really need to. Like an amnesiac, there are regions in my mind that simply lie out-of-bounds, deliberately buried.

But why would I need to completely banish my own past from my mind?

I summoned up all my willpower, and unlocked those tarnished memories one by one, day by day. With time, all gradually became clear. Now I understood everything, and immediately regretted it. Remorse deluged into my soul. I was responsible for all of this.

## ATROCITIES

Technically, I have never broken an oath. I fulfilled my vow to serve Magnus for as long as he walked the world - the old world, that is - and some historians might say that my sense of honor is legendary. I do not know. But if there is one certainty in this life, it's that all things come to an end. So, for the sake of Axeoth, I broke a promise to myself for the first time. I delved into the mists of my own past.

They were haunting, violent days better left destroyed in memory... a time of tragedy I had long ago sworn to forget. My youth. But only in remembrance can we learn from our mistakes.

I have been a servant for longer than anyone else is aware. Before humans, dwarves, elves or goblins walked the old world, we genies served the gods, preparing the planet for the arrival of their children. My memories from before the Crossing were fractured and hazy, but I recalled Free Haven, a city of floodlights, of steel and gold and infinite possibilities. One orderly constant in this newfound colony, a wild and chaotic world. A genie is bound by his honor, and I had already made a bold promise, swearing to live forever: to see the end of time.

Magnus had not yet been born... instead, I answered to Padish, the Colonial Governor. There were fewer of us then, and our roles were broader - we had already seen a few wars between splinter groups and "kingdoms" who disagreed over the smallest matters. I served as a general, spy, sorcerer and overseer. This year, I accepted an ambitious duty: recovering the stolen

weapon in Aliant without using force. So, I befriended Alan and his beautiful daughter, earned their trust and that of the town council.

Danger was commonplace here, she knew that; still, Alanna ventured out at night, probably hoping to visit me. I'm still not sure. Elder Theodore, indignant, emerged alone from the council hall as the heated debate within roared on without him. Three streets away, fearful for his life and enraged, he lashed out with a concealed dagger at an approaching hooded figure. Only when she collapsed, silently dying, did he realize his mistake: he had slain the mayor's daughter.

## ADMONISHMENTS

Startled, I included these events in my report to the Government as usual, and - predictably - Padish declined to act. Unusually, though, I refused to take no for an answer. Maybe I had grown disillusioned at humanity, maybe I was overcome by sentiment, but in this particular case I knew I would need to disregard my orders for once and avenge Alanna's pointless death, if only to help myself forget.

Perhaps this too explains why Queen Emilia has made such a deep impression upon me - I was not fully aware until now, but she reminds me of Alanna in so many ways.

I couldn't muster the resolve to speak to Alan in person, so I sent him an anonymous note, explaining that his fellow elders could tell him more. It was the worst move I could possibly have made; he took rash action. As it happened, he executed the right man on the spot, but was convinced that even the other four elders posed a threat. They fled to Vissias, and no Government could have impeded the chain of events which followed. After Michael's death, I watched from afar as Alan stormed into the treasury, where the weapon resided. I trusted him, and did nothing. The man was harrowed by his grief, but surely he wasn't insane enough to activate that mechanism?

Later, when I learned he had indeed done so, I wouldn't have accepted acquittal even if it had been considered. I fully confessed to my failures and threw myself on the Government's mercy. The scorn in the eyes and expressions of my friends and family...

For my defiance, I was imprisoned in the only way a genie can possibly be contained: trapped indefinitely within a magical bottle, to dwell on my crime for eternity. For the sake of sanity,



I made another promise, vowing to bury my own history, to forget my crime and start afresh. Thankfully, even eternity has an ending. When the human King Magnus, a collector and student of Ancient artifacts, obtained this bottle and opened it against the advice of his Viziers... he found a penitent and broken creature so grateful to be free, so eager to serve once again, that he immediately swore lifelong allegiance to the man who had rescued him. And, naturally, that man too was eternal.

## REDEMPTION

Shortly before the Reckoning, when the lords of Bracada and I convinced Magnus to publicly reveal the truth of his long life - that he had ruled Bracada for over a thousand years - I joked with him that he couldn't possibly be condemned: every creature in the world, great or small, hid some sort of secret bursting to be set free. And now I have revealed my part in an event so horrible that I had to convince myself it never took place. Poetic justice!

This is why the Ancestors wanted Tarnum to destroy me. Whether indirect or not, my actions already scarred one world! I'm still a threat, more dangerous even than Magnus!

"No soul is ever beyond redemption, Solmyr. I'm living proof. Believe me, you have nothing to answer for," Tarnum encouraged me.

But there was no redeeming the Day of Fire, not in a thousand years or more. What I wouldn't give to play out those events again, to prevent Alan from ravaging the earth and shaming the world!

But perhaps I can never be redeemed for my part in the old world's pain, and as long as Axeoth remains there will still be a future to look forward to. Regret is selfish, and I'd rather live with it than break another vow. So I'm burying the past once again and concentrating on the Eye of Goros.

Maybe if I can prevent the Eye of the Storm from being activated, I can truly begin to put all of this behind me.

## JUMEIRAH

We had survived the perils of Korresan, braved the Megadragons, tackled our own histories and now faced Jumeirah, the capital of Qassar. As surely as the sun beat down upon my face, I didn't look forward to tearing down these beautiful walls. The city's splendor was beyond what we'd expected - though it was no longer home to his palace, Mysterio clearly held a lingering fondness for his former headquarters. I just hoped he didn't cherish it too deeply, because little of it would remain when we were through with the place.

"Luckily, it's an excellent time for a siege. In the absence of any real commanders, they've put some hot-tempered young librarian in charge of the city's defense. I've never even heard of the fellow, but rumor has it that he was an historian from Great Arcan who convinced Mysterio to take him on as an apprentice during his visit. He spent several months in Rylos, but was considered too irritating to stay and was quickly exiled to this place."

"Well, this tale-spinner will soon learn the difference between his books and the real world. History isn't such an appealing subject when it arrives on your doorstep with an army and a catapult," Tarnum quipped.

"And will history continue to stand with us when our mission here is accomplished, or are you still undecided?" I pressed him.

"I am. As you know, I've never trusted Magnus - I've known of his sense of avarice even longer than you have, and probably loathe it more. He just seems... inhuman. On the other hand, you're even more human than I am, Solmyr! I'll help you reclaim this Eye, but I'm not ready to completely abandon the Ancestors' task. I need to think on this. And anyway, why would you even need my help?"

"Because our own... my own disgusting failures are repeating themselves here on Axeoth, that's why. What if Axeoth is destroyed? Will the Ancients send down more portals, carry us to another unspoiled world to corrupt with our irredeemable ignorance?"

I was annoyed that the Immortal Hero failed to appreciate the seriousness of our situation, but Chandra was ambivalent. "You couldn't possibly have compelled him to join us? Clichéd as it is, the fate of the world is at stake!"

“Actions may speak louder than words, Solmyr, but a Guardian’s voice holds more power than her hand. You know as well as I do that Tarnum must be convinced, not forced. Like you, he is a creature bound by his honor. He will decide for himself, come to the right conclusion and join us in our fight.”

“But by then his help may be too little, too late.”

Chandra smirked, knowingly. But the question remained. Why was Magnus’ alliance with Mysterio considered so imperative? What good was he trying to do the world?

## QASAR CAPTURED

Qasar was under our control, and Mysterio would never forgive us for that. I asked Chandra what she was looking for in this place. She didn’t answer, but instead took me to a sepulcher behind the city. She opened a certain tomb. A body was laying in it, wearing old Ursanian garments.

Von Tarkin.

But what was Von Tarkin’s body doing here, of all places? Chandra had an answer:

“Because that’s the last place someone would come looking for it. In the lion’s den.”

She opened the mouth of the corpse and produced a small blue gem.

“That’s the Eye of Goros? It was in Qasar all along? But how...?”

“My last gamble. When I understood Channon was lost, I had to put the Eye somewhere safe, so I thought of a place where nobody would look. And I knew he would hide the body somewhere no one would think of. It had to be Qasar.

“But why would Mysterio hide the body of Von Tarkin? I don’t understand...”

“What you see is a body. You think it is Von Tarkin because it is dressed like him.”



Alamar (Archibald)

And then I understood. I felt all heat leave my body as I slowly realized who had been buried under Qasar all those years.

“So Channon...

“Yes. Since my defeat, the Kingdom of Life has been under the rule of Gaius Von Tarkin. Mysterio, the arrogant fool, was no match for him. But Von Tarkin was weakened nonetheless, and he knew the other nations would never tolerate a necrolord with so much power in his hands. He had to hide, assume another identity, until his plans came to fruition. So Gaius Von Tarkin became Mysterio. People close to the real Mysterio, who began suspect he was not himself, were sent to Orilios one by one.”

I felt as if I had been hit with a mace. My head was spinning.

“What can we do?”

“I’m going to the Island of the Ancients to activate its defences. You need to gather your allies and destroy Von Tarkin’s Kingdom of Death.”

“My allies?”

“You know who I am talking about.”

Indeed I knew. It was time to ask my old friend “Alamar” for his help. After all, if you want to take down a necrolord, you need another at least as powerful. And what necromancer was stronger than Archibald Ironfist?

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE WINDS OF DEATH

*Mysterio the Magnificent has been dead for years, and it turns out Baron Von Tarkin is in fact ruling in his guise. Solmyr is now leading an army against the Kingdom of Life to free Channon from the sinister necrolord.*

### DAY 1

The implications of what I had learned made my head spin. Mysterio was dead, and Von Tarkin had assumed his identity to rule over Channon. He was using the resources of the Kingdom of Life to locate the Island of the Ancients—it was one of the metal towers that allowed the Ancients to communicate with their own kind on the other side of space. With the Eye of Goros, Von Tarkin could take control of an orbital weapon of the Ancients, the Eye of the Storm, and obliterate all life from the surface of the planet.

Only one piece was missing: the role of Magnus in this plan. Magnus had to know Mysterio was not what he seemed to be. Why had he chosen to ally with him? Was Magnus mad enough to wish the end of all that lived? No. There was something else. Magnus was using Von Tarkin for his own ends, certainly planning to outsmart him at the last moment. In his hubris, Magnus had played a very dangerous hand, and I was now forced to clean up his mess.

It will be the last time. Emilia, my dear Queen, that's a promise I make to you.

It was time for me to play a dangerous gamble of my own. To face the alliance of a wizard and a necrolord, I needed a necromancer of my own. So I called Alamar. It was time to see if the man I knew as Archibald Ironfist had truly changed.

### DAY 2

Ironfist came, and he didn't come alone. He brought armies, both dead and living, the whole host of the Church of Equilibris, wizards from Uludin, knights from Framon. I was more than surprised to discover the Framians were led by none other than Nicolai Ironfist, Archibald's nephew. Nicolai had also brought his wife, a beautiful sorceress called Alita. She

reminded me of Emilia. Apparently, Nicolai had found out quite a long time ago Alamar was none other than his uncle, but chose to forgive him for his past deeds only recently.

“We finally made our peace,” Archibald said. “And I’m happy to see the Ironfists will have a bright future.”

“Once you were waging a secret war against my former master Gavin Magnus, now I ask you to assist me in an open war against him and his allies. It seems all the roles have been inverted.

“And once you were a spy and diplomat, now you’re a general ready to do what it takes. The Reckoning changed all of us, Solmyr. For better, for worse...maybe it simply helped us find our true selves.”

I didn’t think of it that way.

“Maybe. We need to work together to bring down Von Tarkin and Magnus before it’s too late. The Guardian of this world, Chandra, felt I could trust you. I hope she was right.”

“And I hope she was right in assuming we could indeed stop the two of them.” He laughed. I briefly caught a glimpse of the evil Archibald of the past, and couldn’t help but shiver.

“I don’t see your goblin bodyguard,” I noted.

“Oh yes, good lieutenant Kalech. I sent him to scout the defences of Channon. Von Tarkin knows we’re on to him. He’ll be ready.”

I took a deep breath.

“So will we.”



Mysterio the Magnificent



## DAY 7

The goblin Archibald called Lieutenant Kalech finally returned, with quite a story to tell. According to his testimony, he had fallen into a trap, battled hundreds of vampires with only a knife, managed to escape by riding a ghost dragon, and so on. Archibald translated his fabricated boasting for the rest of us:

“There are four generals leading the undead armies of Channon. They call themselves the Horsemen of Doom: the Lords of Famine, Pestilence, Madness and War. We’ll need to defeat them before we can besiege the city.”

### THE FOUR HORSEMEN DEFEATED

It is only when the four Horsemen were defeated that it struck me: they were the rivals of Von Tarkin during the War of the Five. The Lord of Pestilence, a ghastly elf with no eyes, had to be the ranger Erutan Revol of Arbor’al. The Lord of War, a bulky man with a hole in his head, had once been Mongo the barbarian warlord. The Lord of Madness could only have been Mad King Maticus from Orilios: he looked much like his portrait in the castle of the wardens on that cursed island. The Lord of Famine was the only one I could not identify, but he was sporting old Ursanian armor, so he had to be some old foe of Von Tarkin’s from the days of the Empire.

Anyway, now they were put to rest for good, and the time had come to attack the city of Rylos itself. Like Vissias on Enroth aeons before, the Kingdom of Channon would be purged... but in the name of Life this time.

### CHANNON FALLS

Channon had fallen, and the realm was at last freed from the vicious necrolord’s rule. But Von Tarkin and Magnus were nowhere to be found. In Von Tarkin’s study, I found many maps of Axeoth, with many coordinates and calculations. One location was circled: an archipelago south of the sea of Verhoffin.

They had found the Island of the Ancients.

# FINAL CHAPTER:

## THE ARCHIPELAGO OF THE ANCIENTS

*Von Tarkin and Gavin Magnus, uncommon allies, have found the location of the Island of the Ancients and managed to trap Chandra in a stasis field. It's up to Solmyr and Archibald Ironfist to stop them from re-activating the orbital weapon called the Eye of the Storm.*

### DAY 1

We left Nicolai and Alita to rebuild Channon, and are now sailing to the Island of the Ancients. I'm afraid we won't be coming back alive—last night we saw a column of light ascending to the sky. It can only mean someone reactivated the Tower of the Ancients. I can only hope it's Chandra, but as the saying goes: hope for the best but prepare for the worst.

I'm putting my diaries in an enchanted bottle and giving it to my friends the water elementals in case something should happen to me. If you find these journals, I ask you humbly to bring them to Queen Emilia Nighthaven of Great Arcan. She must know how far I went, and be ready to continue the fight in my stead if we can't stop Von Tarkin and Magnus.

I know all of this is the result of my own weakness. I must now face the Eye of the Storm and put an end to this madness once and for all.

With all my loyalty and my love,

Solmyr ibn wali Barad

### DAY 2

(Notes from Solmyr)

It's worse than we thought. Von Tarkin and Magnus are now controlling the Eye of the Storm. It struck several leagues west of us, with diminished power, yet the tidal wave was enough to send our ships straight into the reefs. Many died, drowning. Archibald and I



Sandro

survived. I still have the small, black cube Nicolai gave me before we embarked. He told me it was a lucky charm that was given to him by a dwarf friend, and that he felt it was my turn to have it.

Lucky charm indeed!

We're on a small island south of the Island of the Ancients. We'll need to raise an army from the bodies of our dead soldiers and sailors, discover what happened to Chandra and find a way to stop Von Tarkin and Magnus once and for all.

## DAY 5

Some hope in the darkness, at last. Lieutenant Kalech came back with great news (and I'm not talking about how, according to him, he single-handedly defeated a giant crystal whale). Magnus and Von Tarkin are fighting each other for control of the tower. Looks like the alliance is over now that they think their enemies are at the bottom of the ocean!

There are two strongholds on the Island of the Ancients: the Tower itself and some sort of Complex. Magnus retreated into the Complex. Kalech also told us he saw a woman in some sort of magical cell. It has to be Chandra. We must find a way to free her.

Von Tarkin however is occupying the Tower with his armies of undead, as well as what Kalech described as metal flying objects, shooting rays of fire that "leave no bodies behind". Archibald says he saw things like that before: they are called Terminators, mechanical servants of the Ancients created to guard their secrets. Von Tarkin somehow managed to make them serve him. We're not powerful enough to face him yet.

## HEIRS OF THE DEAD

It soon became clear we would never be able to defeat Magnus and Von Tarkin without some help. Our enemies had had all the time they needed to fortify their bases on the islands of the Archipelago, while our own forces had been severely diminished by the shockwave of the Eye of the Storm. We were foolish to believe we could triumph alone.

But we were not alone.

I had called upon some old friends who owed me a couple of favors, and Ironfist too had some powerful allies. Like a ray of light in the desperate night, the reinforcements arrived at last. The first to arrive were my newfound allies from across Rysh, bringing with them caches from Orilios, Uludin and Channon, along with the prayers and hopes of the people I had liberated throughout my journeys. Adama, the people of Channon, the Qassari - each contributed.

In turn, none of the emissaries I had dispatched to Great Arcan, Etendar, Chedian and even the Pirate Kingdom returned empty handed; I received resources and unexpected pledges of support from old friends and enemies alike. I hadn't been optimistic, and it warmed my heart to see all Axeoth and the Exiled united, temporarily, under a common cause. Perhaps we had redeemed ourselves at last...

Only Tariq, the messenger I dispatched to the Tribal Lands, failed to respond immediately. But to my delight and relief, it turned out that Tarnum had finally made up his mind, choosing to forsake the Ancestors' quest and trust in my leadership as Chandra had predicted. Together, it was possible we'd learn the necessity for the Immortal King's survival, but one thing was definite - his counterpart, the Immortal Hero, would fight under our banner.

Then we learned who Archibald had called. We first felt suspicious when we recognized the color of the arriving ships. A black flag marked with a gold skull - the sigil of the Necromancers' Guild.

His powers had been diminished by his past defeats, yet I could still sense how formidable an opponent the newcomer was. As powerful and dangerous as he may have been, he still, for some reason known only to him, recognized Ironfist as his rightful lord.

Sandro.

To say our new allies were not overjoyed at the idea of fighting alongside this rancorous lich is an understatement. Even I had lost dear friends throughout the years who faced him in battle, thwarting his evil plans for world domination. We could only hope Ironfist knew what he was doing and that Sandro's loyalty to him was not feigned.

I remembered the former king of Nekross, Gauldoth, had once tried to convince me Sandro had learned his lesson from his past failures.

Deep in my heart, that's exactly what I was afraid of.

## FACE TO FACE WITH MAGNUS

Finally, I found myself facing Gavin Magnus in battle. He was surprised to see me here, but didn't try to charm me with sweet words. We were both way past that. We both knew one of us would never leave the Island of the Ancients.

"You shouldn't have come here, my old friend, you may have lived a bit longer," Magnus hissed, arrogant and full of venom.

"What are you trying to do, Gavin? Why ally yourself with Von Tarkin? What do you plan to do with the Eye of the Storm?"

"Von Tarkin is a fool. He needed my help, my knowledge of the Ancient technology. Thanks to me, we could reactivate the tower without the Staff of Blue Light. We can't use the weapon to its full power yet, but since you're here, it's only a matter of time before we defeat my old nemesis Archibald Ironfist and seize the Staff."

"But what are you trying to achieve, Magnus?"

"Von Tarkin has been fascinated with the power of the Eye for centuries, wishing to use it to destroy all life. But I won't use it that way. I'll use the threat of the Eye, the fear of its power, as a way to prevent wars and evil. There will finally be peace on this world, as people won't dare fight each other unless they want to know a new Day of Fire."

There was only one way to answer that.

"Magnus, I'm sorry to see you're completely insane. There's no way to bring you back from where you're standing now. You give me no other choice than to destroy you once and for all.

"You're welcome to try, my friend. But even if you kill me, I'll come back to life. I am free from the cycle of life and death. I am the equal of the Ancients – better than that, I am the new crafter of worlds! And as an example of my new power, I'll start by destroying the city of Arkania and your lovely queen. Then everybody will know of Gavin Magnus, the God of Peace!"

## MAGNUS DEFEATED

I defeated Magnus, but he won't stay dead for long. I must find a way to kill him, or incapacitate him for good. Chandra is the key. I must take the Complex and free her.

## COMPLEX CAPTURED

I found Chandra floating in the air, eyes wide open, behind some sort of force field. It was like she had been frozen in the middle of something. I needed to find a way to free her. Then I noticed a small, square-shaped hole on the field's control panel...

Could it be...?

I put the black cube in the small hole. It disappeared with a noise, like a musical note. The stasis field instantly dissolved and Chandra came back to consciousness.

"Thank you Solmyr. I was caught stupidly – Von Tarkin had something I didn't suspect he had. I knew he had one of the Eyes of Goros, but I would have never thought he also had the hand of a Guardian – my brother's hand. He kept Verhoffin's hand with him all this time, and used it to activate the stasis field!"

An idea was starting to grow in my mind.

"How does it work?"

"When no special instruction is given, the stasis field can be opened by any Cube of power, like the one you had. If a Guardian orders it, the stasis field can stay locked for any number of years, even centuries, even eternity. A Guardian's voice holds more power than his hand, as long as he holds one of the Eyes of Goros."

I had a plan. When Magnus came back, we would be ready for him.

## FINAL BATTLE WITH MAGNUS

We fought the best we could, but we were tired from the previous battles while Magnus was not. When we thought we were about to win, he sent us aside with a single spell. We were broken, and his triumph was total. Or so he believed.

“Even the Guardian can do nothing against me. She’s so weak. So human. I’m so far superior to her, in every way. I’m an immortal. I have been chosen...”

Chandra laughed mercilessly.

“Immortal? Chosen? Do you even know where your immortality comes from? A corruption in the Dome. An error in the processing of your soul. You can’t die because Heaven regurgitates you like a piece of rotten meat. You are nothing more than... a bug!”

Magnus became enraged by Chandra’s taunting, and his anger made him careless. I summoned a powerful wind spell, the most powerful I could. Magnus was cast away... right in the middle of the stasis field.

“Now!” I shouted.

Magnus immediately understood and was back on his feet, rushing out of the field, but it was too late. Chandra spoke.

“Stasis Field activated. Duration: eternity.”

Several centuries ago, I was freed from a lamp by a man I then called my master and my friend. And now I was looking into the eyes of this man, forever trapped in a stasis field that only a Guardian could open. And in those eyes, I could read the final fear of an immortal. The fear of death.

Cold tears rolled down my cheeks.

“Farewell, Gavin. Farewell, my friend.”



## BATTLE WITH VON TARKIN

Von Tarkin attacked us with his legions of the undead, and we barely managed to repel him. Archibald hit him with a powerful spell, shredding his face to pieces. The beautiful features of Mysterio the Magnificent were now hideously disfigured. Von Tarkin ripped his flesh away like the mask it was, revealing the terrifying face of death beneath: a skull with two small fires burning in its sockets, burning with pure hatred against everything that lived.

He'll come back. And this time, he'll bring the Terminators.

## FINAL BATTLE WITH VON TARKIN

We fought Von Tarkin's Terminators, but it was clear we didn't stand a chance against the machines. Kalech had been right: the ray of those things could destroy you, leaving behind nothing more than a cloud of ashes.

"Pitiful mortals," the Lich said. "You cannot fight against the Source. The Source commands the end of all living things. Soon I'll harness the full power of the orbital weapon and erase all life from this chaotic universe."

He rose his staff high in the air, and I saw it: the skeletal hand of Verhoffin, holding the Eye of Goros.

"Terminators! Eradicate the living things!"

An ominous red light started moving left to right on the front of the machines, as they scanned the area for their victims. They advanced on us with a buzzing sound. Then Chandra shouted:

"Counter-order!"

The machines stopped. A weird, mechanical voice announced:

*"Voice recognition positive. Guardian identified. Waiting for your orders, master."*

“What? How can it be? Attack, Terminators!” Von Tarkin was frantic, finally understanding he had made a mistake by bringing the Terminators to the battlefield. The machines ignored him.

“My brother taught you well, Gaius, but he wasn’t stupid. He kept one piece of information from you, knowing you would turn against him sooner or later.”

Chandra started walking towards Von Tarkin. She walked past the Terminators, and they turned to follow her. Von Tarkin watched her come. He knew he was done for. There was nowhere to run.

“A Guardian’s voice holds more power than his hand, Gaius,” Chandra said, clutching her own Eye of Goros in her fist. “Terminators, eradicate the Lich.”

And they did. With a high pitched scream of despair, Baron Gaius Von Tarkin was reduced to a pile of white dust.

Magnus was locked in stasis for all eternity, and Von Tarkin had been destroyed forever. It was over. At last.

Then I remembered Archibald. While nobody was paying attention to him, he had gone to the tower of the Ancients, with the Staff of Blue Light!

## ANOTHER TURN OF THE PAGE

I found Archibald in the topmost room of the Metal Tower, the Staff in his hands. This chamber had been secured even against the Guardians - the very reason why the Ancestors had needed my master to reach these islands uninterrupted at all costs, I finally realized with gravity. If he hadn’t escaped, if I had defeated him any earlier, it would’ve never been rediscovered.

With Mysterio dead, Magnus was the only living being in Axeoth with the knowledge, expertise and sheer driving greed to unlock it. The devices here tapped directly into the Wire. Here, a fallible man could instill himself with immortality - a goal Mysterio had pursued, and eventually died for. But Von Tarkin, obsessed with the power of the Eye, somehow overlooked this place.

And now Archibald was standing in front of a large console. I readied my spells. He saw me and smiled.

“No need for drama, Solmyr; I’m not interested in the Eye of the Storm, nor eternal life. I never have been.”

Above him, a ghostly representation of what I guessed was the orbital weapon was spinning. The letters S.T.O.R.M. floated next to it. Archibald pressed something on his console, and the vision was replaced by countless spheres.

Not spheres, but worlds. Dozens, hundreds of worlds floating in the Spinward Rim.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

There was a circular hole in the console; Archibald inserted the Staff of Blue Light. It entered perfectly. Blue veins appeared on the staff, converging at the mystifying gem on its crown. It burned brightly, shooting rays of its azul light all over the room. I noticed, on the planetarium above, blue lines now stemmed from one of the planets, expanding and interconnecting with the other globes around it. I later learned that everyone on the planet could see the lines in the sky.

The Magister Alamar stepped back and contemplated his work.

“Haven’t you guessed already?”

I certainly had. The world would change forever after that. And not only this world, but all the others. I watched on with a mixture of fear and awe as the planets danced above me.

On the giant screen, a silhouette appeared. It was still blurred, and I couldn’t quite see who or what it was. But it spoke.

“We are the Ancients...”

Archibald had ended the Silence.

*So ends “Heirs of the Dead”, the fourth and last book of the Legends of the Ancients.  
But there are still stories to be told...*

# THE WORLDCRAFTERS

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*There are still stories to be told...*

