

'CANDLEJACK! Book One: Cardinal of Fate'
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Revised Edition

This book is dedicated to my mother and father, for without whom their sacrifices to bring me into this world to be able to write this book would not be possible.

I would also like to thank several people and friends I've met along the way in life that gave me inspiration to move on with this project: Josh Vickery, George Dow, Bob Shaw, Will Brashears, my siblings, my nieces, nephews, co-workers and many others, spiritual and physical, are too numerous to mention here. Thank you all.

*

“...If one were to interpret the essence of 'CandleJack!', one has to see beyond the veil of our human existence, to the moment the spark of our spiritual light within all of us becomes what we truly seek. As we are the albatross of our worldly lessons above and below, so we fly with and within it along with brother wind and sister sky...”

- Jeffrey Anthony Campos, 2013 -

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Lieutenant Berwyck - part Nombus albatross / part Phyorcthorian hawk, brother of Rigor, of King Orachon's Elite Guard of the Kingdom of Yarrow, friend of Lord Cellus

Cardinal Rigor Mortis - Phyorcthorian hawk, Cardinal of the Kingdom of Yarrow, brother of Berwyck

Xucca - Nombus albatross, mate of Larco, Rigor and Berwyck's mother

Lieutenant Kaeleos - Phyorcthorian hawk of King Orachon's Elite Guard, General Daellon's adopted son, surrogate father to Rigor and Berwyck

General Daellon - Phyorcthorian hawk, Captain of King Orachon's Elite Guard of the Kingdom of Yarrow, surrogate father of Kaeleos

Larco - Phyorcthorian hawk, Xucca's mate, Rigor and Berwyck's 'true' father, of King Orachon's Elite Guard, (...mysteriously went missing from Elite Guard some time ago...)

Seros - Soldier / Warrior of King Orachon's Elite Guard, raccoon, father of Lespar

Belnapp - weasel, master thief, King Orachon's Elite Guard Scout, Head Squire of the Royal Stables of the Kingdom of Yarrow

Chancellor Gareruff - hare, Cardinal Rigor Mortis's Personal Secretary and Chancellor of Yarrow

King Orachon - Phyrorthorian hawk of the Kingdom of Yarrow, son of King Orax

King Orax The Kindred - deceased Phyrorthorian hawk of the Kingdom of Yarrow, father of Orachon

Callas The Innkeeper - Phyrorthorian Hawk, caretaker of the inn at Yarrow

King Aegolth - Syorthian hawk of the Kingdom of Tyral, son of King Adrid

King Adrid The Intrepid - deceased Syorthian hawk of the Kingdom of Tyral, father of Aegolth

General Metgare - Syorthian hawk, Captain of King Aegolth's Elite Guard of the Kingdom of Tyral, brother of Fedrox

Lieutenant Fedrox - Syorthian hawk of Tyral's Elite Guard, bard, brother of General Metgare

Seignoir Lord Nordellan - Pymra eagle, Head Magistrate of the Consul of Aviatyre, historian

Seignoir Lord Cellus - lynx, Assistant Magistrate on the Consul of Aviatyre, friend of Berwyck

Seignoir Lord Draemer - Pymra eagle, Assistant Magistrate on the Consul of Aviatyre, assistant historian

Seignoir Lord Anisalsa - elder Consul of Aviatyre member, half human, half armadillo-like creature

Captain Trelayne - pure white, albino Phyrorthorian hawk, Captain of the Guard at Castle Grimoire

Lespar - Raccoon, deceased childhood friend of Rigor Mortis

Farris - Dark Magic Sorcerer, Bat-Faced Gryphon, Leader of the Gryphon

Jarduche - Leader of the Gargoyle

Razantrope - 'spirit guardian' of the temple of Chalynn, (a.k.a. 'Larco')

King Segwyrn - king of the island of Haebrugg

Jeff 'Jean Pierre' Castleberry - freshman (transfer student at Brunn Academy, friends call him 'J.P.' for short, has an artistic flair with mechanical pencil, friend of Chuck 'Havoc' Ravick

Hal Castleberry - father of Jeff, architect at Conley & Griff

Jocelyn 'Aubrie' Castleberry - mother of Jeff, homemaker

Sheila Corvo - sophomore year at Brunn Academy, student DJ at B.R.R.N, the radio station at Brunn

Academy, friend of J.P., loves anything to do with adventure and mystery

Chuck 'Havoc' Ravick - J.P.'s best friend and (part time!) freshman student at Brunn Academy. Digs fast cars, hot chicks and dabbles in pencil art in that he is 'very gifted' in mostly drawing 'monsters'

Lisa Drummond - neon blue haired girlfriend of Chuck Ravick, freshman college student at Brunn Academy

Kurt M. Fenlow, III - senior year at Brunn Academy, Phi Beta Kappa honor student who has fun at trying to 'ruin' anyone's reputation. Big ego and full of hot air most of the time. Son of multi-billionaire Richard Fenlow, II.

Max 'Tiger' Neutermann - loud-mouthed neighbor of Jean Pierre. Big, tough guy, kind of a bully. Enjoys WWF wrestling.

Mandy 'Mandela' Patterson - grocery market worker and gifted 'seer' that also teaches the intuitive arts.

Helga Geist - mysterious woman with many psychic gifts. Landlady of the apartment where Mandy Patterson resides

Doug Tressler - store manager of Tressler's Market

Professor Roy McMullin - science professor at Brunn Academy

...and a cast of anthropomorphic fur suited furies of the furry fandom...

Prologue

A look of concern arose over Xucca's face, seeing the dark sky open up unveiling nature's wrath upon her small family of Nombus albatross. Where there was once brilliant sunshine, gentle gilded waves and warm ocean breezes ruffling their wet feathers during a fishing lesson, all vanishing in an instant. A vast plane of cold, angry sea with its stinging winds growing stronger, moment by moment. Around Xucca's neck, a mysterious rectangular medallion of unknown origin swaying between her layers of feathers. Embossed in its center, an image of a candle within a heart surrounded by a silhouette of an albatross and hawk's heads. Beveled edges inlaid along each of the four sides, framing the central images, completing the piece. It was a gift of a bond, a promise of an eternal love between two cultures. A gift given by one whom now was not present at her family's hour of need.

Just then, all became quiet and still around Xucca; everything bathing in a palate of brilliant white light for a few moments. Within the palate, seemingly coming out of nowhere, bits of color begin to appear, transforming into tangible shapes and images.

She was back on Nombus in the brilliant sunshine. The sky perfectly clear and blue as far as one could see. The horizon on a vast, flat plane of land seemingly having no end in nearly all directions. Sitting in a meadow with a small pond near some flowers, one could see the mountainous ice walls of Nombus in the far distance towering over the plane. She could hear the sounds coming from the harvest fair on the other side of the pond. And now, sitting here with the one whom she loved and

whom loved her. His profile, blurry at first, then coming into view.

A gentle voice reminded her of their union as he began reading the words etched on the back of the medallion.

"If ever we may part, our bond shall let nothing come between our eternal love for one another."

Her lover began gently placing the medallion around her neck as he spoke. With the medallion around her neck, they smiled at one another; his wings starting to surround hers. Moving closer to embrace each other just as a void of darkness rapidly overcame the vision...

A rogue typhoon appearing from the surrounding darkness began enveloping them into its swirling dark, mysterious labyrinth. Quickly gathering against a half-arched, segregate breaker for protection; all three began huddling close together. Xucca shielding her two brood beneath her gray wings from the tenacious ocean storm quickly reaching its zenith. Her feathery contour washing away with every brutal spray. At times, the treacherous spray delivering whiplashing surges of water, nearly knocking the Nombus albatross off the weathered rocky slab with deadly frequency. A constant, chaotic, choking cataclysm of rolling darkness impeding any known escape. Unyielding gale force winds hurling crescent blue shears of lightning across a swirling pastel gray sky. Each deafening crack of thunder seeming to enhance the massive, monstrous walls of surf that would certainly perish the weak, threatening to take them under at anytime. For they would all surrender to an ominous watery grave once her last ounce of strength gave out. Bravely fighting against an onslaught of waves; Xucca now focusing on concentrating covering and protecting her brood from the elements. Panic now beginning to hold a nightmarish core of losing her children at any moment just as the earlier vision of another began reappearing in front of her eyes. The loss of her mate close to her heart and children was there one moment, then suddenly gone...

"Stay close, my children, stay close!" she began to cry loudly to her brood against the noise of the crashing waves, all three gathering close together. Their eyelids shutting tightly against the rhythmic onslaught of wave after wave, seeping to break apart their physical presence and existence as a whole. Panic now holding both siblings of what was happening around them as they held on to their mother for dear life. The oldest sibling having a brief, yet blurry vision of seeing his mother with another; a close and loving spirit suddenly vanishing with another surge of water hitting hard and fast...

Chapter I

the fear of rescue

On the opposite side of the island, the armored profile of a Phyrorcthorian hawk and Elite Guard from the idyllic kingdom of Yarrow flew high above the treeline of Ornathys's landscape; the sun casting his large, winged shadow over the terrain. His black feathers highlighted by silver streaks along their edges. His breastplate embossed with the word 'ORACHON', the name of the ruler of the kingdom of Yarrow. A spear strapped next to a large cross-lined rucksack hung from his tunic belt. Anthropomorphic in nature, being part human and part hawk, he retained attributes from both species. He had given many seasons in service to the kingdom from his start as an orphaned youth, a result of the Great Conflict involving wars of different cultures and lands. Kaeleos was raised as a surrogate son by the general in command of Yarrow's Elite Guard. General Metgare, also a Phyrorcthorian hawk having tragically lost his own family to an avalanche, took in and raised the young orphaned Kaeleos to his present stature as a lieutenant in service to King Orachon.

Kaeleos had been airborne flying inland and along Ornathys's white sandy shores for many hours in search of a weasel, one Belnapp the Master Thief. Dressed as a poor peddler in a old, worn tunic with a winter coat and a feather in his cap, Belnapp made his living as a thieving weasel pilfering from those with what goods and wares he needed to survive on the island of Ornathys. He would venture between Ornathys's two island kingdoms for his daily plunder and hide amongst the terrain of Gryth Wood; a large, dense and dangerous forest that ran almost the entire length of the island. Belnapp's tale of becoming a thief began when he was a young orphan. He learned to survive on his own by sneaking into the kingdoms on peddler's carts, hiding himself under the cloths that covered the peddler's wares. Once inside a kingdom, Belnapp would rummage through the different shops at night when all were asleep. Just before the light of dawn, he would then sneak back upon another peddler's cart, hiding his tracks of his pilfered loot from the villagers, leaving them scratching their heads on their missing food and wares.

Belnapp's recent trail of thievery was very difficult for Kaeleos to trace in the dense tropical terrain from the air. Word of Belnapp's crime was passing from village peddler to village peddler traveling between the kingdoms about this same weasel. A weasel whom had just pocketed King Aegolth's treasure off of a traveling bard upon an evening's visit to The Iron Crow; a very seedy and sinister tavern within the kingdom of Tyral where no good ever comes. That particular evening at the Iron Crow, Belnapp had been engaging in a congenial conversation of food and drink with that same bard. Fedrox was working on finishing off his fifth tankard; the sudsy, sloshing brew dripping onto the wooden bar plank with Fedrox's every movement of his drunken swagger. Between balancing his gregarious girth against the vertigo of his lightheadedness became a challenge for Fedrox as he tried to remain still on the narrow, one-legged wooden stool. Precariously balancing himself, Fedrox's words stumbled along half-halfheartedly as he conversed with Belnapp; his grogginess slurring his speech.

"Whenz eyez whuz justs a wheeze lahhdh," said Fedrox, occasionally stammering his words between gulps of ale, "I journeyedz as a young skiffs aboard King Aegolth's ship durings the trade routes to the outer islands. Whenz wheeze usedz to visits the Isle of Haebrugg to drop offs and picks ups supplies, eyed useds to sneaks awayz to ventures off to the Temple of Chalynnz."

"Really?" Belnapp returned, "You must've been pretty brave to venture to the temple alone. Legend has it from the natives that the temple contains 'wild magick'."

Fedrox's eyes widened that moment.

"Sure, eyez wuz braves enuff to go there!...though, me brother forbade me to even go nearz the temple. He wuz afraid that I woodz awaken the deities and spirit guardian that protects the grounds the temple stood on," as Fedrox took another swig of ale.

"Did you ever go inside the temple? I mean, did you see any 'deities' around there?" Belnapp suggested, taking a small sip of ale.

"No, but onez timez somethings strange did happen," as Fedrox motioned Belnapp to move closer to hear him. "Most of the timez, eyed vizits the temple wuz in the daytime. But on one sojourn, the crew stayed overnight on the island. Eyez wuz about ready to goes asleep in my hut when through the window I notices a strange flickering light coming from the temple in the distance. It got me curious, so I gets up to go see what the light wuz about. It...the light...seemed to float in mid air. So eyez lit a torch and decides to heads up the mountainside to the temple myselfs for a closer looks," Fedrox groggily

recalled, almost losing his balance on the stool.

"What did you see when you got there?"

"Well, when I finally reached there, the strange light had disappeared. But I felt...something. Like I wuz beings watched by someones or 'somethings' as I got closer to the temple."

"Watched? By whom?"

Fedrox's eyes suddenly paled as he recounted the event. His face appearing blank in thought, pausing a moment to belch before he spoke.

"Yeah, watched. I dunno who, but it felt more likes a 'what' than a 'who'. I couldn't see it. It was pitch black. But I rememberz that it was a warm night too. But when eyez arrived, I felt very cold. I couldn't help feeling so cold. Even the torch light seemed to want to go out by itself, but there was no wind blowing. Then, as eyez walked up the steps to the temple, I hearz a voice."

"A voice?" Belnapp asked, looking at Fedrox in awe of what he was hearing.

Fedrox's voice became a gasping whisper as he spoke slower.

"It was like a deep, rolling, cavernous voice. Sounded like a demon. A demon in pain." Fedrox's glossy eyes focused on Belnapp's eyes as he slowly related, "And the voice called to me, calling to me to enter inside. I felt like running away at first, but then something overcame me. I felt something. Something like a shadowy creature coaxing me onward. I couldn't see it, but I felt it. I felt it at first in my mind...like it was talking to me...and then it took me by my arm..."

There was a pause as Fedrox stared down at his arm.

"What happened?"

"I dunno. I...I felt very, very strange. Like I was someone or something else. I was inside that temple. And I was...chanting."

"Chanting?"

"Yeah. Strange words I had never heard before. A tongue or dialect I had...never...heard...of..."

Before he could finish, Fedrox was out like a light, snoring loudly; his head falling onto the bar top with a solid thud. Inconspicuously, during their conversation, Belnapp retrieved a cream colored felt pouch containing several valuable precious stones from a rucksack inside the bard's large surcoat pocket, quickly hiding it within a worn chemise pocket sewn onto his tunic belt. Now it was bad enough that political tensions had been rising to a head between the island's two kingdoms, Yarrow and Tyral, in the midst of another impending war over land disputes. Unknowingly, Belnapp had instigated the situation further since the bard, Fedrox, was brother to General Metgare, a Syorthian hawk and Head Commander of King Aegolth's Elite Guard of Tyral. Sporting an imposing girth, Fedrox was no stranger to gorge on much food and drink at times that 'excess consumption' of either was not out of the question for both his persona and physique. Now one might say that Fedrox could eat just about anything, being an overweight Syorthian hawk, who sometimes had trouble 'getting off the ground'

socially as well as physically.

The next morning, Fedrox went to the large hold of Tyrall's Captain of the Guard to inform his brother, General Metgare, about King Aegolth's precious gems stolen by Belnapp at the Iron Crow. Metgare was in his study chamber briefing Lord Nordellan, Head Magistrate of the Consul of Aviatyre, on securing the kingdom perimeter during the Eceleiation when came a knock on the study door.

"Yes?" questioned Metgare, walking over to open the door to reveal Fedrox standing in the doorway.

"My sincere pardons to My Lord Nordellan and General. My Brother, I must have a word with you," Fedrox interrupted, holding his head slightly from the hangover he was having.

"Now?" questioned Metgare staring at Fedrox.

Fedrox nodded back to Metgare; Fedrox's face looking urgent as Metgare returned a scowl back at his brother before facing Nordellan.

"Please forgive this interruption, My Lord, but I will return shortly to discuss the keep armaments with you."

"I'm in no hurry, General. I'll wait here," replied Nordellan, as his eyes shifted to the table to study the parchment of the guard layout during the Eceleiation.

As Metgare closed the study door, he signaled Fedrox to follow him down a stairway, turning off to a side alcove, behind a wide support column several yards away from the study chamber.

"This had better be important, Brother, for I am in discussion with Nordellan on securing Consul during the Eceleiation," Metgare firmly stated, his eyes penetrating into Fedrox for the disruption.

"Yes, Brother, it is. The gems are missing," Fedrox returned; the sound of Metgare's voice echoing inside Fedrox's head.

"Missing?! What do you mean 'missing'?!" An angry scowl appeared on Metgare's face as his voice grew another level louder.

"I was at the Iron Crow last evening having a bit of round with the How and this weasel. We were talking about Chalynn and-"

"Weasel?! What weasel?!" Metgare interrupted.

"He was kind of a chatty sort. Wanted to know about the temple there and the deities and such and..."

"And what, Brother?!" Metgare's face was redder by now, turning his head slightly at an angle while his face drew closer to Fedrox's face.

"And when I woke up, the rucksack was...empty..."

"Empty?!"

"...and the pouch was missing." Upon finishing those words, Fedrox eyes squinted tightly shut, waiting for the next onslaught of what his brother would do or say next.

"What?!! You were robbed?!! Do you know how angry Aegolth will be if he finds out the jewels were stolen?! You were sworn to hold onto those until the Eclection ceremony!! Yours and my head will be on Aegolth's wall if we don't find those stones before then!!! I'm sending the Guard out after this weasel and it will be his head once we find him!!!" growled Metgare.

Fedrox's face became expressionless and pale as the thought of what he had done hit him like a rock.

Word of the royal theft reached amongst the village peddlers with their goods and wares traveling between both kingdoms. As Kaeleos was checking the guards stationed at Yarrow's drawbridge, he received word of the theft from one of the peddlers traveling from Tyral. An old peddler crow wearing a well worn gray chemise and whom had traveled many times between Yarrow and Tyral stopped in front of Kaeleos with his small cart of wares.

"Your Worship," the old peddler stated, "are you aware?"

"Aware? Aware of what, I ask?" Kaeleos responded as he quickly eyed the peddler's cart and the wares under some cloths.

"Aware of the thief whom stole King Aegolth's treasure from the Iron Crow last evening," the peddler replied.

"What are you talking about, peddler?" Kaeleos stopped a moment and eyed the peddler.

"There is talk that Lieutenant Fedrox was seen at the Iron Crow in Tyral, Your Worship, and that a thief pilfered several gems of King Aegolth's treasure Fedrox was carrying. Fedrox told the Howkeep at the Crow that Aegolth's treasure must have been stolen by the weasel he was talking to."

"Weasel? How did you hear of this?"

"The Howkeep, Me Worship. Belnapp was seen by the Howkeep talking to Fedrox."

"You are sure of this?" Kaeleos's eyes widened.

"Yes, Me Worship, the Howkeep informed me," the crow peddler replied.

At that point, Kaeleos ordered a guard to inform Daellon of Kaeleos leaving his post to set out to search for Belnapp and the stolen gems. He realistically hoped to find Belnapp before nightfall to retrieve the confiscated gems before any further political unrest between Tyral and Yarrow had worsened. As Kaeleos flew high above the dense terrain, he noticed a small, shiny sporadic trail where some of the precious gems had fallen out of the pouch Belnapp had stolen from Fedrox. For Kaeleos to track such a master thief within the island's harsh equatorial climate, albeit one of many challenges he faced as the King's Elite Guard. Several days of extreme humidity and heat with barely an onshore wind made flying difficult for an avian. Dense foliage and underbrush created an easy cover for such a wily rogue as Belnapp. Kaeleos's hunger, ravenously growing with the intensive ground search above, began showing in his maw.

"If I ever find that tenacious, trickster weasel," Kaeleos spoke to himself, "I'll grind his scrawny bones for my next meal!"

That moment, Kaeleos noticed the shiny gem trail end beyond a patch of thick foliage along a rocky pulpit. Heading past the dense wood, Kaeleos decided it would be wiser to continue the search flying back towards the open seashore. But the skies were growing far darker ahead of Kaeleos as the churning sea began its rapid advance towards the coastline of Ornathys, bearing down with its impending wall of darkness. The gentle crosswinds that had previously cooled his large frame several degrees from the torrid climate below grew in intensity with every beat against his flapping wings. Just then, vicious rain tore from a canvas sky of dark, rolling clouds, surrounding Kaeleos in all directions, leaving no clue of where the sun had hid beneath a dark layered cape just moments before. Stern faced, Kaeleos now had to fly harder just to keep airborne hoping his strength would hold out with the approaching storm.

Peering through the sheets of windswept rain toward the boiling sea of the island's northeastern inlet, Kaeleos noticed a small silhouette on the breakers just off the island's jetty. Could this be a stranded seal or some animal gone astray? Possibly Belnapp? But what would a thieving weasel be doing out in an approaching storm? Kaeleos became very curious to find out who or what it was. For the Lieutenant knew that he would soon have to return to the kingdom since the King's warriors would be concerned of Kaeleos's whereabouts. For Lieutenant Kaeleos was one of King Orachon's Elite Guard from the kingdom of Yarrow. And General Daellon, the Phyorcthorian Head Commander of The King's Elite Guard, was not one in the habit of waiting, especially since Kaeleos was Daellon's 'adopted' son.

Kaeleos began flying closer to the breakers as angry spray battered his wings harder than he had ever encountered before. The incessant torrents of rain now began turning sideways eclipsed by gale force winds. He caught a better glimpse of the small huddled object. It was a female albatross. "What in the world is an albatross doing out here in this havoc?" The long, intense search for the weasel along with Kaeleos's own hunger quickly dissipated from his mind. Kaeleos could see that she was in trouble battling against the pounding surf with her small huddled frame, realizing she would be a goner if he didn't do something fast. He quickly swooped down to hover over her, fighting the explosive wind and surf. Xucca caught sight of Kaeleos; his presence startling her for a moment as she tried to catch her breath from the engulfing wall of water that nearly drowned her a moment ago. In her past, Xucca had been approached by another Phyorcthorian hawk; a mortal enemy to gull and albatross alike who might as well have had her for their next meal! Still in shock, Xucca hesitated, not knowing what to do. Seconds later another wall of water slammed onto the rock slab, nearly knocking her off into the ocean.

"Grab onto my talons and I will get you out of this storm!" Kaeleos yelled to her as another metallic blast of thunder roared around them, partially muting his call.

"My children! I have my children here!" Xucca cried in return as the surf pounded harder onto the slab.

Not sure of what to say or do next whether herself and her brood would perish within moments, a quick decision of her immediate trust to the hawk stranger was imminent.

"Take my children to safety first!" Xucca yelled to Kaeleos above the callous drone of the surf.

Kaeleos nodded then took the two squawking brood from her into his talons and began to fly to the

shoreline defense caves. Keltyck Rock, a large natural formation of several caves perched up high on the surrounding cliff sides of Ornathys away from the pounding surf below; the ancient caves being still used by both Phyorcthorian and Syorthian Elite Guard as an ocean defense from invaders. Kaeleos flew like he had never flown before as quickly as he could while clutching Xucca's two offspring, dodging the violent sprays from the churning sea below. Upon reaching the sky borne entrance to the cave, Kaeleos released the two noisy siblings into its dry inner sanctum where they would be safe and not able to not crawl out so easily due to the high-walled entrance.

Xucca held on to the breaker for dear life as wave after wave pummeled the spot where she hid against the turmoil. As the wind grew stronger, the chain on her medallion began to rise up over her neck, stopping as it hit her beak, floating in the wind. As she tried to pull the medallion back down, it was at that moment a rogue wave came out of nowhere, smashing against the breaker. The wave smashing hard enough that the breaker shattered into several large blocks of stone, throwing Xucca into the furious sea.

Once Xucca's brood were inside the cave, Kaeleos flew back to the small breaker where he had left Xucca only to find nothing. Frantically, he looked about the boiling sea, his eyes scanning beyond the torrential spray for any sign of her. Luckily, Kaeleos spotted her far from the reach of the breaker going out to sea, splashing her wings erratically trying to stay afloat. Swooping down, he plucked Xucca up from the raging swells, carrying her off to the safety and solitude of the rocky shelter.

Inside the cavernous keep, Kaeleos placed Xucca next to her two obstreperous children who were quite anxious and content to see their mother and parent again. Shivering and half-conscious, Xucca huddled both young close to her knowing they were safe. Within the darkness of the cave, she tried to focus her weathered eyes on Kaeleos's whereabouts with what very little light was about. For a few moments that seemed a lifetime, she could not see any movement, not even Kaeleos. Just darkness, emptiness, a random chard of lightning, the howling storm outside the cavern's sky light entrance and her brood next to her. Between intervals of lightning flashes, she noticed a winged silhouette moving about the cave entrance, gathering what sounded like branches.

Suddenly a spark of light appeared from a stone to tinder on the ground Kaeleos started from a kubarog briar wick he carried in his rucksack. The cave immediately became alight from the fire, throwing glowing shadows of the cave wall's textures along its inner sanctum onto its walls. Every few moments a flash of lightning could be seen from the cave's entrance, splashing over the firelight's convex shadows emitting an eerie iridescence.

In the corner, Kaeleos's spear and rucksack lay against a set of large rocks. Xucca could see the spear layered with many intricate royal engravings and solid gold bands embedded with moonstone gems indicating to Xucca that Kaeleos may be a warrior or soldier of the kingdom of Yarrow. The cross-lined rucksack contained the blazon seal of King Orachon on its emblem. From this familiarity, the fear somewhat subsided within Xucca now that she and her young were out of harm's way knowing that Kaeleos may be one of the King's Elite Guard. Still, being cautious and not knowing what was to happen next, Xucca remained motionless. She held a fixed gaze upon her rescuer; a rather strong, tall Phyorcthorian hawk who wore the armor of an Elite Warrior Guard. He turned to Xucca after placing some tripe and codfish on a spit over the small fire to cook.

"Well, you seem to be awake still after all that. I'm Lieutenant Kaeleos of King Orachon's Elite Guard. I'm lucky to have spotted you back there. You wouldn't be here now if I hadn't rescued you and your brood. Now is not good weather to be out with your children."

Kaeleos's name seemed strangely familiar to Xucca for some reason, yet not clear; her mind still in shock from her intense ordeal in the storm.

"Thank you for rescuing us, Lieutenant, if that's who you really are, not some common thief. You don't plan to have us for your dinner now, do you?" Xucca blurted, feeling superstitious about his intentions.

Kaeleos laughed. "Thief?! My dinner?! Ha-ha! So that's who you think I am! I certainly wouldn't be treating you as well as my closest friends if I were a thief! Nor would I be alive long to wear such armor if I attempted to do in a King's Guard. Yes, I am the King's sworn warrior. Even under these inappropriate conditions, we're all quite fortunate to be alive. And as for dinner, I've already retrieved some food for you and your brood that I am now preparing. You will all feel better after our meal."

The cooking fish did smell good to Xucca and her brood. Her random thoughts of running away from the cave somehow and this Phyrorethorian stranger from the past whose kind hunted hers disappeared with the emergence of her own hunger. She would stay for the meal for herself and her young. Xucca looked upon her rescuer, her eyes looking non-reflective, delivering a cold stare.

"Then you will let us go afterwards?" she coldly responded, still feeling he may have an ulterior motive for her and her children.

Kaeleos hesitated for a moment, avoiding looking at her stance. He replied back, adding some tinder to the fire, his eyes focusing on the flames.

"You are free to go whenever you wish, if that is your desire. I will not keep you here. You can leave through the back entrance to the cave following the path through the waterfall. It will take you on the path to Yarrow through Gryth Wood. But beware of the many dangers that run through the Wood. You would be much safer here with me along with the warmth and protection of this cave rather than traveling through the Wood tonight in this storm to the kingdom. I can take you there in the morning after the storm departs."

Xucca pondered that Kaeleos could be telling the truth. After all, Xucca and her children would not be here if not for Kaeleos rescuing them. She had much to be thankful for him. She owed him for her life and her brood's lives. With her current state of mind and body being tired and exhausted, she had little strength left to defend herself and her brood to travel on foot, let alone fly. Xucca had no choice but to trust this avian warrior for the moment. She resolved to stay the night in the cave and journey with Kaeleos in the morning to Yarrow.

to forget the past

The storm had departed by dawn on Keltyck Rock leaving a mysterious and foggy, dank start in its mist as Xucca awoke. It did nothing to ease Xucca's fears of what would happen next to herself or her children, Berwyck and Rigor.

Both offspring were born in previous summers; Rigor in the first, Berwyck in the following. Xucca's relationship with another Phyrorethorian hawk, Larco, formed in the prior years but most of her memory of her one time 'significant other' had been lost with yesterday's life threatening events. She had met Larco on the island of the Great Ice Wall of Nombrus during a harvest festival there where both

returned to Ornathys. But soon after their first few seasons together, Larco left her under auspicious circumstances, leaving her all alone to raise her young. He never returned. Yes, she was also afraid of Phyrocs in this sense that they would leave her again, not so far as they would kill her since albatross and hawk being mortal enemies. For some Phyrocs, it was naturally part of their well known unpredictability with albatrosses.

She felt so alone in the world.

All she had were her children, Rigor and Berwyck, that were a part of her life and a part of her lost mate that was somewhere out there.

When Xucca gave birth to Rigor, he first appeared 'stillborn', hence he was named Rigor Mortis, for Xucca thought she had lost him. Rigor had the traits and build of a hawk along with a larger hawk's head and beak. Though, as he got older, Rigor became portly in his build.

Berwyck, however, was different than his 'much larger than life' brother. He had the traits of an albatross, the body and frame of an albatross, though smaller in proportion to his brother, yet he retained the keen intellect and acute vision of a Phyrocthorian hawk. Berwyck got his name from a vast glacial lake Xucca used to visit on her home, the Great Ice Wall of Nombus, with her own kind. But like Rigor, Xucca loved Berwyck just as much no matter what differences were between them both.

As the fog started to part, the first subtle rays of dawn's sunlight fell into the cave dwelling's small skylight high above the now smoldering fire pit. Xucca was slowly beginning to get her strength back after her rest yet still feeling quite sore, a bit lame and unsure of her ability to fly at the moment. She awoke hearing Kaeleos moving about.

"We'll be heading off to Gryth Wood in a moment," Kaeleos spoke, as he had awoken earlier to prepare for the day's journey. "I'll lead us through the Wood on the safest and quickest path I know. We have a dangerous journey ahead of us so I want you to stay close to me. The amulet will help keep us safe while we travel."

Kaeleos reached into his rucksack, pulled out a red, sphere shaped, stone amulet on an ancient chain and placed it around his neck. Little was known about the amulet, though word of its origins that it came from inside an ancient temple. It was given to King Orachon by the Consul of Elders after the battle of the Great Conflict. The amulet was found to have 'protective powers' during the battle by those on the Consul who knew of its power. In order to keep the amulet safe, Orachon left it in possession of his Elite Guard Commander, General Daellon. Daellon had given the amulet to his First Lieutenant in charge, Kaeleos, to hold for the upcoming Consul's visit to the kingdom.

Kaeleos took his spear and they left on the path along the wall through the darkened back side of the cave, Xucca and her brood following close at hand by Kaeleos. Light from a distance peered through another corner chamber of the cave. Turning the corner, they walked along a large, wide tunnel of the increasing light to the sound of crashing water at its end.

Upon arriving at the opposite end of the tunnel, the opening revealed a large waterfall providing a natural ledge of steps around its sides leading down to the edge of Gryth Wood. The path from the cave seemed so different from where they had come from. A pastoral setting of indigo ivy winding alongside the ancient stone steps leading down to the forest floor. The cave was one of the few on the island Kaeleos had known that was used by the Elite Guard for defense of the kingdom from the sea.

Walking through the waterfall Xucca seemed fearful, almost paranoid of any kind of water from her ordeal in the storm. She stopped short. Fear raced in her eyes. Kaeleos noticed Xucca trembling and outstretched a friendly talon to her.

"It's okay," he calmly assured her.

Clutching Kaeleos's talon, Xucca felt confident in passing through the waterfall as she stepped onto the stone path below. Kaeleos then took Rigor and Berwyck through the waterfall to Xucca's waiting wings. Once together, they walked quietly along the river to the main path that led to Yarrow. Kaeleos's curiosity showed in his face as he gazed at Xucca who seemed calm but silent. She began fumbling with the medallion around her neck, knowing she had not lost it during the storm. It was then Kaeleos caught notice of it. He was curious but did not mention it to her.

"I don't believe I caught your name, my damsel in distress," Kaeleos quietly chuckled to her, grinning slightly.

"It's Xucca," she murmured, pretending not to look into his gaze at her. "I'm from the northern tier of the Great Ice Wall of Nombus. I am here not of my own accord. I was looking for someone that brought me here five summers ago. His name was...Larco. He was...was my mate," she started to softly sob. "These are my children, Rigor and Berwyck, his progeny. I've been searching for him ever since. He abandoned me without reason. Even the King's Guard knows not of his whereabouts when I inquired. Larco left me alone to raise my children. And I thought he loved me."

They both stopped short of the path leading into Gryth Wood by some lyndeknyle shrubbery. Xucca placed Rigor and Berwyck on the ground, still sobbing, Kaeleos looking concerned at Xucca.

"I'm sorry to hear of your misfortune. Is there something I can do for you?"

"No, nothing. My trust for your kind has diminished considerably since The Great Conflict. Can't you see that I need no help from you?" Xucca ended abruptly. She paused. "Larco was a soldier in the King's Guard. I have no respect for him for what he did to me and his children! I would hope he's dead now for what he has done! Curse his soul!"

Xucca began to sob harder by now. Kaeleos slowly comforted her with his wing. It was then that the medallion revealed itself laying on top of Xucca's feathery contour that Kaeleos noticed the object.

"What is that you are wearing?" he asked.

"Nothing you or I should be concerned with!" as Xucca took the medallion off from around her neck, throwing it to the ground. For a moment, Berwyck and Rigor looked in curiosity at the object laying on the ground, then at each other. Berwyck walked over to the medallion, picking it up, handing it to Kaeleos. Kaeleos examined the medallion, noticing the wording etched on its back.

"If ever we may part, our bond shall let nothing come between our eternal love for one another."

Feeling remorseful for her situation, he began to hand it back to Xucca. As he did, she pushed his talon away, partly closing his talon around the object. Kaeleos completed closing his talon into a fist, dropping his arm to his side; the medallion's chain only visibly dangling.

"I take it this meant something to you at one time," Kaeleos asked. Xucca remained silent as she turned away from him, her head bowed down as she continued sobbing.

"Xucca," Kaeleos spoke softly, "if I ever find this Larco of yours, I will make sure he gets what's coming to him, not just for deserting the King's Guard but also for what he has done to you and your children. For the time being, if there is anything I can do for you within my power as the King's servant and as myself then let me do it for you."

Xucca knew that she would need the help of a Phyrorethorian to help her through this trying time, although her mistrust was still there from her past. The notion to trust again seemed foolhardy and naive. Still, she owed her life and her children's lives to this warrior who seemed to care for her and her brood.

"Would you truly help me Kaeleos?" as she turned and stopped to question him, her eyes fixed upon his, looking for an answer she was deeply desperate to hear.

"I would give my heart, soul and life to you Xucca if anything to help you," Kaeleos responded, turning to her, putting his talons gently on her shoulders. "I would move mountains and seas to right the misfortune you have suffered in any way I can. Please let me try."

Xucca nodded her head. She sighed an acknowledgment and hugged Kaeleos tight with her wings as he held her and her brood against him within his large, powerful wings.

the weasel thief

It was about half a day's journey to Yarrow through Gryth Wood. Several paths within the Wood changed directions many times throughout the dense forest. But Kaeleos had known the true paths of the Wood from the air so it was not that difficult for a highly experienced Elite Guard to lose direction in such a maze. In the past, he had battled enemies on the ground as well as above after the time of The Great Conflict. He would approach a certain spot in the Wood and reflect back to those encounters, being ever more conscious and cautious with Xucca and her children. As if in a heightened state of alertness for whatever could happen next, Kaeleos was prepared for it.

He was taught well by General Daellon of King Orachon's Elite Guard to become an Elite warrior and the strategies of combat a Phyroc warrior learns. From his humble beginnings as an orphan, Kaeleos strove to be the best warrior he could be in serving the kingdom. His past, though, was a somewhat troubled one before his third season. Tragically, he had lost both parents to The Great Conflict. He had very little memory of them before then. He would have not survived if not for an unknown Phyroc that took him to General Daellon, his surrogate father to be.

Daellon had lost his own beloved mate and son to an avalanche on Raedre Mountain. Heartbroken from the loss of his family, he had thought of taking his own life until the sight of a young Kaeleos had renewed his spirit. He took the small hawk in and trained him to be a warrior just like his very own son before the tragedy. This gave Daellon a new outlook on life as he felt it was a sign from the gods that he was meant to have a son who would follow in his footsteps once Daellon stepped down from his command post. He had named him 'Kaeleos' in honor of his own departed son. 'General Kaeleos' he would often think...

Midway through the Wood on still yet another twisting path, Xucca noticed a small, shiny object on

the ground just ahead of them. Kaeleos was now carrying Xucca's two young to relieve her during the long journey to the fortress. Stopping only for a moment, Xucca knelt down to pick up the shiny object when suddenly a weasel wielding a small dagger jumped out from behind a large tree.

"That's mine!!! Leave it alone!!!" the weasel shouted at Xucca, nearly falling backwards from the scare.

Within a heartbeat, Kaeleos quickly placed the two young on the ground, reached for his spear and pinned the weasel firmly up against the base of a wide tree. Kaeleos's talons held the assaulter's chin firmly against the tree while holding the spear in the other, ready to pierce through the pelt of the weasel's neck with the spear's sharp tip if he moved in the slightest. Surprised, the weasel trembled, shaking in fear, their eyes locking tightly on each other's gaze. Kaeleos had finally caught up with his invisible quarry.

"How dare you attack us, you blaggard!!! Especially a female with her young!!!" Kaeleos roared and snorted; his eyes filled with fire. "I should run you through now, you worm!!!" Kaeleos repeated, his spear tip firmly upon weasel's pelt, stinging like a heated pike from a blacksmith's furnace.

"Please, My Lord!! Please have mercy on me, My Lord!!!" the weasel cringed, feeling the pain increasing in his neck from the spear tip. "I have no conflict with you!!!" he cried as he began to shake nervously while sweating profusely in his spot.

"When it involves a female, you do!!!" Kaeleos roared defiantly in the weasel's face, his beak ready to bite the weasel's muzzle off if he twitched in the slightest. Kaeleos quickly eyed the dagger in the weasel's paw. "Now drop your weapons!!! Drop them now!!!"

Shaking violently, the weasel let the dagger fall to the ground.

"That's all I have, My Lord! Please set me free!" The weasel was weeping by now.

Kaeleos noticed a cream colored pouch with a small hole and the crest of Tyral's kingdom embroidered on its lining hanging from Belnapp's tunic belt. Kaeleos thought that it more than likely contained the valuable stones taken from Fedrox at the Iron Crow.

"And the pouch!!! Remove it!!!" Kaeleos's voice boomed through the weasel's pelt.

The weasel nervously removed the pouch from his tunic belt letting it fall, hitting the ground, spilling the contents of the precious gems he had collected. Kaeleos stared at the fallen gems on the ground then quickly focused his eyes back on the thief. Kaeleos's hot angry breath emptied into the weasel's face, making him cough.

"Who are you?!!!" Kaeleos demanded.

"J...Just..a...p..poor..." the weasel incoherently began to the point of stammering.

"I meant your name!!!" Kaeleos roared into the weasel's face.

"...It's...Belnapp, My Lord, Belnapp of Gryth Wood..." the weasel whimpered.

"You are the thief that I've been searching for!!" snarled Kaeleos. "Did you know that was Metgare's brother you've robbed back there at The Iron Crow?! Are you trying to start another war between Yarrow and Tyrall?! You can be hung for this, thief!!!" threatened Kaeleos.

"Oh, no, please, My Lord, have mercy...have mercy!!! I did not mean it!! I did not know!! Please have mercy on this worthless one, I beg of you!!" Belnapp pleaded, half panting from feeling the increasing pain of Kaeleos's spear tip.

Kaeleos could see the thief was having enough of his torture that Belnapp began sounding earnest in his voice at this point. Staring hard at Belnapp, Kaeleos spoke.

"As the King's Elite Guard, I could take you to the castle gallows to be drawn and quartered. But since you admitted who you are, I will let you go under one condition. Apologize to the female or I shall run you through here and now!! Apologize, worm!! Now!!" Kaeleos bellowed.

"M...m.my...s...s...sincerest apologies to Your Lady and her young from this worthless one," Belnapp tearfully whimpered while looking out of the corner of his eye at Xucca. "I beg of you for your forgiveness My Lady, please!!"

Kaeleos shot a look at Xucca. Hearing Belnapp's plea, Xucca nodded with agreement to Kaeleos. Kaeleos then gave a long ominous stare back at Belnapp.

"Luck seems to be with you today, master thief," Kaeleos loudly whispered. "You are free to go. Leave this Wood and don't let me catch you stealing again or next time will be the gallows for you!" Kaeleos spoke firmly and withdrew his spear. Surprised, Belnapp didn't know what to do or say for a second.

"Thank you for your great mercy, My Lord...thank you!" Belnapp's voice begged.

Half-trembling, Belnapp began slowly backing away, nearly falling to his knees as he did so, watching Kaeleos cautiously with every step he took. Kaeleos knelt down to collect the weasel's dagger and the fallen gems, putting the gems back into the pouch, looking up occasionally at Belnapp. As Kaeleos finished tying the bag filled with the pilfered loot, a thought came to Kaeleos just as Belnapp started to turn away from him. "This thief would make an excellent scout for Daellon's Guard."

"Belnapp!"

Belnapp immediately stopped in his tracks; his legs and feet frozen solid with fear of any slight movement he made.

"His Majesty's Elite Guard needs a scout for surveillance. It is very dangerous work. You must work hard, be proficient with different weaponry and have good knowledge of the land. Are you interested?" Kaeleos hesitated purposely for a moment before speaking again. "It pays well in precious stones!" he spoke as he held up the thief's former snatch so Belnapp could see it clearly.

That's all Kaeleos needed to say. For a moment, Belnapp's eyes glittered with enjoyment.

"You...you would want me to do that, My Lord? You would trust me after what I have just done?" Belnapp inquired, a swollen lump forming in his throat as he cautiously chose his next words to speak.

Kaeleos smirked at Belnapp. "As long as you don't let me or the Royal Guard catch you stealing again or dangling from the gallows you will be! Well, what's it's going to be, Belnapp? A life of honor or no life at all?" Kaeleos demanded.

Belnapp had to think fast. He really didn't want to keep running from the King's Guard for the rest of his lifetime. He started out becoming a common thief as a young weasel. Now older, he had attained the title as master thief among thieves within both kingdoms on Ornathys. But he was getting tired of running. Now he had a chance to apply his talents towards something beneficial to the kingdom as well as himself. And receiving precious stones for his work! He just loved precious stones!! Besides, he decided it was better to be a scout in the Royal Guard than chance himself to be dangling from a hangman's noose.

"I...I accept your offer, My Lord," Belnapp spoke. "I will serve you well, I promise."

"Good. You've made a wise decision, master thief. I will make one fine warrior out of you," Kaeleos firmly stated with a slight smirk aimed at Belnapp. "Come. We begin in the morning," as all five travelers began to walk down the path in the sunset leaving Gryth Wood's twisting paths with King Orachon's fortress ahead in sight.

The five weary travelers arrived at Orachon's fortress just after sundown as night's starry cloak blanketed their trail's end. The drawbridge was an immense wood and iron structure in itself, dwarfing their size in perspective to small mice. The surrounding moat's wide expanse flowed around the entire stone structure encompassing the kingdom.

Kaeleos began signalling to a guard on watch along the parapet wall using his spear's reflection from the sun's fading light. Waving his spear in symbolic drawn motions with the light streaming off its intricate gold craft work, it attracted the guard's attention. A signal was returned back with the flashing of the guard's shield. A loud, low pitched moan and crack was heard as the massive wooden cogs and eccentrics of the transit lowered the massive drawbridge across the transom; one of the largest drawbridges ever made. The earth beneath the travelers' feet trembled and shook as the drawbridge reached the ground with a solid thud, scattering dust and debris in front of them. Once down, the massive metal gate of the portcullis raised as they began to traverse across the drawbridge.

As they walked past the lit wall torches along the inner walls of Yarrow's keep, a flurry of activity of sight, sound and smell came from Yarrow's marketplace as the harvest festival had been going on for most of the past few days.

Making their way inside the keep, General Daellon, along with four Elite Guard, stood blocking the traveler's path along the marketplace; his face at first looking upset at Kaeleos, then relieved. Daellon quietly motioned to Kaeleos and the others to follow him to his quarters as the four Elite Guard strode aside, in front of and behind the group. Kaeleos knew at that moment there was some explaining to do for his disappearance from the Elite Guard. He began to tell Daellon of confronting Belnapp in Gryth Wood with King Aegolth's stolen gems.

"Hear now, you understand that my men were out looking all over for you when the storm broke. You don't know how upset and worried I was when you went missing without a word to me on this quest of yours, by yourself, without my orders or backup, to find this thief you've captured," Daellon firmly recounted to Kaeleos. "But I'm very thankful you made it back safely from the storm's chaos."

"Forgive me, father, for disobeying your orders and leaving my post," Kaeleos interrupted, "I heard about the theft of Aegolth's treasure through a peddler returning from Tyrall and took it upon myself to find the missing treasure. Once I caught this thief, he surrendered King Aegolth's pilfered treasure in return for a chance to serve on Orachon's Elite Guard as payment for his thieving ways," as Kaeleos handed over the amulet around his neck and the pouch containing Aegolth's treasure to Daellon.

"So you tell me that this weasel thief who 'surrendered' King Aegolth's treasure in exchange wishes repentance to serve under my command and King Orachon's Liege?"

"Yes, father," Kaeleos replied, "for you did tell me we need an experienced soldier. One who understands the lay of the land as well as being proficient with arms. A scout. Someone we could send ahead of the Guard to relay information back to command. His knowledge of places to hide within Gryth Wood's dense foliage impressed me in my search for him from above."

"Hmm..." pondered Daellon looking at Belnapp, eyeing him hard. "For this time, Lieutenant, I leave the responsibility of his recruitment and training in your hands. But I want a report from you on his progress daily, be that a direct order from me, understood? And if he falters in any way or manner during his recruitment, the guardhouse dungeon will be his last resting place for his 'service rendered to the kingdom'."

Belnapp shivered slightly from Daellon's statement. "I will serve the King's Guard with my life."

"So be it first," Daellon ordered, staring hard at Belnapp, "to see you fit to give your life to your King and Yarrow. Lieutenant?"

"Yes, General. I will prepare the soldier for training and his watch keep," Kaeleos returned, turning to eye Belnapp momentarily.

"And who else have we here?" as Daellon eyed the other three travelers.

"This is Xucca and her children, Rigor and Berwyck. I rescued them from drowning during the storm near one of our sea defense positions. I had to. They would have surely perished if I had not been there."

"Indeed," Daellon remarked, "I guess you have been busy today. Send them over to Callas the Innkeeper to provide food and a place to rest for their stay here."

"Thank you, General, for your kindness to my children and I. We can never repay you enough," Xucca added.

"On my behalf, My Lady," General Daellon replied as he bowed slightly before making his leave with the amulet and the pouch containing King Aegolth's treasure to see King Orachon.

Kaeleos followed Belnapp, Xucca and her children to the Innkeeper's How for an evening's dinner as the travelers settled in for the night.

As Belnapp settled into his bunk that evening, he felt a pain in his back as he was laying on the straw mat. Reaching behind himself, he felt an object that was in his pocket. Reaching into his pocket, he

pulled out a shiny object. One of King Aegolth's gems must have fallen out of the pouch during his scuffle with Kaeleos landing in his pocket. The medium sized ruby sparkled in the moonlight coming through the window in Belnapp's quarters. For a moment he thought about letting Kaeleos know about it. Then again, why should he? With all the gems he had pilfered, one missing wouldn't be such a loss to Aegolth. Besides, what if he ever needed the ruby as something valuable to barter with? He finally decided to keep it anyway as a token, placing it back in his pocket until he could find a safe hiding spot for it...

As Kaeleos finished checking the guard sentries on duty for the evening, he headed back to his gatehouse quarters to settle in for the night. Reaching into his small rucksack, he took out the medallion Xucca had thrown to the ground earlier.

Looking closer below the wording on the back, in the lower corner, the name 'Larco' was etched.

Xucca had mentioned the name of an Elite Guard named Larco. The name sounded familiar to Kaeleos. General Daellon had mentioned to King Orachon of a missing guard a season ago that had not returned back to Yarrow. Daellon had sent out guards to search the island for the missing soldier but they had found no trace of him. His disappearance seemed to be a mystery to the kingdom.

Yet the medallion Kaeleos was holding in his talon was a clue. Larco was the missing guard. But where was he? Where could he have gone to?

the Cardinal's dilemma

Several seasons had passed in the kingdom of Yarrow. Berwyck and Rigor had grown and took separate paths in their lives. Rigor followed the monastic route hoping to repent his ways of childhood thievery and perhaps stand toe to toe with royalty as a Cardinal of Yarrow, which he eventually became. Berwyck joined the Elite Guard of Yarrow, though under some resistance of Xucca who not wished him to join because of the dangers involved in being an Elite Guard. Privately, her reasons regarding her lost mate and his 'true' father she could never tell Berwyck about for fear of him running away. Being very young at the time, Berwyck never really knew of the existence of his true father. He had always trusted and confided in Kaeleos as his father figure being someone to look up to growing up.

Berwyck's first season of service to Yarrow's Elite Guard was about to prove his honor and courage the kingdom and to Kaeleos, his adoptive father. On one particular day, Berwyck had just finished checking the armament to see if any weapons needed to be repaired or replaced. Kaeleos was quickly approaching the armament from the chancery where the head of Consul, Lord Nordellan, was working on a potion.

“Berwyck?” Kaeleos spoke as Berwyck was coming out of the doorway from the armament hold.

“Yes, father. What is it?” Berwyck responded.

“Nordellan just informed me about a certain plant on the island he needs for a potion he is in the middle of creating at the moment. A potion that would keep certain insects away from the eating the flowers in the King's courtyard gardens. He was looking for a multicolored plant called a 'Nombrus Calter'. Have you ever heard of or seen such a plant here on Ornathys?”

“Yes, I'm familiar with that plant. Xucca knew of them thriving in the cold on Nombrus. They are a very hearty large leafed plant for all seasons. I've noticed some by Castle Grimoire just outside of Gryth Wood not long ago.”

“Nordellan asked me that he would like this plant as soon as possible to complete the potion before sunset today. Can you head to Grimoire, find this plant and bring one back to Nordellan as soon as you can? I am with King Orachon and General Daellon in the Great Celestial Hold parchment room in discussion going over securing Consul's visit to Yarrow. Nordellan will be joining Orachon's and Daellon's discussion on Consul's visit once the potion is complete.”

“I will, Lieutenant. It shouldn't take me long. I'll return before sunset.”

“Good. Bring the plant to Nordellan in the chancery as soon as you arrive back. Now I must return to Celestial Hold for the discussion. Good luck,” as Kaeleos quickly began heading back in the direction of the chancery to inform Nordellan.

Grabbing his spear, Berwyck headed in the direction of Castle Grimoire between the shoreline and Gryth Wood to retrieve the plant for Nordellan. Once Berwyck reached Grimoire, he found several of the colorful plants lined up along the edge of the castle moat near the secondary door of the castle's side wall. Retrieving two of the large leafed plants, Berwyck began heading back to Yarrow the same way he came.

As he follows the shoreline, in the distance out in the water, Berwyck notices a strange looking galleon sailing towards Ornathys. The galleon's large sails are strewn along its masts with what appears to be an unusual webbing design for the sails, much like a spider would make. The galleon stops just outside the breakers that jut out from the shoreline. There is movement on the galleon as Berwyck notices a small object dropped onto the water from the Galleon's side. The object begins to move away from the ship bearing the silhouettes of three figures on board heading towards where Berwyck is standing at on the shore. As the objects come into view, Berwyck sees that they are Beuthalian spider pirates, pirate scouts ahead of a potential invasion fleet heading directly towards Ornathys.

Clutching his spear, Berwyck prepared for the worst as the small boat carrying the three spider pirates reached the shoreline, dismounting onto the shore. Carrying sabres, the three pirates approached Berwyck, stopping short within a foot or so, surrounding him.

“Aye!” says one of the pirates, “What we have 'ere? It's only one of 'em, mates. He's a little bug and there's three of us. Even odds, wouldn't ya say?”

“This is gonna be easy,” says the second pirate, Like catching flies for dessert,” as a trail of poisonous drool emits from the second spider's mandibles.

“Piece of cake, I says. Now I'm getting hungry!” notes the third pirate, its face closing in on Berwyck.

It was at that moment that Berwyck got the upper hand. Thrusting his spear far into the second spider's mouth between the mandibles, Berwyck caught it off guard, retrieving his spear back quickly. The spear's gorge causing a white ooze to spurt out of the spider's jaws from the open wound. Stunned, the spider fell to the ground, dropping his sabre.

The first pirate, seeing what just happened, swiped his sabre at Berwyck. Catching a few loose feathers, the sabre missed Berwyck for the most part as he ducked and rolled on the beach sand between the spider's long legs. Springing back up onto his talons from the ground, Berwyck thrust his spear into the first spider's abdomen, causing the spider to fall to the ground, legs spreading out, ooze pouring out from its fatal wound.

The third pirate bearing his gnashing mandibles charged Berwyck, his sabre catching Berwyck's cape, twisting it, pulling Berwyck to the ground. The spider holding Berwyck's body down on the sand with its claws as its mandibles drew closer to Berwyck's beak. Retrieving his spear, Berwyck jabbed the spear's tip hard into one of the spider's eyes, causing the eye fluid to drain over Berwyck as the spider stumbled off balance, stunned by the attack. Berwyck got up and began to chase the injured spider running towards the water. The surviving spider pirate managing to reach the boat and began paddling back to the galleon before Berwyck could finish him off.

Berwyck sat on the shoreline for a time, catching his breath from the attack. He hadn't been wounded aside from losing a few feathers along with some aches and pains from the struggle. The sun had started going down as Berwyck watched the pirate ship begin to slowly sail away.

Kaeleos, worried why Berwyck hadn't shown up back at Yarrow sooner, had flown to the spot where Berwyck was resting, seeing the pirate ship sail over the horizon.

“Are you alright?” Kaeleos asked.

“There were three of them, Lieutenant,” as Kaeleos looked at the corpses of the two spider pirates that succumbed to their wounds. “I held them off but one of them got away back to the ship.”

“You are lucky to be alive, Berwyck. I'll have to let Orachon and Daellon know of the pirates. Are you able to fly?”

As Berwyck got up, he found the remains of the plants he had retrieved scattered on the beach sand from the fracas. He picked up what little was left of the leaves.

“I don't know if Nordellan can use these or not,” inquired Berwyck.

“You are more important than those plants are at the moment. You've saved Yarrow. Come. Orachon and Daellon will want to know about this,” as Kaeleos and Berwyck headed back to Yarrow.

Kaeleos was proud of his adopted son, though it could have cost Berwyck his life fighting them alone. That day, Daellon made Berwyck a Lieutenant. Daellon put as much trust in Berwyck as he did Kaeleos for the courage and valor Berwyck held as a young soldier in fighting off an invasion.

Berwyck was in line for honor and recognition. Presented with the title of Lieutenant, not only from the kingdom but also from word of his heroism reaching the Consul of Aviatyre. Yet, Lieutenant Berwyck's honor became in jeopardy several seasons later while facing scrutiny from a potential tribunal against himself and Belnapp regarding a missing amulet; an amulet that was in the possession of King Orachon. The amulet had gone 'missing' during the Consul of Aviatyre visit to Ornathys to settle the fief disputes between the two kingdoms. The same amulet Kaeleos and General Daellon were to guard in the royal treasury. Upon checking the royal treasury one day, the Cardinal's Chancellor, Gareruff, had notified King Orachon and the Consul of the missing amulet, placing the blame squarely

on the present Captain of The Elite Guard and the Guard's Scout and Squire for its loss. This of course would lead to Berwyck's questionable security on guarding the royal treasure while he was in charge.

Prior to Consul's visit and the missing amulet, per King Orachon's orders, General Daellon and Kaeleos had sojourned off to sea to find Yarrow's missing Elite Guard named Larco who left the island of Ornathys under 'mysterious circumstances'. Daellon and Kaeleos left Berwyck and Belnapp in charge of Yarrow's defenses. Luckily for Berwyck that he had a good friend on the Consul, Lord Cellus, a lynx, whom would come to Berwyck's and Belnapp's defense as they were charged with the perpetration of the crime by the Cardinal's Chancellor, Gareruff the Hare. The charge would come with little plausibility and substantiation though, for one member of Consul, Lord Draemer, had been given the amulet through Lord Nordellan and King Orachon to conduct research into its ancient origins; origins that traced back long before The Great Conflict had divided the archipelagos surrounding Ornathys. Lord Cellus convinced Consul for any tribunal to be sustained to a later time in order to continue discussions on the island kingdom's land fiefs.

And as for Berwyck's brother, the once peaceful quiet of an autumn afternoon in Yarrow's courtyard gardens suddenly fills with a screech of anger...

"What do you mean the tribunal was 'challenged'?! By whose authority was that commanded? You had better have some answers for me or I will seek your execution for contempt, my friend!!" Cardinal Rigor Mortis turned his head away from the tower window to face his personal Chancellor.

"Your Eminence, I did not mean to accuse falsely!" replied Gareruff, his body shivering profusely. "I did not mean for it to happen this way! The Consul made the decision of delaying Belnapp and Berwyck's tribunal from Lord Cellus's request! Lord Cellus knows not of the 'plan'! Have mercy on your most loyal servant, Your Eminence, please! I won't let anything else go wrong, I assure you!" A cold chill overcame Chancellor Gareruff out of fear from what His Eminence would say next.

The Cardinal stood by the large, open ornate stained glass window of his tower room, glancing briefly out at his private courtyard gardens, catching the mid morning's light. A moment passed as he returned his eyes to focus hard on Gareruff standing by the Cardinal's desk; the Cardinal delivering a threatening tone to Gareruff as he revealed his covert agenda.

"I'm not one to be taken a fool, My Chancellor. Particularly at this time with the Consul of Aviatyre's visit involving both kingdoms on shared rights of the land fiefs on Ornathys. And as for those on the Consul, the less Lord Cellus knows of 'his own' involvement in the plan right now, the better. The Consul is going to be here awhile to address the fief concerns before both kingdoms. I have many tasks to perform until the Consul adjourns. You had better keep everything in place until I send my brother to face his untimely meeting with Metgare's Guard."

Rigor paused, turning briefly away to look again outside the window. He returned his dark eyes focusing ominously at Gareruff, quietly speaking with a slight leer as his wicked grin faded.

"Do I make myself quite clear to you, my friend?"

The hare's body quivered in fear of the statement, for he knew it would cost him his head if he failed again.

"Yes, very much so, Your Eminence, very much so! Thank you for your generous mercy! I will not

fail you again!" still trembling as he spoke; his eye pupils shrinking, cast in fear.

The Cardinal then slowly approached Gareruff, stopping just a few inches in front of him; casting an enormous, dark silhouette encompassing Gareruff completely. His cold stare and breath emptying directly onto the hare's face; his eyes aglow with flame.

"You had better 'not' fail, My Chancellor, or it will forever be your last! Now leave me," the Cardinal echoed slowly.

A large, swollen lump formed in Gareruff's throat as he turned pale from those chilling words. Slowly the hare backed away, closing the heavy detailed mahogany door with a solid thud reverberating many times throughout the Cardinal's chamber.

The uneasiness of Gareruff's job, being the Cardinal's personal secretary and Chancellor to His Eminence could be deadly. Walking a thin line between life and death for the endowment of a title of royalty also meant his doom if he ever crossed the Cardinal's path. Gareruff, a gifted orphan hare is a result from The Great Conflict. In his youth, Gareruff showed a marked talent in scribing and mathematical calculations, thus impressing his assignment to a royal title in serving the Cardinal himself. In doing so, Gareruff's mind always haunted him in whatever subservient duties the Cardinal instructed him to perform. More or less, Gareruff was a personal slave to the Cardinal first, the kingdom second. With all he had to do for the Cardinal, whether it was a treasonous duty to the kingdom or not, a possible nervous breakdown would finish him off eventually.

The Cardinal had returned back to the window and stared quietly out at his private courtyard again, his mind hampered in thought. Consul had made several visits to Ornathys to try to iron out the fief disputes between the kingdoms, some to no avail. More or less, temporary amiable amends of the fiefs between the kingdoms and Counsel prevailed, making alliances in the process from the discussions with Consul. One time, the Cardinal had overheard from those on the Consul that his brother Berwyck had become good friends for some time with Lord Cellus, a lynx on the Consul, during a sojourn to the continent of Haebrugg many seasons earlier...

"Your Eminence," called out a voice.

Rigor was carrying parchment rolls from the cathedral library as he was walking along the great hall of the castle back to the Great Celestial Hold, the drawing room where Consul was meeting. He stopped as an approaching elder Consul member, Lord Anisalsa, an armadillo-like creature called out to him. "Lord Nordellan and Consul missed you at the meeting."

"Yes, My Lord Anisalsa, I know. My apologies to you, Lord Nordellan and Consul members as I had to retrieve a certain parchment Lord Nordellan requested involving the fiefs along Gryth Wood surrounding Castle Grimoire. The parchment had been mistakenly stored in my library rather than King Orachon's library and I've spent most of the morning looking for it. My chancellor was supposed to deliver Consul all the pertaining land fief maps for today's meeting. I have spoken to my chancellor before about forgetting to include certain important parchments relating to our discussions."

"Not to worry, Your Eminence. Lord Nordellan reconvened Consul for tomorrow to discuss those fiefs with Aegolth. I hear Lord Cellus and your brother have returned from their voyage to Haebrugg and the surrounding archipelagos. They brought Nordellan word of good faith from the natives on those lands and that they would support Orachon's and Aegolth's Guard if ever another Great Conflict arose.

Nordellan also said Lord Cellus called Berwyck a great and true friend to himself and the Consul. You should be very proud of your brother's accomplishments, Your Eminence."

"Yes, Lord Anisalsa...yes, I am..." as envy and jealousy of Berwyck grew twofold from that moment on in Rigor's heart. How dare Lord Nordellan, Anisalsa and the Consul decide to put Berwyck higher in authority than Rigor or the kings of Ornathys were? How dare they?!

Once Cellus heard of Berwyck's tribunal for treason to the crown, he immediately informed King Orachon of the Consul's decision to handle the matter after the meeting of the two kingdoms had completed preliminary negotiations on land fiefs. This temporary defeat was not going to stop what Rigor had originally intended. The plan would go through to clear his way for his eventual domination over the two island kingdoms of Ornathys...and eventually, the outside world's island archipelagos and inhabited continents. His troubled past during his youth would not become a part of his future conquest. Nor would it be in the cards for anyone to usurp his own seat of power in the kingdom that he had worked so hard and long to obtain.

Yes, revenge was very sweet upon the Cardinal's beak. He hid it very well throughout the years of loyal service he gave to the kingdom. Now the time for action and change was quickly approaching...

A vision of his two fathers, Larco and Kaeleos appeared. At first, a blurry image of Larco and Xucca dancing before him, holding him in their wings. Then another, but clearer image appeared of Kaeleos teaching a young Rigor how to fight in a meadow. That too, faded into black as it changed into Rigor's entrance into monasterial life within the kingdoms of Yarrow and Tyral. Rigor had no ambition to become an elite warrior, then or ever...

...But one thing escaped Rigor more than anything he ever desired. Control. He needed 'control' more than anything else in his life. He wanted 'complete' control. Control of both kingdoms on Ornathys and then...the world! That was going to be 'his destiny'...

And through his 'deceptive' practices he had learned how to obtain 'control' through his peer of 'so-called' friends during his youth, well into the monasterial role of his royal position in and of Yarrow.

Unhappy memories of his childhood were attributed to one particular friend. Lespar, his closest childhood friend, was Rigor's tutor in the art of evil deception. During their youth, Rigor and Lespar wreaked havoc amongst the villagers of Yarrow and Tyral from their stealing, pilfering and outwitting the peasants of their belongings. Life seemed good for Lespar and Rigor as 'partners in crime' in that their spree seemed to last forever those many seasons ago...

...A young Rigor and Lespar were hiding behind three large casks of ale, crouched down close to the ground, as the first day of the Harvest Festival in Yarrow was drawing to a close. Lespar was going over the finer points of thievery to Rigor.

"Now, you see that crow merchant with the applecart? I'm going to create a distraction with the basket of capers he's got sitting on the far end of his cart." Lespar knelt down and picked up a couple medium sized stones off the ground. "As I walk by, I'll drop these rocks in front of the cart, pretending to trip over them. As I'm trying regain my balance, I'll bump into the basket of capers, making them fall onto the ground. Once he starts arguing with me, you sneak over to the other end of the cart, staying close to the ground to avoid being seen. As I'm arguing with him, grab as many apples as you can fit into your tabard pocket and this rucksack, okay?" Lespar said to Rigor, handing him a small rucksack.

"What if he sees me?" Rigor asked.

"He won't. I'll keep him busy looking at me in the opposite direction."

Lespar quickly got up from behind the casks and proceeded to walk over to merchant with the applecart. As he walked very close to the cart, he dropped the rocks from his tunic pocket, pretending to stumble and fall, knocking over the basket filled with capers that went flying into the air and falling to the ground.

"Ouch!" yelled Lespar as he regained his balance.

"Hey!" the crow merchant yelled at Lespar. "What are you doing? You just ruined my capers!"

"You shouldn't leave rocks laying on the ground in front of your cart of wares so people could trip over them," Lespar returned.

"I spent a long time picking those capers! I'm gonna make you pay for all those capers you spilled on the ground!"

"Just wait until my father hears about this! He's an Elite Guard in the kingdom! If I had gotten hurt from your carelessness leaving rocks in front of your cart of wares, he would see fit that you could not sell here in this market ever again!"

"What?! How dare you! Why you nasty little rogue!"

"Don't believe me? Just watch. Hey everyone!" as Lespar began to yell loudly, drawing attention to himself and the merchant. "This merchant tried to make me fall over in front of his cart with these rocks as I walked by! My father, Seros, is an Elite Guard! Somebody go get Seros the Guard and tell him to bring General Daellon out here as well to see about this merchant's trickery!" A small crowd began gathering around where Lespar and the crow merchant were arguing at one end of the cart.

Meanwhile at the opposite end of the crow merchant's cart, Rigor began to move from behind the ale casks to behind the merchant's cart, being careful as not to be seen. Upon arriving at the cart, he started pocketing as many apples as he could in his tunic pockets. Once they were full, he began filling the small rucksack with apples until he could fit no more. Keeping low to the ground, he carefully returned back to behind the ale casks carrying the pilfered bounty. Behind the casks, Rigor looked back at Lespar arguing with the merchant noticing an Elite Guard was walking towards the commotion going on between both.

A large raccoon in an Elite Guard uniform approached the crowd.

"What's going on here?" Seros asked, looking at his son, Lespar, and the scattering of capers all over the ground.

"Father, this merchant tried to make me fall in front of his cart with these stones," as Lespar pointed to the rocks on the ground he had dropped earlier and tripped on. "I tripped over them, hurting my foot."

"Yes," the merchant replied, "and your son ruined all my hard work picking those capers to sell. He knocked them off my cart and he should pay for his carelessness." Seros noticed several rocks in front of the cart.

"Are you okay, son?" Seros asked Lespar.

"My foot feels sore." Lespar answered as he felt his foot. "Ow! I think I may have broke it," Lespar lied as he began to hobble around on his good foot.

"Merchant," Seros ordered, "I don't know exactly what happened here, but for now I am asking you to move your wares and leave the festival until it is over. My son seems to have gotten hurt from someone's negligence. Someone else here could have gotten hurt as well. General Daellon has instructed me to keep watch on this festival and any problems that may occur."

"What?! I didn't do anything wrong!" the merchant cried.

"Merchant, this should cover the cost of the lost capers," as Seros reached into his pocket and pulled out a couple small brass coins, handing it to the merchant. "Bring your wares to Tyral to sell until after the festival."

"Wha-?! But I need to sell the rest of my wares! You can't make me leave!"

"Yes I can per the orders of the General if there are any incidents during the festival. Pack your cart and leave. If you and your wares are still here when I return, I will take you to General Daellon myself." Seros ordered.

"Grrr! This is not over! Your son is trouble! I shall seek Consul on this matter!" the crow merchant angrily spoke.

"That's for me and General Daellon to decide on my son and your obligation to sell your wares here at the festival. Now pack up your wares and leave. Be gone, for when I return I do not want to see you here. Lespar follow me," Seros ordered as Lespar left with his father and the crow merchant began packing his cart in a huff, grumbling to himself.

After they got a distance away from the market place, next to the wall of the armament, Seros spoke to Lespar.

"Lespar, I know you're lying," Seros warned in his tone of voice. "That was wrong whatever you did back there. Now I will have to let the General know of this incident."

"Father, I didn't steal anything!" as Lespar implored in return.

"Yes, but you were up to something. I've caught you before doing that. And your foot is not broken. Am I right?"

Lespar huffed a sigh. "Yes, father," Lespar replied, looking remorseful.

"Your mother and I love you very much, my son. Stealing from the merchants is a serious offense. You had better keep yourself in line, my son, or you will be caught and sent to the dungeon by Daellon

himself next time. I'm very serious, Lespar. Just because we're raccoons and naturally curious doesn't mean we have to steal. I overcame my natural instinct to steal when I became an Elite Guard. I want to be proud of you, Lespar, so try to avoid those tendencies. Your mother and I are here when you need us. Okay?"

"Yes, sir," Lespar said, moaning slightly.

"I'll be home once I'm off duty. Go home now. I'll see you and your mother there soon, son," Seros noted.

As Seros went back to his post, Lespar headed back over to the casks of ale where Rigor was hiding.

"What happened? I saw the Elite Guard. Is everything okay?" Rigor asked.

"That was my father. He helped chase away the merchant," Lespar replied.

"Huh? Was it supposed to go that way?"

"No, not really. Did you get the apples?"

"Yes. Plentiful," Rigor said, showing the apples he collected from the cart to Lespar.

"Good, then let's head for Gryth Wood to enjoy our feast," Lespar noted as the two slipped passed the guards at the front gate of the inner wall. Carrying their bounty, they exited the castle by slipping through an iron yett between the outer wall and the berm outside of the courtyard gardens to enjoy their feast. Yes, life seemed good for the young thieves...that is, until one fateful day...

That day, Lespar's and Rigor's friendship came to an early and abrupt end one day in an open meadow a good distance away from Yarrow and Tyral...

Not far from Yarrow within Gryth Wood, Lespar and Rigor had created a series of underground tunnels and fabricated a fortress out of branches, leaves, rocks. For the outer and inner layers, Lespar and Rigor used cloth tarps taken from the peasant merchants carts. The fortress became perfect camouflage against the backdrop of Gryth Wood's dense terrain if anyone tried to find either of them. If the fortress ever became breached, they had an alternate escape of hiding within the ground tunnels Lespar had dug beneath Gryth Wood.

As Rigor was fastening a portion of the fortress that had given loose to a recent rain, Lespar approached him with a surprise.

"Rigor, look what I've got," Lespar announced as he was holding two of his father's lances from the armament. "How about a jousting tournament between us?"

"What? Now?" Rigor asked. "What if your father finds out they're missing?"

"I don't think he'll notice. This morning the armament door was left open by another guard, so I went inside and took them from the weapons rack. I saw them the other day with my father and decided I wanted to try them out," Lespar said. "So c'mon, let's joust. Over there, by the open meadow where that large tree is," as Lespar pointed to the open meadow.

Once they both walked over to the open meadow, Lespar handed one of the lances to Rigor.

"Okay, Rigor, go stand over there by those boulders and face me with your lance. I'll stand here by the tree facing you to start off. When I tip my lance up and down, you charge at me running with your lance, okay?" Lespar spoke.

"Are you sure this is safe," Rigor asked.

"Trust me. Just point the lance out to your side when we cross each others paths, okay?"

"Okay then," Rigor nervously twitched.

"Let the tournament begin!" Lespar announced loudly, enunciating the syllable of each word slowly.

Lespar was the first to start running towards Rigor as Rigor followed running towards Lespar, both lances pointed at one another. As they reached the point where their paths crossed, they both pointed their lances to their sides. A loud crack was heard as the lances made contact with each other, throwing both combatants to the side, rolling on the ground with the lances freefalling in midair; the deadly spear tips missing either. Both Lespar and Rigor had the wind knocked out of them from the lance blows as they got up from the ground.

"Whoa," Lespar spoke, "That was interesting." as he tried to keep his balance standing while grabbing his chest from the pain of his lance kicking back into his chest.

"Yes," added Rigor, catching on his own breath, "but shouldn't we be wearing any armor to protect us from the lance's kicking back like that?"

"I guess I should have brought some armor along as well. Hey, instead let's pretend one of us is hiding somewhere here in the Wood. When the other finds out where he's hiding, we'll battle it out with the lances, okay?" Lespar suggested.

"Uh, okay," Rigor agreed.

"Okay. I'll hide first. Close your eyes and wait for my signal. I'll make a shrill sound and then you come looking for me, okay?"

"Okay," Rigor agreed.

Rigor closed his eyes as a quite a few moments went by. Finally he heard the shrill sound made by Lespar coming from behind his back towards the large tree in the meadow. As he looked around he could see no sign of Lespar, so he headed towards the large tree. Once he reached the tree, Rigor stopped and turned facing away from the tree, still looking for any sign of Lespar.

Suddenly, Rigor heard a noise of leaves rustling and a crack of a tree branch. Looking up as he turned around towards the tree, his lance's spear tip pointing at an angle upward towards the high tree branches with the base of the lance resting on the ground.

"Aha!" yelled Lespar as he dove from a tree branch, his lance pointing directly at Rigor.

Gwosh!

A searing pain swept through Lespar as he became impaled on the sharp spear tip of Rigor's lance; the spear tip penetrating through the raccoon's stomach and out through his back. Dropping his lance, Lespar's pierced body slowly slid oozing down the shaft of the lance, leaving a bloodied trail of impalement behind.

“Nooo!!” Rigor shouted, his beak dropping in horror at the sight of an impaled Lespar. In a panic, Rigor let go of the lance; the weight of Lespar's body making the lance sway back and forth with it finally coming to rest up against the tree, keeping Lespar's body still suspended in midair.

“...Rigor, help me!...,” a weakened Lespar cried, his head slightly turned, his eyes on Rigor as the shock of his fatal wound was snuffing his life away quickly. Within moments, Lespar was dead as his arms and legs dangled in a fallen heap.

The 'play joust' with Lespar's father's weapons had suddenly turned deadly.

The shock of seeing Lespar's impaled corpse coursed through Rigor's body. He had let this happen. Panic set in.

“My friend!!! I did not mean for this to happen to you!!!” Rigor cried out. “Lespar!!!” Rigor yelled once more as the woods echoed his pain.

Rigor made sure no one knew what had happened that fateful day his own life changed forever.

“The villagers will think I did this,” Rigor thought out loud. They certainly would have had they known he was with Lespar.

It was too late to save Lespar so Rigor had to save himself from the hangman's noose if the kingdom ever found out. He needed to have an alibi.

He decided to head for the coastline running as far as he could from what had happened. He vowed to keep that dreaded 'secret' to himself from that day on.

When the villagers finally found the lifeless body of the impaled raccoon, Rigor's disappearance had come a day earlier when they found the runaway albatross stuck in a seawall cliff with his foot intentionally caught between two loose boulders. Once they freed him, the bones never did set well. Rigor's intention of crushing his foot to seal his alibi by having become lost by the island's rocky oceanside cliff, falling between the rocks. Rigor's constant limp is a painful reminder of what really happened that fateful day. The anger and frustration just thinking about it made his eyes well up. His fate had already been set in place long ago...and he couldn't turn back now if he wanted to...

In the same token as Berwyck, Rigor never knew of his true father as well. However, unlike Berwyck and being the older sibling, the burned-in memory of another parent had not gained Rigor's trust and confidence in Kaeleos. It had taken a toll on Rigor's psyche during his youth, for he also needed to find someone to look up to besides Xucca. Someone he 'could' trust and confide in as a friend, a mentor and a father figure. And that someone just happened to be Lespar...

Turning to the wall, Rigor yanked down a small tapestry next to the window containing a kingdom in its weave. Looking at the tapestry red-eyed, he then took a parrying dagger from a wall plaque and began to shred the tapestry wildly in a fit of rage.

As bits of tapestry laid strewn over the floor, Rigor eyes everything around the room, still holding the dagger, panting in deep breaths. Walking over to a table in a huff, Rigor notices a few parchments lying about. Gareruff was supposed to take them with him back to the king's library. Placing the dagger on the table, Rigor grabs one of the parchments. He removes the string tied around it and tosses the string to the floor. Part of one of two wax seals falls off as Rigor unrolls the parchment. He stares at the parchment for a few moments, reading its contents. Turning it over on the backside, there is more as he reads on. As he begins to calm down, his panting slows and a smirk of satisfaction develops along his beak as he begins to roll up the parchment, clutching it tightly. This document was part of 'his plan' as a way to divide the kingdoms even further. A 'pardon' and a 'writ of banishment' had been drawn up for the name on this document.

And the Cardinal was familiar with that name...

CHAPTER II

of fiefs and kings

Yarrow's fortress was a massive structure built during the Age of Orax when Phyorcthorian culture had just come into itself. The largest fortress of many among the surrounding island territories. It ran many stone's distance across nearly a quarter of the island of Ornathys. The rest being Gryth Wood in continuous conflict between the kingdoms of Tyral and Yarrow regarding 'shared' land rights. The land disputes dealt with ancient surveying records and maps between the original Phyorc and Syorth settlers. These records and maps were never defined upon in a proper forum or council within the two kingdoms.

The present king of Yarrow, Orachon, a fair, decent king, had a compassionate heart for his people and a pronounced dedication to loyalty. In his youth, Orachon had sojourned to battle across the ocean to defend Haebrug and his father's followers as a warrior during The Great Conflict while his father remained to defend Yarrow. After becoming a member on Consul as a diplomat and peacemaker, he became well known as a formidable ally to those he served in battle. Many of his allies had trusted his wisdom and dedication in helping to solve many wars, in part lessening the casualties of such. Disputes had ended in 'reasonable' ongoing discussions between sides as Orachon was a great mediator. His father, King Orax the Kindred, was also a mediator. But his health was questionable for a long time from nearly losing his life to an energy bolt charge directed at him by a certain dark sorcerer gryphon. After The Great Conflict, Orax became too ill to defend Yarrow. In his place, Orachon served as Commander-General of Yarrow's Elite Guard for several years before the death of his father. After his coronation to the throne, the kingdom of Yarrow flourished with more good will than during the reign of his father. The only remaining spur Orachon had trouble solving was the ongoing land disputes with neighboring Tyral. And war seemed imminent to escalate much faster between the two kingdoms if nothing was solved soon.

On Orachon's council, His Eminence, Cardinal Rigor Mortis, was presently working on a peaceful objective to settling both kingdom's territorial disputes when he wasn't busy shredding wall tapestries...

Tyral's king, Aegolth, a Syorthian eagle noble whose sojourns to many battles overseas as well, was

also a diplomat. Though not as compassionate as Orachon for obvious reasons with Gryth Wood, Aegolth was as fair in his judgments as one could possibly expect. Slightly older than Orachon, Aegolth had many followers from other lands as well as those who would support him, be it war allies or the number of untold minions, if need be. His late father, King Adrid The Intrepid, had a large following as well, some of which dwelling in the same lands as Orachon's followers. The Syorth's arrival on Ornathys just before The Great Conflict brought fief concerns within Gryth Wood and Yarrow as well as their own established territory to the southern part of the island. Indeed, they were a 'divided people' in those lands that honored both. And now the legacy continues on with their heirs to their thrones in hopes for stability of lands hanging in the balance of both kingdoms. A very 'explosive' setting if ever something suddenly went awry...

Castleberry's delusion

The winter's snow and chill permeated the landscape at Brunn Academy in Fenlow City. The 200 year-old academy's grounds and walkways to its structures were being cleared of the past evening's foot of snow by the red-faced maintenance crew on hand. The sun's rays were at their weakest this time of year as within the month the academy's mid-term exams were due regardless of the subzero temperature outside.

Inside the Anthropological Science Studies auditorium of Brunn Academy's Tazyrk Hall, Professor Roy McMullin in his brown tweed jacket with leather arm patches is lecturing to his freshman class on early avian anthropology. Freshman Jeff 'J.P.' Castleberry, or as his friends call him, 'J.P.' for 'Jean Pierre', is sitting next to a very beautiful Sheila Corvo, sophomore student and part-time radio station DJ at the academy. Jeff's attention span begins to wander from his tablet to Sheila's gorgeously shaped hands, causing Jeff to stop writing his notes on the professor's lecture to admire Sheila's perfectly articulated fingers holding her stylus to her tablet.

"...and as I had discussed earlier on crossbreeding of the several different species of Evanlurdia Perceptae," Professor McMullin continued, "the natural selection of the species was dependent on the environmental implications imposed on their traits throughout the forces of nature. Therefore..." Professor McMullin stopped speaking to turn away from writing on the large blackboard, eyeing Jeff straight on, sitting in the second row next to Sheila. He could see Jeff staring at Sheila's hands instead of looking ahead and taking notes. Without breaking his stride, the professor continued his sentence, "...Mr. Castleberry, could you please enlighten the class on the evolutionary development of the male and female Perceptae within their natural ecological existence?"

For a few moments, everything became a slow motion scene from a movie as soon as Jeff heard his name called by the professor.

The students roared with laughter at Jeff as he was caught off guard at the Professor's statement. Sheila looked up from her notepad at Jeff giving him a curious look; her lips on her mouth slightly open. Her chestnut blond hair falling slowly across her temple as she turned to look at Jeff, gazing into his soul with her deep sky blue eyes for the answer she waited to hear...

"Uh...the species of Evanlurdia only co-existed within a span of a few thousand years?" Jeff started his weak reply as he vaguely remembered his avian anthropological homework assignment the night before the symposium.

Jeff had been up most of the night drawing several, rough, rotated view sketches of strange creatures

for his art class assignment the following morning that he was majoring in. He carried a basic, rough sketch of a monster his best friend and student 'chick magnet', Chuck 'Havoc' Ravick, had drawn up as a reference for Jeff to go by. The anthropology evolution class was a required class this semester for Jeff's credits towards his major. And, at the moment, Jeff seemed to be failing miserably as if he failed this class, he would be two credits short of transfer credits towards going to Cutler Art College next year.

Jeff snapped out of his trance the moment the professor spoke directly at Jeff sitting in his chair.

"You're incorrect, Mr. Castleberry," Professor McMullin touted, "for as you should already know that one particular species of *Evanlurdia Perceptae*, the *Lemurania Perceptae*, existed in the Northern Hemisphere for only a thousand years due to the extreme climatic change, therefore precipitating their evolutionary state to either adapt or diminish by the time of the Glacial Expansion."

The professor then walked over to Jeff and Sheila and stared at both of them. The other students remained silent as the professor spoke.

"Mr. Castleberry, I would like to see you in my office after the symposium since this is your last class of the day, I take it?"

Sheila's face blushed as she looked up at the professor and then at Jeff.

"Yes, sir," Jeff begrudgingly acknowledged as subliminal giggles of laughter were heard from several rows of seats behind Jeff and Sheila.

Time went quickly after that episode as the professor's symposium ended within an hour which seemed like only a few minutes. Sheila's blushed face turned away from Jeff as she got up to leave Jeff to his own fate with the professor. She had to get back to her dorm to clean up and prepare for her next 4 hours as one of the student DJ's at the academy's radio station, B.R.R.N., at the Corbet Building conveniently located just across from her dorm building.

Sheila's weekly night gig lasted from six pm to ten pm but her voice as B.R.R.N.'s DJ was well known throughout the entire student body. The pay from the DJ work helped with some of her school expenses on books as well as her dorm fees and a very small part of her tuition. Her program formats varied from pop to hip hop to electronica and metal. But her dark secret, her favorite musical group that was hidden from the public eye, was The Partridge Family from the 1970's. 'I Think I Love You' was her favorite song from that group that only she knew about. She had an autographed poster of a young David Cassidy, a gift from her late grandmother who attended one of his early concerts back in the 1970's; the poster tucked away in her hope chest, only to be brought out and caressed when she was totally alone...

Jeff began walking down the solemn hallway as classes were ending straight to Professor McMullin's lab, only to be met by the academy's 'hot-air buffoon', Kurt M. Fenlow, III. Kurt had also exited out of his last class of the day and saw time to have a bit of fun. Kurt had a nasty tendency to belittle anyone he came in contact with, regardless be it friend or foe. Kurt's middle name was Milford but it should've been 'Ego'. Kurt was 'the wanna-be Phi Beta Kappa student' of all-time at the academy. His multi-billionaire father, Richard Fenlow, hardly knew his only son aside from all his corporate business travel engagements, yet gave him an egregious yearly Swiss bank account to spend at Kurt's leisure. Kurt's prized 1964 red Ferrari was his daily driver and the envy of the students and, especially,

the young women at the academy. Kurt's father had also donated a gift to the academy to the tune of over five million dollars to the Business and Athletic Departments of Brunn Academy when Kurt became a freshman there. Of course, the dean and the president of the academy were extremely grateful of the Fenlow Trust to keep the academy out of the red and in the black during Kurt's tenure at Brunn. Now Kurt was in his senior year - and he was fit to be tied, according to Jeff.

"Why if it isn't Professor Emeritus Jeff Castleberry? So tell me, Emeritus, how's things going in the evolutionary study of 'your' theory on Glacial Expansion? Ha ha!..." chuckled Kurt, stopping short in front of Jeff. Kurt began to stick his chest out imposing his size on Jeff.

"Not as cold as some living 'organisms' are," replied Jeff back to Kurt, fuming inside. Jeff knew how to carry himself from training in karate ever since he was little boy. He does not fear Kurt, but is above picking a fight with him.

"Now, now, let's not get overboard on the reactionary principles save our local corporate supporters of such a fine, renown institution as Brunn. Yet, they still just seem to let the riffraff slip by from time to time, don't you agree, Emeritus?" retorted Kurt, as he snickered a toothy grin.

"What are you driving at Kurt?" as fire roared inside Jeff's mind.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing a little extra income couldn't handle. Speaking of which, Miss Corvo is expecting an interview this evening on her program with a well established financier. One who is starting his own company in the very near term. I believe she will have me on the air tonight at seven to discuss my upcoming business venture followed by an elegant dinner at Robespierre's downtown at eight when she gets off the air early. My father recently gave Robespierre's management an extended building lease along with a renovated interior decor at the family's personal seating location. So Miss Corvo and I will be dining in sheer elegance."

Anger was fuming inside of Jeff as he heard Kurt's words. But Jeff was not Sheila's love at the moment. For it seemed that Kurt was since Kurt seemed to own everything, including Fenlow City and Brunn Academy. And now, the heated pike was stabbing into Jeff as Kurt spoke of Sheila like a prize trophy.

"By the way, Emeritus, today my father is contracting a local architectural firm downtown to build new office space over in the UK just outside of London for his major corporate partners. He is handing Conley & Griff a substantial contract that could've been used for my own financial growth, but I have enough money to keep me busy for now. The management from Conley & Griff met with my father yesterday to introduce the architects on our project. And can you guess, Emeritus, what I found out from my father about those architects? One of those architects is your father. So I'd hate to see your family lose their home and you out on the street somewhere...where the riffraff belong..." Kurt said.

Jeff tries to walk around him to contain his anger but Kurt bumps him into the locker with his shoulder. Bam! Jeff has now been physically assaulted; his body going automatically into his first kata stance, ready to defend himself. Kurt reaches in with both hands to grab him by the shirt. Jeff swipes his hands away, pushing him back into the locker on the opposite side of the hall.

Slam!

Kurt angrily pushes himself off the locker, about to charge at Jeff.

“Castleberry!” Professor McMullin was yelling at Jeff from down the hall outside his lab. The students that had stopped to see the scuffle began to move on once they heard the professor.

“What's all this commotion? You students move on along to your classes!”

“We shall finish our discussion at another time,” ended Kurt as he turned and walked off towards the opposite end of the hall.

"Castleberry!" yelled Professor McMullin, "I'm waiting!"

Jeff wanted to swing a roundhouse at Kurt but high-priced lawyers and a lot of jail time would be in the cards if that ever happened. He would've like to have seen both of them spar it out somewhere in a controlled match environment to see who was the better of the two. He felt that the time for facing Kurt would come but not now. Jeff turned and walked towards the Professor's lab, walking through the lab doorway followed by McMullin closing the door shut.

Jeff huffed a sigh of disgust as he sat down in the antique straight back wooden chair sitting directly in front of the professor's early 1800's hand-turned walnut desk. Not to say the antique seven-foot long roll top desk was overly ornate or ostentatious. But within it's bas-relief styled carvings of cartiff's with gold leafed-accent along it's perimeter edging down to the lion-clawed footings, it was certainly a sight for any antiquarian furniture collector to behold. It's worn tabletop of ink-stained glory where past professor's had corrected student's work over the last century at Brunn made it's identity known to students and alumni of the academy alike.

Being one of three of the original desk's of Brunn Academy's founding father, Enoch J. Brunn, back in 1803, before the small centuries old village town of Corbyn was renamed Fenlow City in the late 1960's. Today, few remnants of homes and landmarks still exist of Corbyn. The other two desks belonged to the Dean of Brunn Academy, Sherwood Kirby and the President of the Academy, Milo Backus Kanfield, fourth-generation of the Brunn family dynasty. An unnamed local wood craftsman at the academy's inception had designed and created the monstrous masterpieces of fine walnut to Enoch J. Brunn's specifications. Each made for retrofitting the high offices of study. And legend also has it that the same wood craftsman had incorporated 'secret drawers' into each of the three desks for purposes unknown to this day...

"You know your grade point average in my class right now is below the class work and the academy's standards," Professor McMullin spoke, looking laser straight at Jeff; his eyes seeming to pierce through what Jeff was thinking at that moment. "You've missed many assignments that I have given you during this semester's tenure. I've tried working with you, Jeff, as best I can, but you have to make the effort as well. Your point average is unacceptable and for me to continue to keep you in my class would require an Act of Congress. And I certainly don't mean that jokingly. I've already marked you down this semester as 'incomplete', Mr. Castleberry. I have no other choice to do otherwise. I have also let Dean Kirby know beforehand of the cancellation of your mid term results in my class this semester. I feel that you should seek Mr. Kray, the guidance counselor. For a transfer to a different curriculum or one that will get you back on track at the current level with what I am trying to teach my students," the professor said.

"Professor," Jeff replied, "I knew this was an advanced class when I took it. But it was the only class available I could take this semester that would follow the required study for my major. If I fail now, I

would lose the chance of getting my credits towards Cutler Art College in Kingsley."

"I'm sorry, Jeff, but I cannot make you an exception to the grading of my class here at Brunn. It's out of my hands," answered the professor.

"Thank you, sir," Jeff somberly spoke in resolve as he got up from the chair and left the lab.

The wintery drive home from Brunn Academy across town seemed a lifetime, though, Jeff was back home at his parents in twenty minutes. The ranch styled home was a welcome sight for Jeff as he pulled his small standard shift car into the snow cleared driveway, parking it into the tight clearance between the neighbor's fence and the garage wall in a small area he had cleared out for himself. The car engine shuttered, dieseling as he turned the key off, puttering and shaking until he popped the clutch while shifting into fourth gear, halting the chaotic noise.

As Jeff entered the back door to the kitchen, he dropped his back pack against the mud room wall, wiping his feet on the metal mud grate and wet/dry carpet. He caught the smell of pastry, meat and vegetables from the kitchen as he removed his coat.

"Jeff? Is that you?" yelled his mother, Jocelyn Castleberry, from the open cellar door.

"Yeah," responded Jeff in a tired manner that his voice barely carried across the mud room to the far end kitchen wall several feet away.

"You received a bill in the mail from the insurance company on your car. May be about that ticket your father told me you received a month ago," replied his mom.

Jeff sighed heavily on that note remembering Officer Greer pulling him over for doing forty in a fifteen mile an hour zone down steep Hope Kill Road. A road behind the shopping mall in town with a forty degree incline, five hundred feet downhill, intersecting with Broadway at the bottom. Jeff remembered kids rollerskating or skateboarding down that hill nearly getting themselves killed in the process or causing an accident at the bottom of the hill. Police finally discouraged them by having the town place several small asphalt rumble strips in that section of the road. A temporary idea since neighbors complained of more difficulty traveling on the road during the winter and the strips were soon removed. One town ordinance that had been voted on was to close that section of Hope Kill Road off to traffic and make it a 'narrow pedestrian walkway'. But neighbors eventually rescinded the ordinance due to needed vehicle access to the shopping district and the state highway. Jeff really didn't want to read the insurance surcharge, knowing he had less than \$50 left of the car insurance to pay off this year. He dropped the envelope back on the table.

Jocelyn appeared from downstairs at the doorway to the cellar, carrying a basket of laundry she had just finished folding.

"Also a letter from Cutler Art College addressed from a Mr. Trevor Ridley, Admissions."

Enthusiastically, Jeff grabbed the small, blue lined envelope from the art college and ripped it open. As he unfolded the letter, his expression turned to concern as he read what the Admissions Officer had sent.

Insufficient credits. Credit transfer denied.

Professor McMullin had did Jeff in and kept his word about it. "Great. Just great," thought Jeff as Jeff's expression turned to frustration over his credit transfer being denied.

"Your father's working late at the office this evening. Dinner's almost ready. We can eat early. I made a homemade shepherd's pie."

"Mom?..."

"Yes, Jeff? Is something wrong?" as Jocelyn was putting the dishtowels in the kitchen drawer.

"Uh...I'm going over to the library for a bit after dinner. Gonna meet Chuck there anyway. Should be back before bedtime. Gotta catch up on some research for Cutler next year," as Jeff read a text he received earlier from Chuck to meet him at the library this evening.

"Okay, dear. Hope they accepted you at Cutler. Your father and I are so proud of you furthering your art studies," Jocelyn trumpeted to Jeff, smiling. He returned a smile back hidden by the knowledge she hadn't yet read the letter that was curtailing Jeff's future career.

"Yeah, it's gonna be great," Jeff lied.

Chuck Ravick

The Fenlow City Library, for those that lived there, was an architectural masterpiece. Risen like a phoenix from the ashes of the old armory building that had once stood on its grounds, in its place a bold statement of ultra modern, glass-endowed vision to the artistic eye of the beholder that covered over four city blocks. Its ease of accessibility was unprecedented to the designers and underwriters on the Library's Board of Directors. Its futuristic approach to the ever changing, state-of-the-art technology mix to its antiquarian collection of centuries past made it 'the' premiere library of the state and city for all its \$1.1 billion it cost to build. Indoor and outdoor gardens adorned its mall grounds with the finest flora and fauna money could buy. The artwork and sculpture that lined its halls and corridors encased the visitor with inspiration as well as an unlimited selection of reference with WiFi convenience. Of course, with the help of the Fenlow Trust, ninety percent of the cost had been covered exclusively with the help of multi-billion dollar financier, Richard Fenlow. Albeit relative, of course, if bigger is better was an understatement.

Driving his beater car into the library's parking lot seemed so out of place. His car was like a small abstract splotch and spatter painting that came from a paintball fight in perspective to a very large, well planned high tech geometric sculpture. Parking next to a new, silver colored, quarter million dollar Aston Martin. Jeff got out of his car, closed his squeaky driver's door and began walking up the snow cleared sidewalk to the library entrance. Upon reaching the library entrance, a large, pyramid shaped, glass architectural portal similar to the Louvre, Jeff swiped his library card in the reader to gain access.

The red light came on so Jeff swiped his card again.

The red light came on again. Jeff wondered if the magnet strip on the card had been demagnetized somehow.

Being the only access to the Fenlow City Library was with the library's own card to those deemed

access after the user's application was accepted. Much like a personal profile, the security at the Fenlow City Library was taken very seriously for those wanting to gain access to its materials. Similar to Brunn Academy, security was priority one on the Fenlow Trust and the Board of Directors minds for students and patrons to allow use of the educational resources in Fenlow City. One almost practically had to give blood in order to gain access to certain places in Fenlow City provided there was traceable lineage of 'blue blood' in one's family such as the Fenlow heritage. Yet, unknown to most, there were certain other places in Fenlow City having secure enhancements far more encrypted and not so easy to access, blue blooded or not.

Yup, Jeff was pretty much locked out at the moment.

Just then, a tattooed wrist reached in front of Jeff with a card and swiped the reader twice. It was his friend Chuck Ravick.

"Hey stop gate! What up?" Chuck spoke, grinning at Jeff as he opened the glass door when the green light came on.

Chuck was wearing his worn leather vest with his heavy metal band t-shirt from the Abraxsys IV concert he attended two years ago in Harrington Stadium. His neon red and black hair crew cut made Chuck discernible even from a distance. The tattoo of a muscle-bodied dead crow, from a pencil-drawn creation of his own imagination, showed boldly on his forearm. The words 'Havoc' and 'Ravick' was tattooed on each of his left and right wrists.

"Dude! Don't startle me like that! I thought you were already inside," Jeff replied, a little surprised.

"I got held up with my dad before he headed off to his second-shift job. He was gonna show the guys at work some of my drawings I did the other day. One of the guys is an art aficionado or something. His son is some kind of game designer for a company in California. He thinks my artwork is worthy of a storyboard or even character design! Hey, what's the matter with your card? Not good enough for the Fenlows? Heh heh!" Chuck laughed as they walked across the expansive marble mosaic floor of the library's grand lobby. On either side, several massive columns rose high to support the vaulted glass ceilings to several glass knaves. An ultra-modern glass cathedral of sorts.

"This place makes me puke at times, man, with all its wonderful 'modern enhancements'," Jeff chided a sigh.

"Yeah, and half of them don't work well, do they? Hey, ya think if someone screamed inside here, this glass wonder piece would all shatter into a million glass chards - art, furniture and all? No place for a bull in this china shop! The Fenlows only bank everything on what makes 'them' feel good, not what others think anyway, right? Besides, who do they 'really' want into their inner circle, their city, right? No politics in the way. It's all good to them. Only the best."

"Yeah, good for them," replied Jeff.

"Ha ha! Now you're talking, mate! Even my artwork is too good for the Fenlows to be shown here!"

Chuck laughed as they turned the corner in front of an immense Lucite stairwell to one of the electronic reading venues off to the side. The heavily carpeted floor of the room muffled any reverberation of noise from the grand lobby. The walls and ceiling were sculptured with the finest

soundproofing materials available. Once inside the reading room, the threshold of hearing was next to deafening that nary a whisper could be heard from the next chair.

"You know," Jeff told Chuck as they sat down at the long table, taking out the Admissions letter from his pocket, "Cutler sent me a letter from the Admissions Officer. I don't have enough credits to get into Cutler. Haven't shown mom or dad the letter yet. And to top it off, McMullin gave me an incomplete grade in his science class today as well. So now I'm short more than a few credits anyway to transfer into Cutler."

"Gee, that's tough, man," replied Chuck, "Guess you have to hang out with me from now on, huh?"

"And watch you draw all kinds of creatures the next few years? And make a killing on the local tattoo parlors looking for your art?"

"Gotta make a living somehow, dude," Chuck smiled back.

"Well, I was kind of hoping Culter would help expand my opportunities in life just to get me out of this creep ville town called Fenlow City."

"Aww, c'mon, you love it here. It's not all that bad. After awhile. it kinda grows on you, heh heh!"

"Yeah, like a raging head cold."

"Hey, I'm here. Besides I can teach you about the fine art things in life like..."

Just then, Chuck stopped to eye a cute neon blue haired girl in a navy blue t-shirt and coat that had just entered the reading room. His eyes seemed to wander over her body like an x-ray machine for several moments.

"Whoa! Hey Jeff! There's Lisa Drummond! What a hot bod! She's the chick living in the posh bungalow next to the Fenlows, that ten acre spread in the Fenlow Commons section of town. Her parents are into the clothing business, you know, designer fashion. Dali Drummond is her mom, the famous fashion designer. Lisa's in my history class this semester. Ya think I should take her out on a date or something?"

"Wait. You're actually in love with Lisa?" Jeff questioned as he turned to see Lisa.

"Well, I do have kind of a crush on her...kinda sorta..." Chuck replied.

"Just her bod, right?"

"Yeah."

"And do you think that she'll appeal to your sense of urgency? Your sense of fashion or taste? Or how you dream up those monster creations you are so talented at drawing?" Jeff grinned.

"Knock it off. I just want to...to get to know her better, that's all."

"Sorry. My bad. But wait'll she get's a load of your drawings. She'll be designing Godzilla Wear, for

sure!"

"C'mon, really man. What should I say to her? Any pointers?" Chuck implored.

"You're serious?"

"Yeah!"

"Well, how about taking her to a craft fair or something? That's artsy."

"Hmm, might work, but she probably gets sick of anything to do with art 24/7, especially with her mom. Hey! Maybe a heavy metal concert? The band ThrushFire is playing in Madison in a week and I got two tickets here from Kirk Baland, my old boss at Arc-Tec Signs. He's got connections! He gave me these for the two weeks work I did for him last month. He's too busy to go with the current workload he has."

"Yeah, but all you did for Kirk was pushing a broom and help load the trucks at times. And maybe she isn't into heavy metal?"

"Wouldn't hurt to find out. Especially when it's backstage passes for free!" Chuck smiled as he showed Jeff the two ThrushFire backstage passes he got from Kirk.

"You're one crazy dude, Chuck," sighed Jeff.

"Yeah, crazy for Lisa for not what she wears, but how she wears it!" Chuck grinned as he growled like a tiger. "Watch how easy this gets."

"I'll be over here pretending to hide in case there is an explosion or something," Jeff whispered back.

Chuck coolly walked over to the computer table Lisa was sitting at, working on her WiFi laptop, feverishly typing away.

"Hey, you're Lisa Drummond. I've seen you in my history class."

"Yeah. And you are?" Lisa briefly looked back at Chuck as she continued typing her research paper on Lewis and Clark.

"Chuck. Chuck Ravick. I live over on Edgemont Green."

"That's nice," she murmured.

"Yeah..." Chuck blurted a weak reply.

"So what do you want?" came back a blunt reply as her fingers typed along, not missing a beat, eyes on her laptop screen.

Chuck needed a good line right about now to gain her interest in him.

"I hear your mom is a famous fashion designer," Chuck quipped.

"Why?" Lisa abruptly stopped typing to look at Chuck. "You want to design a dress for her?"

Chuck smiled a humorous return. "No, but I'm into artistic expression myself."

"Really. That's keen," as Lisa continued back to typing, eyes on her laptop screen, pretending not to recognize Chuck's presence.

"Hey, I've got these concert tickets to see ThrushFire, a metal band playing in Madison next week. I was gonna go with a friend of mine but he couldn't make it. So I was either going to find someone to go with me or turn these tickets in at Ticket Gate Turnstile downtown," as Chuck pulled the tickets from his jacket pocket revealing them to Lisa. "They're backstage passes too."

Lisa stopped typing abruptly to stare at Chuck and the backstage passes in his hand. For the next few seconds that seemed like minutes, she eyed his Abraxsys IV t-shirt as well as his muscle bodied dead crow tattoo on his arm. Then her eyes scanned his neon red and black hair until her eyes followed down to look him straight in the face.

"Hmm, you're for real, right?" she flirted.

Chuck had a brain fart for a second.

"Huh? Uh, what I mean is...yeah, I'm okay. I'm cool," he shrugged.

Lisa giggled. "Well, in case you don't know, I'm a fan of ThrushFire. I have all their cd's."

"Really?" Chuck was surprised.

"Yeah, I do a lot of my creative art when I am listening to heavy metal bands, though mom and dad don't care for my musical tastes."

"Wow! You are so cool! I'm into...drawing," hesitated Chuck, hoping she liked his talent.

"Really?" Lisa smiled back.

"Yeah...um...monsters. Like those you see on video games, but mine are original."

"Cool. Like the dead crow tat?" as she pointed at Chuck's arm.

"Yeah, I only wear what I design."

"I like that. Shows character. Sure, I'll go with you to ThrushFire."

Chuck finally found someone who liked the same things he liked. At least Lisa liked heavy metal bands.

a token with a secret

The afternoon fell quickly into darkness as a cold, stiff autumn wind blew through the study's open

castle tower window. Lord Cellus walked over and closed the stained glass window shut before the wind blew the flames out on the study's wall sconces. Walking back over to Berwyck, Cellus stopped short directly in front of where Berwyck was sitting at the study's table.

"I'm not one to say that Gryth Wood belongs to one rule or another. Just as those who serve the rule and live on lands sharing one another's hierarchy should be founded on undeniable interests of trust between kingdoms," Lord Cellus spoke as Berwyck listened. "In my many years of monarchial consent to various councils or consuls, I have never prevailed to one's particular interest or interests in assuming total rule. Be it dictated, counceled or consuled, I take my own responsibility and allegiance to what outcome I have judged appropriate and proven to the Consul and of my high service to their Majesties."

Berwyck glanced an inquisitive look on Lord Cellus.

"Then I perceive the effort of such an 'enumerated compact' as just another one of my 'higher' brother's ploys to divide the lands further be it Aegolth's reasoning or Orachon's efforts to 'share' the monarchies?" noted Berwyck.

Walking away from the window towards Berwyck, Cellus stopped short in front of him. Cellus looked inside of the pocket on his surcoat. He reached in and pulled out a small gold locket case engraved with the finest detailed engravings ever crafted. He handed it to Berwyck who examined the piece intrinsically as Cellus spoke.

"Before we met each other on Haebrugg, myself, Consul and Nordellan visited there several times. I've been meaning to show you this for some time. If you'd care to look on the back side of the locket, you'll see a cartiff of flying gryphons surrounding a small insignia within the crest of Chalynn. According to the ancient scrolls, long before the Great Conflict, Chalynn was once a great kingdom on the island of Haebrugg ruled by an ancient noble king. A king who was respected by all whom served him as well as those on the surrounding continents. Yet, long before the kingdom of Chalynn, there existed a temple or monastery containing mysterious origins as to its past. There were several myths of 'wild magic' and ceremonies originating from the temple. Of powerful deities that were supposedly capable of changing what is 'seen and unseen'. However, the temple and its mysterious origins remain long after the kingdom of Chalynn had mysteriously 'ceased to exist'. And there are rumors of 'spirits or guardians' of the temple that still exist a thousand years or so long after the kingdom's demise."

Cellus paused, then heralded a sigh.

"I think that you will find that the locket is sealed shut, my friend, possibly by its maker," Cellus muttered seeing Berwyck examining the locket closely to find out how it opens. "I received it on one of my earlier sojourns to Haebrugg. An ill peasant approached me during my visit to the lower village for food and drink. He told me that it contains ashes of a 'spirit guardian' from that island temple. It had been passed on from hand to hand. And he was now too old to have it for he would not live much longer and had no need for it." Cellus continued, "Unfortunately, that same peasant died before I left Haebrugg. I've kept it ever since as a 'spiritual token'; a gift and a reminder from that unfortunate peasant to help me have faith to make the right decisions. It will be yours someday, too, for I feel that it's getting far more difficult for me to solve the many problems of the kingdoms their majesties are willing to give into. Aegolth's recent protest of ceding into Orachon's tracts is at the onset of stalemate at the moment. I don't know how much more room I have to offer to Orachon's rights either with Aegolth's lee of stone." Cellus paused for a moment. "Only our lasting friendship, my friend, is all we

have left for us during this Consul tenure."

Berwyck grinned at Cellus and noted, "I, too, accept our friendship as the only means of getting through this Consul meeting with the kingdoms here on Ornathys," as he handed the locket back to Cellus.

"Good," Cellus remarked. "Tomorrow, let's go see that waterfall you were telling me about that you visited often during your youth. Consul will be here on Ornathys for awhile. It will be refreshing to get away from the discussions for a bit. I'll let Seigneur Lord Nordellan know about my absence on Consul for the day and return the following morning."

CHAPTER III

a score for a coffee

Jeff awoke to his cell phone alarm blaring. He began tossing around in bed trying to avoid the bright sunlight reflecting off the snowbanks in his backyard coming through the window. The light hitting his squinting eyelids. Opening one eyelid halfway, he grabbed his cell phone off the nightstand, canceling the snooze alarm while catching the day and time on its display. Saturday, 8:30am. He had overslept more than an hour. For today he was going to try to meet Sheila Corvo. The girl with the 'perfectly articulated fingers' sitting next to Jeff in Professor McMullin's early avian anthropology symposium. During the evenings and certain weekends, Sheila was one of the student DJ's at Brunn Academy's radio station B.R.R.N. Though Sheila was Kurt's love at the moment, Jeff felt he could offer himself as an alternative for the simpler things in life rather than the excesses of material wealth Kurt offered her. Jeff really hoped one day Sheila would see Jeff for who he was, not for who he wasn't. Also to forgive himself to her for his embarrassing reply to Professor McMullin's question at the symposium.

Midway through his freshman year at Brunn Academy, Jeff was still trying to set goals for himself for his life ahead. Professor McMullin and Kurt Fenlow were the current obstacles in Jeff's path to attain going to art school, being respected and having Sheila as his girlfriend. Jeff never really thought about his career choices of what he wanted to do in life until the last couple years. Brunn Academy was just a bus stop in life. But once he picked up brochures on Cutler Art College in the guidance counselor's office, he was hooked. Art was his way to go, or so he thought. Along with his friend Chuck's help, he figured it would be a snap. His parents originally wanted him to become an architect, much like his father Hal. Jeff persuaded them that he could still take a technical course at Cutler if his art school majors didn't work out. For Cutler did have a few architectural courses one could take as a transfer to a related technical school or college. Once he heard that, Hal was sold on the idea as a backup for his son and agreed on financing the tuition for Jeff going to Cutler...provided Jeff had transferable credits from Brunn.

But at the moment, things didn't seem to be working out that way for Jeff. Eventually he would have to show that letter to his parents, leading Jeff back to square one.

Rushing around to get cleaned up and dressed, Jeff reached into the closet, pulling out his best casual duds for the event this morning. He hoped to get to the radio station before Sheila signed off around noon this particular day. Having read the DJ schedule on B.R.R.N's web page, he noticed Sheila was working four hour weekend mornings. 8 to noon this month instead of evenings, trading off the time with the other student DJ's on a monthly basis.

Once he arrived at the station, he went inside. In the main lobby, there was a large glass window for looking inside the actual live studio where Sheila was on the air. Jeff began tapping on the window to get her attention. It did. A song had just finished playing as she turned to see Jeff at the window.

"...that was 'Undertow' by 'Blue Faded Napkin' from their latest cd, 'Reconstituted Ice Pack' that's climbing the charts holding at number five on the top ten. I've had more than a few requests for that band this week during the evening show here at B.R.R.N. And now here's one going out to the chemistry department students over at 'Grunge Hall' though Brunn calls it Enoch Hall. Here's 'Delight To Ya Swagger' by Two Blind Crisp, an up and coming Fenlow City garage band with their current Hip Hop Electronica song. Makes you wanna raise your hands and give it up here on B.R.R.N..." Once the song began playing, Sheila faded her microphone volume and got up from her DJ chair, exiting the live studio room to talk to Jeff.

"Yes, can I help you?" Sheila asked.

"Um, yeah, I-"

"Wait a minute. You're Jeff Castleberry? J.P., right? You're the one who was sitting next to me during Professor McMullin's synopsis the other day."

"Jeff or J.P.. My friends call me J.P., either or. Listen, that's why I came here. I wanted to apologize if I embarrassed you in any way at the synopsis. I was admiring your hands," Jeff said.

"I think you embarrassed yourself more than me. My hands? What about my hands?"

"Hands?" Jeff answered nervously. "Well, hands can tell a lot about a person. Well, what I mean to say is that I've never seen hands like yours."

"I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"Oh, I mean they look like hands one would see in a fine art portrait oil painting. Hands that care about a lot of things like the future of the person and the persons they have a connection to. As I was watching you write your notes, I noticed how-" Jeff softly said before Sheila interrupted.

"Huh? Oh, you must have heard me on the academy's radio program last week. The interview I had with the academy's biology Professor Quinn talking about winter skin care protection. Professor Quinn told me how good my hands looked and how well I take care of them. Are you with the academy's newsletter?"

"Uh, no, but your hands-"

"Yeah, that was an informative interview with the professor. She talked a lot about preventative skin care for the winter. She gave great tips on certain hand lotions we should be using right now. Why, do you need any hand lotion?"

"Uh, no, but what I'm trying to say is-"

"Hey, the song's almost over. I've got to get back into the booth. I've still got a couple hours here. We can talk more about it and have a coffee once I get off work. My treat. I only have an hour of free time

today before I get busy again."

"Uh, sure thing," Jeff responded.

"Great. I'll meet you off campus at Coolidge's Coffee Shop around 12:30. Later."

"Okay."

"See you then," as Sheila returned to the booth, back in the studio chair just as the song ended and cued her microphone. "Hey, let's keep the groove movin' with another hot one this week. This is going out to this year's graduate students in Kale House. It's the hot metal band from Madison, Thrushfire. From their latest cd 'Winged Fury', it's 'Avalon Spires' here on B.R.R.N.," as Sheila cued the cd.

Jeff stood there for a moment looking through the booth window at Sheila, who was looking at the control board and her clipboard. Jeff began quietly mouthing the words he wanted to tell her, 'I love you'.

the gargoyle king's return

The shadows of the full moon in a clear, starlit sky reflected off the textured stone prison walls of Castle Grimoire onto the dark moat waters below. Nestled between both kingdoms, Grimoire was a holding fort for prisoners of war during the Great Conflict, depending on which kingdom or gryphon or gargoyle army had control of the castle. Since the end of the Great Conflict, the Consul had taken charge of control of the castle until the land disputes between the two kingdoms were settled. Quietly hidden behind a row of hawksberry and lydeknyle shrubbery, several pair of dark eyes looked up at the stone arch pulpit of the king's solar. The next move would have to be precise and accurate for the guards walking the allure would arrive in passing a few moments for their nightly watch. Patience and stealth would be necessary for the insurgence of the fief about to take place. A wrong move to usurp the present monarchy would cost dearly for the first stage of the uprising. It had been long in planning and taken several lives of gargoyle and gryphon the last time the castle was attempted to be sieged.

Farris, The Dark Gryphon; a skinny, bat-faced sorcerer gryphon, confided with a small army of gargoyle to relinquish the seat of power on the same climate of night then as it was now. Jarduche, King of the Gargoyle, would've wanted his old ally Farris to lead his dark army to victory; to overtake the throne in a political coup of unbalancing the Consul of Aviatyre's decision on Jarduche's imprisonment. Only an existing force powerful enough to hold a stone warrior in a castle of stone must have been 'magickal'. This 'force' also had another means of value to its possessor besides keeping stone soldiers at bay. It could also 'bend time', so to speak, if the words of its ancient incantation could be spoken and performed correctly. Indeed, the immense power of this magical amulet could, in favor of a battle, change the tide, or time, if need be...

As soon as both guards had made their way completely inside their opposing mural turrets from their nightly watch, the short window of opportunity arrived for Farris to move the plan into action. Timing was critical at this point. He signaled to the three other stone warriors that accompanied him.

Standing alongside the outer curtain wall on the berm, each gargoyle began to slowly climb the massive fortress. Their stone clawed hands, feet and paws digging into the outer curtain wall with every movement, much akin to a spider climbing a vertical surface with ease. Once all four reached the top of the battlement, the gargoyles quietly and carefully moved down the mural stairs from the wall walk to

the inner ward of the first hold.

Once on the ground, they came upon a massive iron yett in front of a large donjon leading to the tower catacombs. The larger, heavier chested gargoyle, looking like a cross between a Siberian tiger and a Brahma bull, was signaled to rip open the gate.

The horned tiger/bull gargoyle moved into position in front of the gate. His massive fists dug into the iron yett like it was a ball of clay; bending, crushing and shredding it open as though he was opening a tin can with ease. Once the remnants of the twisted iron gate were removed and cast aside, Farris signaled the shorter, squat looking gargoyle to stand watch at the opening. Then Farris and the other two gargoyle moved quickly inside the hold to the steps up to the tower room where Jarduche was held prisoner.

Upon arriving at the upper most room of the tower keep, a short hallway led to a large iron door at the other end. It seemed far too easy to reach and rip open to rescue Jarduche. But Farris already knew what to expect at this point and told the others to stop where they were while he observed the immediate surroundings of the short hallway. His judgment had been correct for the group to stay put for he did notice something strange about the surroundings. On the wall to his immediate left, an unusual glow emitted from the wall overshadowing the glow from a single small wall torch on the opposite wall near the iron door. The light from the center of the wall seemed to have a movement of its own, a revolving vortex of color suspended in midair.

Reaching into his hip sack, Farris pulled out a small metal button and tossed it on the floor near the iron door. Suddenly, a large, blinding bolt of lightning arced in a wide path from one wall across to the other wall, disintegrating the button into nothing, not even ash. Farris again reached in his hip sack pouch and pulled out a sphere shaped amulet on an ancient chain and held it high above him. He then whispered an incoherent incantation. Strangely enough, the steady vortex of light emitting from the wall was drawn from its place and swallowed up into the sphere. Farris then whispered another incantation and the iron door turned into dark, powdery ash as it fell, disintegrating into dust onto the brick floor of the hallway.

The immense figure of Jarduche emerged from his prison hold; a large, broad shouldered gargoyle slightly larger than the tiger/bull gargoyle. Deep scars on his right forearm and under his eye from past battles easily identified his physical features.

"I knew the power of the amulet would purge me from enemies," Jarduche spoke confidently as he raised his fist. "Was there much confrontation, Farris? Were you seen?" as Jarduche shot a look towards his most loyal servant whom helped free him from his tower prison.

"No, My King," Farris noted in return. "The plan went well. The Consul did not even question the disappearance of Seignoir Draemer's coach and his belongings inside the coach that were left behind. They sent another coach for his unexpected leave to Port Satyreclore for the 'nonexistent' meeting with the monastery cleric Count LeMay and his order. We also took care of the squire who went to look for Draemer's coach. Hypnosis of the mind is quite useful, indeed," Farris noted as he handled the amulet to Jarduche's waiting hand.

"Indeed it is, my friend," Jarduche stated. "Once we have Mortis's blessing, Tyral, Yarrow, The Consul and all the leaders of the other lands will eventually kneel to all our demands, especially Nordellan. I owe him for what he did to me and my people. Now we must proceed to Gryth Wood as to

what we must do next for morning will come soon enough so stealth and silence are in our favor for now."

Lord Nordellan

Lord Nordellan, the eldest and wisest of Pymra eagles and head of Consul, had seen much throughout his long life. Nordellan, along with Lord Draemer, are the only known Pymra's in existence just before The Great Conflict annihilated the archipelagos where most of the Pymra lived. Nordellan, though, always holds out the hope that other Pymra could still be found living on other distant islands. His younger years spanned long before the Age of Orax when the inhabitants of the those islands were just coming into being with different cultures.

The Great Conflict, though, changed all that.

While some cultures flourished or spread to adjacent or other islands, others began wars with those whom were already inhabitants of those islands. It was then that Lord Nordellan decided to build a foundation, a Consul containing a mix of different cultures from those lands. The Consul would oversee the problems within those islands that would warrant the need of diplomatic intervention. The Consul helped to promote a common people working for a common bond for all. Though, at times, the monarchies and inhabitants resistance to compromise made it difficult to pursue a peaceful resolution. Especially those lands that held ancient cultures, rituals and secrets long before the Age of Orax. Nordellan was not unfamiliar of such cultures, for he had little doubt of the existence of 'spiritual beings' or 'guardians' of such lands having 'magickal' connotations co-existing with other lands incurring a 'fragmented' past as 'one land'. One land, before the volcanic activity and the oceans had divided it into archipelagos of diverse cultures spread far and wide. One island, in particular, the island of Haebrugg, being of mysterious origins as well as one of the largest archipelagos known...

escape aftermath

The royal coach arrived at the prison hold of Castle Grimoire carrying Seigneur Nordellan, King Orachon and Cardinal Rigor Mortis a day after the prison break. A messenger had been sent to Yarrow by Captain Trelayne to inform Consul and King Orachon of the escaped prisoner. Once inside the Captain's hold at Grimoire, worry was showing across both Nordellan's and Orachon's brow. They began discussing the breach with Trelayne, a white feathered Phyorcthorian hawk who was Captain of The Guard at Grimoire.

"Your Majesty and Your Eminences, I can't understand how it could have happened. I had at least three tour of guard on that watch seeing over Jarduche," Trelayne pleaded.

The Cardinal injected, "Lord Nordellan, I understood that there was extra protection in place in case of escape. An enchantment by the amulet placed on the wall outside his prison door. It would destroy Jarduche, if not finish him off if he even thought of escaping out that very door. Put there by the Consul, I do believe, and by will of His Majesty, as an extra deterrent, in case Jarduche attempted to escape by himself or with help from his minions."

"Indeed it was, Your Eminence and Your Majesty," answered Nordellan, "but the protection was missing as well as the prison door. I fear something far much worse than just Jarduche's disappearance. The only way that the protection could leave that wall is if the amulet is missing as well!"

"But wasn't Seignior Draemer holding the amulet last for his research into its origins?" inquired the Cardinal.

"Yes," continued Nordellan, "but Draemer was to return the amulet back to His Majesty before the Consul departs Ornathys. Before he left, Draemer related to me that he had received a parchment from a cleric by the name of Count LeMay instructing Draemer to leave the Consul immediately. Draemer was to return to Port Satyreclore to meet with the cleric LeMay on the cleric's possible expulsion as the Count of Duchantel Monastery. LeMay was desperate for Draemer's mediation to stop the suzerain's attempt on LeMay's position at the monastery.

"Did Draemer mention who wanted LeMay removed from Duchantel Monastery?" Orachon asked.

No, he did not mention who. As a member of Consul, Draemer has the authority as a mediator on Satyreclore. Sometime before joining the Consul, Draemer lived at Port Satyreclore and he told me LeMay was an old friend of his. However, in retrieving his personal coach to return to Satyreclore, Draemer was told his carriage had gone missing by Belnapp, the Elite Guard Scout and Head Squire of the Stables, under command of Lieutenant Berwyck. Belnapp related to Draemer and Lieutenant Berwyck that a pack of wandering thieves had stolen the coach Draemer arrived in. Unfortunately, inside Draemer's coach contained the wardrobe that His Majesty's amulet was stored in. Belnapp then retrieved another coach for Draemer to leave immediately for Satyreclore while Belnapp, himself, rode off in search for Draemer's missing coach per Lieutenant Berwyck's orders. So far, it's been a day and neither Belnapp nor the stolen carriage have returned."

King Orachon then spoke soberly, "It seems the fault lies within my power to all what has happened here. I trust Lord Nordellan and His Eminence will see that Belnapp and the amulet's return is what's keeping a possible outbreak of war at bay if the amulet has fallen into the wrong hands. There are so many obstacles right now for me to handle between the gryphons, the gargoyles, and Aegolth's 'lee of stone' that Aegolth's people need an entire island in order to prevent a travesty of shared fiefs within the kingdoms. I take it Lord Cellus as well has his hands quite full, Nordellan, with Draemer's absence from the Consul?"

"If it please, Your Majesty, that it is still possible for Seignior Draemer to return for the completion of the negotiations if not for Lieutenant Berwyck's tribunal hearing per the ruling of the Consul on the disappearance of the amulet. I also know that Seignior Cellus, who is meeting with Lieutenant Berwyck at the moment on the matter of retrieving the lost carriage, will have his 'legislatif' on the fief lay of both kingdoms during the next Consul," Nordellan spoke to Orachon, "Cellus had mentioned that to me prior to meeting with the Lieutenant."

"I, too, as well would be curious of what Lord Cellus proposes, for Your Majesty and My Lord, for 'my enumeration' is already in discussion with the Consul," slightly berated the Cardinal.

Nordellan then turned to the Cardinal. "Then, Your Eminence, if I may inquire," Nordellan interrupted, "would Lieutenant Berwyck's probable tribunal by the Consul, being as he is your brother, in any way affect your decision on these proceedings with Yarrow and Tyrall?"

"My dear Seignior Nordellan," Rigor Mortis chided. "My brother had no choice in the matter of his possible treason to His Majesty, the kingdoms and the Consul with Belnapp's absence along with the disappearance of Lord Draemer's coach. His responsibilities to the kingdom come first since General Daellon and Lieutenant Kaeleos are currently at sea to find a missing Elite Guard per Your Majesty's

directive. The outcome of what my brother and Belnapp could be facing with 'misplacement' of Seignoir Draemer's possessions including His Majesty's amulet lies with the decision of Consul. It is irrelevant and inconsequential of my brother's circumstances to my decision for the Consul with Gryth Wood and both kingdoms' lee of stone on the table. Besides, I'm sure my surreptitious warrior 'brother' is quite capable of handling whatever comes at him, however difficult it may be for him...hmm, yes....," as the Cardinal grinned an evil smile.

CHAPTER IV

a reflection of concern

"So this is the waterfall of your youth you were telling me about," Lord Cellus noted, seeing the tall, split waterfall surrounded by the lush island landscape of Ornathys.

"Yes," replied Berwyck, "there is still another ancient cave on the other side of Ornathys used for the ocean side defense of the island by the Elite Guard. But this particular one has special meaning to me for where I've been and where I am heading to."

"There is truth to your statement that beyond the beauty of the waterfall one will find another extension of where one's path in life is connected to," answered Cellus while admiring the beauty of the landscape around the waterfall.

Berwyck paused a moment. "One thing has troubled me for some time, though. I've still yet to find that symbolic meaning of what relationship I truly have with my brother, His Eminence, and my own duties in serving the kingdom at times. My brother's mind seems clouded more and more lately with his one and only self that I've yet to understand. I sense our own relationship has been strained for quite sometime due to his duties within the kingdom hierarchy and I fear something may happen between us. There is also something I have not told anyone else. During our youth, Rigor always seemed to be on a 'darker path', a type of worship to the departed. Even before my brother's entrance into monasterial work, the death of his childhood friend, Lespar, was always a crutch he could never let go of. Lespar was found impaled on one of his father's lances in Gryth Wood. Lespar's death shocked my brother so much so that our relationship changed more noticeably from that moment on. I remember right before his ascension to become Cardinal of Yarrow, he confided with me that he still could not face the fact that Lespar was gone. From those I've heard from who worked around him, there was and still is a much closer spiritual friendship than our own sibling brotherhood during our youth. And I now fear Rigor is martyring Lespar, even after his unfortunate death. Lespar's presence rising again from the after life is still there but through Rigor."

"Berwyck," Cellus interred, "I feel it goes much further than what you are telling me. I too noticed something very distant about His Eminence's demeanor during the last Consul. Your brother's own persona of what seemed to me to be a 'personal resentment' of the Consul's propositions. Propositions which prove fair to all, royalty and peasant alike, within the joint kingdoms on Ornathys I am involved with through many meetings with the Consul. Recently, the Cardinal presented this 'compact' that would prove to be more damaging to the interests of both kingdoms and their people. Having time to review it myself it before the last Consul, your brother's 'enumerated compact' bothers me greatly. The compact's wording and definition on the structure of fiefs, in my opinion, would most likely run rampant. Like a plague throughout all the archipelagos of island kingdoms as well, tying them all together under 'one' monarchy! At the moment, I would tell you to be very aware and cautious of you and your brother's actions in anything you both do involving the matters of the kingdoms from now on.

Remember, I could only postpone your tribunal with Consul. If only I could do more to prove you are innocent to Consul. As your friend, I do believe you are innocent.”

"So you're saying that I should not trust my brother's integrity or word in regards to our relationship and his work within the kingdom?" Berwyck questioned.

"Very much so, my friend. Very much so," Cellus answered. "My hope is also that Belnapp returns soon with the stolen carriage so your own head won't be on the Consul's target."

"Right now, I trust Belnapp more than the outcome of what my brother may have in store for Yarrow," replied Berwyck.

the secret package

Night fell as Chancellor Gareruff was racing on horseback with the secret package as fast as he could through the expanse of Gryth Wood, straight to Tyral's Elite Guard. General Metgare was waiting patiently for a rider from Yarrow to deliver a package that, unknown to Metgare, would upset the balance of power between the kingdoms. The Cardinal had earlier sent word by messenger to Metgare regarding Draemer's missing carriage due to the fact there were 'possible conspirators or spies' from the kingdom of Yarrow.

Upon reaching the turret tower of Tyral's castle wall, Gareruff dismounted his steed with a questionable package in hand, walking towards the drawbridge of Tyral's kingdom.

"Halt! What say ye?" called one of two guards on the rampart to Gareruff as he approached the castle gate.

"I am Chancellor Gareruff, a messenger of His Eminence, Cardinal Rigor Mortis of Yarrow. I was sent here on an urgent matter to see General Metgare. For I deliver a message of urgency from His Eminence to the General regarding the Consul," replied Gareruff, slightly waving the satchel in the air in clear view of the guard.

"Wait there," halted one of the guards as he disappeared from the rampart for what seemed like several minutes.

The guard approached the large walled hold of Tyral's Captain of the Guard and knocked on the chamber door.

"Enter," boomed General Metgare's voice from inside.

The guard entered the heavily weaponed room walking on a carpet made from the hide of a giant Wirantic gray wolf that spanned the length of the room to the General's desk. Metgare was sitting at the desk reading the 'compact' that the Cardinal had presented to the Consul, King Orachon and King Aegolth on the two kingdoms. Metgare looked up at the guard.

"Yes?" questioned Metgare staring at the soldier as Metgare laid the parchment he was reading face down on the desktop.

"General, there is a messenger from Yarrow outside the castle gate. He claims he's Chancellor

Gareruff. He has a message of urgency from his Eminence regarding the Consul," stated the guard.

"Chancellor Gareuff? Is he armed?" questioned the General.

"No," replied the guard, "but he's carrying a satchel."

"A satchel? Bring him to me," ordered Metgare, his brow raised.

"Yes, sir," acknowledged the soldier, about-faced and walked out from the General's hold.

A few moments later, Gareruff the Hare, Chancellor Secretary to Cardinal Rigor Mortis, entered the General's hold escorted by two of Tyral's Elite Guard. As Gareruff approached the General at his desk, the General ordered both guards to leave the hold and stand watch outside his door. Metgare offered Gareruff a chair to sit in front of his desk. Gareruff removed his cloak and hat, then sat down, keeping the satchel close at hand but in full view.

"Chancellor Gareruff, what brings me the honor of your visit here this evening to my humble outpost?" replied the General, fixing his gaze on Gareruff. "I understand you have something quite important for me from His Eminence, Cardinal Rigor Mortis, according to the previous message he sent me. Would you favor a hot cup of some dark calumet tea I'm having? It's quite refreshing. It will quell the evening's chill off one's bones. Or perhaps some rosewood camomile bitters I save for guests of royalty?"

"Camulet tea please, thank you," replied Gareruff, as Metgare handed him a cup of hot tea. Gareruff spoke after sipping the hot, dark brew. "First, His Eminence wishes to extend his highest personal gratitude to you, General, for your handling of the Guard at the Consul the other day for Their Majesties, King Orachon and King Aegolth. His Eminence also wants to present you with a high honor of both kingdoms from Their Majesties for your services during the Consul on your next visit to Yarrow...ah...just a moment," as Gareruff reached into his surcoat pocket and pulled out a small, rolled parchment with the Cardinal's wax seal on its edges. "Furthermore, His Eminence instructed me to give this to King Aegolth as soon as possible," Gareruff added as he handed the sealed parchment to Metgare.

"I will be seeing His Majesty tonight shortly before he retires to his solar...and...?" inquired the General looking at Gareruff holding the satchel in plain view, pointing at it.

"Oh yes...I nearly forgot," replied Gareruff looking down at the package, "His Eminence has also secured me to present you with this for safe keeping until the Eclection. It is part of the presentation for your services to His Eminence to be worn during your Eclection of Honor by His Eminence. However, you are not to open it just yet but to bring it with you for the Eclection a week after the Consul leaves the island. You will know then what it's for."

"Oh," mumbled Metgare as Gareruff handed him the package, "I'm honored and humbled to know that His Eminence has chosen me for such an honor. Though, tonight, I had thought he had another message for me besides securing Tyral's perimeter from those 'spies' he informed me about in his previous message."

"His Eminence acknowledges that those 'spies' are still at large. And possibly there are also those in both kingdoms that may have knowledge of their whereabouts," replied Gareruff. "The spies will

certainly be caught at some point when they least expect it. His Eminence will inform you the same as before whether it's through myself or secured messenger on what to do next. As for now, you've already done what was asked of you."

"Well, I'm happy His Eminence is content with what I have accomplished so far," chimed Metgare, wearing a slight grin on his beak. "Though recently, I've been disturbingly reminded of His Majesty's recent concern about an ongoing mystery for quite some time. It involves the royal treasure. My brother Fedrox had been robbed by a clever thief at the Iron Crow one evening many years ago. That thief made off with several royal gems that my brother was holding on orders from His Majesty, King Aegolth. At that time, I gave the gems to my brother for safe keeping until the Consul came to Yarrow for an honor presentation to Lord Nordellan. My men are still tracking that elusive thief down to this day, and once he's found, he will be hanged!"

A swollen lump had formed in Gareruff's throat, for he had already known whom the thief was. Gareruff's memory quickly shot back to the moment he was preparing the Cardinal's itinerary on the upcoming Consul meeting with the kingdoms when he had come across several small old parchments within the Cardinal's study chamber. One of the parchments contained an Elite Guard report with Lieutenant Kaeleos having confronted the thief Belnapp, retrieving the stolen gems and returning them to King Aegolth. It seemed strange to Gareruff that Metgare would still question the royal gems disappearance from many seasons ago. That same moment, Gareruff had also come across another interesting parchment with remnants of a wax seal that attached itself to the Elite Guard report. The parchment, a royal pardon, curiously handwritten and signed by the Cardinal and King Aegolth 'releasing' an Elite Guard named 'Larco' from confines in Tyrall for a 'disturbance' within both kingdoms. Curiouser still was that on the reverse side of the same parchment, a hastily worded 'writ of banishment' with the Cardinal's signature and the remnants of the Cardinal's and Aegolth's wax seals.

General Metgare looked curious at the sudden change in Gareruff's facial expression, his eyes distant.

"Is there something wrong, Chancellor?" questioned Metgare intently.

"No, nothing," coughed Gareruff; his voice cracking as he tried to clear his throat, nearly choking, snapping back to reality. "Nothing. I hope your men will capture that thief soon and retrieve the stolen gems that were meant for the presentation to Lord Nordellan," as Gareruff reached for another sip of tea from his cup.

"In his last message, His Eminence, Cardinal Rigor Mortis, also entrusted in me something about his brother, Lieutenant Berwyck. Something to do with the kingdoms His Eminence would elaborate more on later. Does this have anything to do with the 'spies' I'm looking for?" inquired Metgare.

"His Eminence told me he will inform you on what you are to do you next time you hear from him for he is quite busy right now with his duties until the Consul leaves the island. Just keep that package safe," said Gareruff as he finished the last sip of tea from his cup.

"Very well then, but I want to be notified as soon as possible when His Eminence has a free moment," responded Metgare sternly.

"Absolutely, General," answered Gareruff, "I will let His Eminence know of your request as soon as he has a chance. Now, I must return to Yarrow before it gets any later. Traveling through Gryth Wood during nightfall is quite dangerous if one took the wrong paths through the Wood. Until we meet again,

good evening, General," as Gareruff placed his cloak and hat on, leaving the room.

"Good evening to you, Chancellor. Many a safe journey to you as well," replied Metgare as he returned to reading the compact.

a cup of thought

Jeff arrived at Coolidge's a little after 12:30 pm. As he walked inside, he caught notice of Sheila sitting in one of the booths against the back wall.

"Hey, Hands! Over here!" Sheila called, waving and looking at Jeff.

"Hans?" Jeff said, pointing his finger to his chest.

"No, not Hans. Hands," Sheila replied with a smile, pointing her finger to her hand. "Ok then, Jeff Castleberry, come over and sit down."

Jeff walked over to her booth and sat down across from her. "The name's Jeff."

"I knew that silly. Sorry," as Sheila took a sip of her latte.

"I, uh, wanted to talk to you about-"

Just then, Sheila's cellphone went off ringing, interrupting Jeff. "Excuse me a moment, Jeff. Sorry."

Sheila quickly glanced at the name on the phone display before holding the phone up to her ear.

"Hi Kurt. What's up? Yes? Right now? Just stopped at Coolidge's having a latte after my radio gig. I'm heading over to the library next and then I-"

Sheila gave the 'just a second' finger to Jeff as she got up from the booth and walked to the door outside to the parking lot, stopping in front of the window of the booth where both Jeff and Sheila were sitting at. Jeff couldn't hear what Sheila was saying but saw her arm and hand expressions waving about as she paced along the length of the window.

"Can I get you something to drink?" a waitress appeared, catching Jeff off guard looking out the coffee shop window.

"Uh, do you have anything else besides coffee to drink?" Jeff replied, looking at the waitress.

"We have plain ice water."

"Ice water, please. Thank you."

"Sure. Back in a minute," the waitress giving Jeff a questionable stare before she walked off. As Jeff returned to looking out the window, he saw Sheila returning back inside from the parking lot. She smiled as she sat back down in the booth with Jeff.

"Sorry about that, Jeff. My apologies," she said. "That was my fiance. He's coming by to pick me up

in a couple minutes. I'm going to have to cancel our meeting here. I totally forgot that I committed myself to go with him to his parent's for dinner this evening. I'm really sorry about this. I'll make it up to you, I promise. Can we reschedule this meeting for tomorrow?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess," Jeff replied, looking disappointed.

"What are you doing tomorrow around lunch time?"

"Uh, nothing that I can think of at the moment."

"Great. You can come meet me at Fenlow City Pizza off Fenlow Boulevard downtown for lunch. I definitely know I have free time the entire day. I'll buy you a pizza and drink, my treat. Then we can discuss what's on your mind about the hand lotions."

"Sure, uh, but I-"

"Oh, he's here. That was quick," Sheila interrupted as she saw Kurt's red Ferrari pull into the parking lot. "I definitely owe you more than a cup of coffee tomorrow for taking your time today to see me. I'll see you at lunch tomorrow, Hands," Sheila smiled as she got up from the booth.

"It's Jeff," he replied.

"I know," Sheila returned before she walked out the coffee shop door. Looking out the window, Jeff watched as Sheila walked over to the red Ferrari convertible where Kurt was waiting for her as she opened the door and got in. The roar of the Ferrari's exhaust kicking up dust from the parking lot pavement as the car sped off in huff; the Ferrari's tires screeching in short spurts as Kurt shifted through the gears.

"Here's your ice water. Five dollars," the waitress said, catching Jeff off guard again, as she placed the bill with Sheila's latte on the table. He reached in his wallet and gave her a five dollar bill.

"Big tipper, aren't we?" the waitress returned.

"Oh. Sorry," Jeff replied in embarrassment as he plopped a couple more bills in her hand.

"Thanks," as the waitress walked back to the counter.

of cloak and dagger

Winter arrived through an unexpected surprise on Ornathys as a major ocean snowstorm set in during the last day of the summer solstice. Night time seemed to evoke the long days ahead as several inches of snow began falling unusually upon this subtropical land. This particular snowstorm would last for several days. In fact, much to the worry and hardship of those who tended the land for farming and bringing their wares to market, the storm made an additional burden to bear during this time of year.

True, it was uncommon for such a large storm of this magnitude to hit the island during the warm season, though every twenty years or so the trade winds had brought more than their share of nature's colder wrath. The below freezing temperatures had turned once flowing streams and waterfalls into

frozen glacial geometrics amongst the whitened landscape of the island's subtropical climate.

A large shadowy figure, dressed in a dark cloak, trudged along in the cold night wind and deep snow making its way to the Iron Crow. The shadowy figure walked around the side of the pub and into a narrow walkway in the back. An old wooden door opened and the figure went inside away from the frigid environment. Small candles lit along a narrow wooden stairway leading down into the dark root cellar of the tavern. Many bottles and casks of fine spirits and ale sat between wooden rafters strewn with cobwebs and dust of age.

Upon reaching the dirt floor of the root cellar, footsteps from another corner of the room were heard. Another figure in still another dark cloak approached out of nowhere and sat down at a small table near the other figure, lighting a small candle on the table.

"It's proving to be common for those of the monarchy to stoop as low as peasants, don't you agree, Your Eminence?" the voice of the shadowed figure at the table spoke, removing his cloak. "Your messenger arrived yesterday with your parchment to have us meet here on this inhospitable evening."

"Your Majesty, my sincere apologies for the timing and inconvenience of this meeting. But it is vital that we both meet here now before the next Consul. For I have something of urgency to confide in you without the Consul interfering, be that it is irrelevant to the weather or the Consul at this moment," the voice of the figure still standing replied.

"Mortis," the figure at the table spoke firmly, "I have little time, if any, for another inordinate meeting between us. The Consul has been irritating me with its bargaining chips as well as your 'enumerated compact' seeming to be of little interest to them. And now, this very evening, instead of being at my comfortable and warm royal study, you want me to bear the brunt of this frigid weather just to meet you here incognito. If this particular matter is not significant enough for me to be here, then I can easily recommend that you would make a fine 'plaque' on my study wall once you are 'beheaded!'"

"I assure you, Your Majesty, you will think twice about beheading me once you hear what I have to say that involves a few gargoyles, the Consul and its appropriation to one of its own, Aegolth," slowly remarked the Cardinal.

The room became still and quiet for a moment as only the hushed sound of the wind stirring outside could be heard through the cellar timbers. An occasional candle flicker interrupting the dead silence.

"Gargoyles, eh? Appropriation? Hmm. You have my interest. Tell me more, Mortis," King Aegolth inquired, wearing an inquisitive brow.

As skillfully as he ever was a liar, Rigor unfolded his deadly plot only 'he' himself knew about...

Rigor began to formulate his elaborate lie. "Well, Your Majesty, according to Lord Nordellan, during a recent conversation with Lord Draemer, it seems a 'conflict of interest' arose between Lord Draemer and Lord Cellus regarding the securement of Castle Grimoire involving a 'certain' gargoyle locked up there..."

"Jarduche?!!" Aegolth replied anxiously.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Rigor continued. "As you know, many years ago, during the Great Conflict with Jarduche in control of his army of gargoyles, both kingdoms battled the gryphons and gargoyles whom were trying to siege Castle Grimoire. Yarrow and Tyrall both having heavy losses on all sides. If it were not for the power of the amulet, Jarduche would have not been captured. Thus Yarrow and Tyrall would now be under total control of gryphon and gargoyle. Only three seasons ago, a particular group of gargoyles and gryphon alike had planned a similar insurgence on the castles. But they were foiled in the attempt for the prisoner was moved to an undisclosed temporary location of which only a certain few Consul knew of. Lord Nordellan being one of them. Yet, at the same time, there was also word of 'spies' who informed the gargoyles and gryphons of Jarduche's location. Unfortunately, those spies were never caught, though there is word of one that had seen the transition. My personal Chancellor, Gareruff, informed me of this recently upon a visit to the Iron Crow several seasons ago. He had overheard a peddler talking to a 'weasel thief' about the gryphons and gargoyles. And now that same 'thief' is a Yarrow Elite Guard Scout."

King Aegolth remained quiet for a few moments before he spoke.

"What about the Appropriation?" Aegolth quietly questioned to Rigor as he frowned at the Cardinal.

"Ah, yes, I almost forgot," chuckled Rigor, "the Consul had also given 'authority appropriate' exactly one season ago to Lord Cellus on the securement of Castle Grimoire prior to Jarduche's recent escape. The securement of Grimoire was originally offered to Draemer by the Consul to study the amulet. However, Cellus changed Nordellan's mind on using the 'amulet' as an extra secure measure from escape. With that, the Consul, in turn, offered the securement to Cellus."

Aegolth remained very quiet and still in thought, his eyes focused slightly off to the side of Rigor as candlelight flickered off them.

Rigor paused a moment. "I hope I have given Your Majesty some food for thought on the issues at hand and to be of any service to Your Majesty of the highest resolute I can offer," as Rigor grinned the wickedest of grins at Aegolth upon finishing the sentence, hiding his true pretense well from Aegolth.

CHAPTER V

an abandoned warrior

The blurred image of a blood red afternoon sky fell upon Belnapp's eyelids as he slowly began to regain consciousness of his whereabouts. The damp leaves on the ground from a cold early morning rain where mist droplets had attached themselves to the weasel's brow and muzzle. He awoke gasping and coughing from nauseating pain throughout his body once the chilled air had awakened his senses reminding him of the reality of his current predicament.

He felt a numbness in his right paw as he tried to move - just then, a sharp pain raced from his shoulder to his paw. His right arm was swollen, possibly broken or fractured, as well as being bruised and battered throughout his body. Belnapp felt as though he had gone through a night of a drunken donnybrook at the Iron Crow. Dried blood had trickled down the fur on his face as he wiped the dirt from his brow and eyes. He felt he had been left to die in a thickly wooded terrain on the island, though 'unfamiliar' with the immediate vegetation and landmarks he knew well as an Elite Guard Scout on Ornathys.

Suddenly, Belnapp came to the realization that he was not on Ornathys. He had not ventured anywhere off Ornathys in his lifetime but knew of the existence of other islands. But where was he? Belnapp now wondered if the Elite Guard would ever find him since he was no longer on Ornathys. "They'll never find me," he thought. His survival had taken priority over finding Draemer's missing coach. Belnapp's head was pounding as he groggily arose to his feet; his legs still wobbly from lying on the damp earthen soil. Every bone and muscle in his body wracked with pain as though he had been trampled by an army of Syorthian soldiers. His stomach growled from hunger and pained from the bruising he had taken from his mysterious assaulters. He felt as though he may have been lying there for a few days losing track of day and night. Leaning up against a tree for balance, he looked for a landmark to identify his original location in case he became lost while looking for help. The red afternoon's sky creating landscape shadows revealed two large twin boulders along a serrated rocky ledge that were within sight of his area.

Reaching into his cloth satchel, he began searching for something to use as a ground marker to retrace his steps. He came across a small blue pouch containing lydeknyle seed he collected for seasoning vegetables. The color of the seed was a brilliant yellow amber, yet small and light that a gust of wind could toss it anywhere, potentially losing his trail in the process. He looked again in his satchel for something larger, but found nothing else. The assaulters had completely emptied their victim's satchel, minus the seed. With no other option, Belnapp decided to take his chance with the lydeknyle seeds and began dropping two to three seeds on the trail as he left his location. The oncoming darkness approaching would inhibit his search for help until daybreak. After walking a distance uphill, just beyond a large thicket of dense foliage by a rocky crag, he stumbled upon a large cave to rest his wounds from a day's travel. The setting sun began slowly edging into an early evening fractal light over the landscape as a clear, moonlit sky eventually enveloped everything, dropping temperatures in its wake.

Morning arose again for Belnapp after seeking shelter from the cold night on the seemingly deserted island. He had lost enough blood for him to sleep for several hours on the floor of the cave. When the first rays of sunlight hit the cave's entrance, a wall of smoky quartz along the inside of the cave reflected a sparkle onto Belnapp's muzzle, stirring him to awaken from his slumber. The large stone cave he had taken shelter in was looking very different this morning. The sunlight reflecting from the quartz crystal wall at the cave's entrance surprised him. Unfamiliar glyph markings carved into mosaic patterns spaced unevenly along the floor and walls became visible. After rubbing his eyes for a clearer view, the walls of the cave appeared somewhat squared off and even rather than jaggedly round and imperfect. The markings on the floor appeared more like ancient runes of a lost civilization leading down into the dark abyss of the cave. He could not decipher their meaning and took time to examine his surroundings more closely, rubbing his paw over the embossed markings.

Strangely enough, on the cave wall just a short distance from him was what appeared to be a walking staff with a large, dark crystal orb mounted on the top of the staff. The staff suspending itself on an ornate stone and metal sconce mounted about five feet from the ground. More glyph etchings were carved into the staff as well as the unusual looking sconce holding it. Curiosity had been getting the best of Belnapp by now as he groggily rose to his feet and hobbled over to the staff on the sconce. As he approached the staff within a few feet, a loud pop came from the center of the dark orb, startling Belnapp that he fell down onto one knee. A bright light then began to emit from the orb as Belnapp realized that it must be some type of torch. As the orb's light flowed into the larger, darker realm of the cave's inner sanctum, he could see many corridors and other objects deep within the massive rock structure. Nervous and shaken from his ordeal so far, he needed to find food soon. But his adventurous curiosity was getting the best of him and told him to venture inward. Looking into the pouch containing

the lydeknyle seed, he realized there were very few seeds left to use as a trail. Dismayed and panged with hunger, he resolved to press on or die trying to find something or someone to help him. Grabbing the light staff as a walking stick, he swallowed a large lump in his throat and began his trek into the cave's unknown reaches...

a questionable affair

Jeff arrived at Fenlow City Pizza a little after noon time. The lunchtime crowd in the shop had three lines; two at the registers and one for order pickup and take out. Quickly scanning the tables and booths, he caught sight of Sheila sitting at one of the tables in the center of the pizza parlor. He hoped she wouldn't leave him the bill this time. He had little money left for the week until the next week when his father would give him an allowance.

"Jeff! Over here!" Sheila waved her hand, catching notice of Jeff in the crowd standing near the doorway. Jeff walked over and sat down at the table with Sheila.

"Hi," started Jeff, "So, I hope this time I can get the chance to tell you about-

"Oh, the pizza's here," Sheila interrupted, as one of the servers from behind the counter brought two slices of bacon pizza setting them down in front of Sheila. "Sorry, Jeff. I ordered ahead of time. Ordering ahead is a bad habit of mine when I'm usually in a rush on most days. Go ahead. Order whatever you'd like. My treat," as Sheila then took a sip of her large lemon/lime soda.

"Thanks," Jeff said as he looked at the menu folder on the table. The same waiter approached the table seeing Jeff sit down earlier.

"Good afternoon, sir. My name is Harvey. I'll be your waiter here at Fenlow City Pizza. Can I get you anything to drink to start?"

"Uh, yeah. I'll have a large cranberry juice," Jeff said, looking at the drink portion of the menu. "And also I've decided on getting two slices of pepperoni pizza to go with that."

"Thank you. Be right back with your order," as the waiter walked back to the counter.

"Thank you for lunch," Jeff said, looking at Sheila.

"It's my way of apologizing to you for my changeable schedule lately. I really wanted to make it up to you this time," Sheila replied.

"I appreciate it very much."

"Now, what's on your mind you wanted to tell me? Was it regarding Professor Quinn's skin care promo interview the other day?"

"Uh, well, it wasn't about that..." Jeff nervously answered.

"Oh. Was it the on the phone interview program I had with Odeon of SledgeWing earlier this week?"

"Uh, no, it wasn't about that either."

"Hmm. Well, what was it you wanted to tell me about? By the way, where's your tablet?"

"Uh, I'm not a reporter for the academy paper either."

"Oh. Well what do you want?" as Sheila's curiosity arose.

"I, uh, that is-" as Jeff was interrupted by the waiter setting down the plate of pizza and drink on the table in front of Jeff.

"Will that be all for now?" asked the waiter looking at Jeff.

"Yes, thank you," Jeff replied.

Once the waiter left, Sheila looked at Jeff. "So, what do you want?" as she took a bite of her pizza.

"Um," Jeff started, "Sheila, I, uh, I just wanted to tell you how very nice you are. And that I've never met someone as beautiful as you. I can't help thinking about you. I'd really like to know more about you."

Sheila stopped eating and looked at Jeff for a moment.

"Thank you very much, Jeff. I appreciate the compliment but I'm already taken."

"Uh, yes I know that," as Jeff voice became disheartened, "But if you ever need someone else to talk to, I just want to let you know I'm here."

Sheila blushed slightly. "Thank you, Jeff. I appreciate the offer but I have to go." Sheila reached into her purse and pulled out a few bills. The waiter who had served them was walking by as Sheila waved to get his attention. He stopped at their table.

"This should cover our meals," Sheila told the waiter, as she handed a \$100 bill to the waiter. "Keep the tip. It's from Mr. Fenlow."

Jeff was surprised at what just happened as his reaction on his facial features turned to shock, his jaw dropping.

"Yes, Miss Corvo!" the waiter replied, "Thank you and Mr. Fenlow very, very much!"

"Wait! What just happened here? All of a sudden you're leaving? Now?! I don't get it!" Jeff questioned Sheila as she gathered her purse, getting up from her chair.

"I have to go, Jeff," Sheila replied. "Believe me, I do appreciate your concern for me. But I'm in too deep with Kurt and his family."

"What? So you're gonna let him order you around? Is that it?" as Jeff's anger started to show over his concern.

"Please, Jeff. I don't want to talk about this anymore right now," Sheila somberly noted as Jeff's

mouth was open in shock for what he was about to say next.

"What do you mean you can't tell me? Listen, Kurt thinks he can run this town just because his family's politics and money have their say of power and who they can control," Jeff fumed.

"Jeff, it's not what it looks," Sheila replied. "I can't tell you anymore. I have to go now. Goodbye, Jeff," as Sheila walked out of the pizza parlor door leaving Jeff alone at the table.

Jeff sat there in shock for a moment trying to figure out what just happened. Jeff then got up from his chair, exited the pizza parlor and began looking up and down the sidewalk to see if Sheila was there. But she was nowhere to be seen.

Jeff's heart would have to wait for another opportunity it seemed. But the next time would prove to be more difficult because of Jeff's earlier confrontation with Kurt.

the guardian of the passages

As Belnapp trudged along the mosaic tiled floor inside the strange sanctum, thoughts of how he had somehow arrived on the island entered his groggy mind. He had left on orders from Lieutenant Berwyck to find Seignoir Draemer's missing coach.

He remembered riding on horseback through Gryth Wood on that cold, cloudy evening. Belnapp had ridden many times on the 'true' paths through the Wood having been taught the whereabouts of all the true paths by Kaeleos. When he was just a thief, Belnapp used the dense cover of Gryth Wood to hide from the guards. He learned of 'safer paths' in the Wood from peddlers who would use those paths when traveling between kingdoms. Eventually Belnapp became a Royal Scout of The Elite Guard as well as a warrior and Squire for the kingdom of Yarrow. Now that he was older and much wiser as an expert on these paths leading through Gryth Wood's convoluted maze since they would most certainly befuddle a newcomer.

Belnapp began contemplating the last time he had seen General Daellon and Lieutenant Kaeleos. Both had left Ornathys several seasons ago to sojourn to other archipelagos in search of Larco, the missing Elite Guard warrior whom was Xucca's mate and Berwyck's and Rigor's father. Daellon left Lieutenant Berwyck in charge of the Elite Guard until their return. Yet it had already been two seasons since Daellon's and Kaeleos's venture began and no word or sight of their return back to the kingdom.

In Belnapp's search of Draemer's carriage, it began to snow lightly as he approached a clearing just inside the center of Gryth Wood where several large boulders lay. The area known as 'Celdoom Pass' where a stance of one of The Great Conflict battles between gargoyle, gryphon and hawk took place. Many warriors on all sides had perished during battle at the pass. Though legend has it that the ghosts of those warriors of that horrible time still haunt this part of the Wood. And if one listens quietly to the wind blowing across the hilltop location not far from Raedre Mountain, one can hear the moans and echoing shrills of death and defiance from warriors whom had perished there.

As Belnapp reached the center of the clearing, he remembered feeling a sharp, numbing pain to his head, losing his balance and falling off his horse onto the ground. Darkness began to overcome him and all his senses. Suddenly, he began hearing words of a strange incantation repeating over and over within the darkness surrounding him. He felt a tightness around his arms and legs. He couldn't move either of them, nor break free as though a rope was tied and bound tightly around them. He felt

powerless, hearing the echo of a repetitive incantation by someone, taking control of his mind and his movements, echoing down to the core of his psyche. And when he awoke, he found himself still alive laying on the ground of this strange land, bleeding and in pain yet not knowing his exact whereabouts. A mystery as to why he was walking inside this oblique and unusual cave not just to find help but also to find the answer why he was brought here.

The orb's light on the staff grew dim as Belnapp entered an enormous chamber within the stone walled sarcophagus. The orb's bright white light transfigured into a liquidy, saturated blue as Belnapp reached the center of the chamber vault floor. The temperature of this room was very cold to Belnapp. For he wished he had worn a much heavier layer for such an extreme climatic change; much colder than the hallway he had just come from. Belnapp stopped for a moment to examine his surroundings as his warm breath from his nostrils revealed wispy clouds that slowly rose high into the still air. The glyph markings on the floor were much larger and formed a detailed mosaic pattern somewhat similar to the hallway's. The ceiling launched very high up into the darkness as Belnapp could barely decipher its height in the blue light. Castellated multicolored igneous rock along the walls of this room contained spiral-like patterns of illuminated minerals like nothing Belnapp had ever seen before. Straight ahead of him loomed five very tall chamber archways, dwarfing the perspective of the archway he had just entered into the main chamber from. Each entry had a series of different glyph lettering embedded into the rock face above them except for one archway. The last one to the farthest right of Belnapp revealed a glowing indigo light over its entrance. But which one should he choose? The slower, pulsating glow of the indigo archway beckoned him to enter. For as he did so, the chilled air made him shake profusely to leave this particular chamber quickly.

As Belnapp entered into the archway from the chamber, the temperature moderated up to a comfortable level for him. The orb light on the staff changed to green, though still dim, yet enough for him to see ahead. Belnapp's hunger was growing steadily by now. He felt lightheaded from not eating and began to question his logic for venturing so far into this abyss. Feelings of desperation and curiosity had overcome his sensibilities, slowly eroding what was left of his sanity and physical state. The roaring of his stomach pained inside him as he came to a rise in the pathway where he stopped to rest to gather his balance and senses. Breathing was becoming more difficult and pronounced by now, panting through his mouth with every step he took. Belnapp's body now wracked with pain when making any slight movement. Having lost a lot of blood, his mind and body were beginning to get the best of him. He thought that if he ever did return back to Ornathys without Draemer's coach, he would be imprisoned for royal treason as well as his whereabouts. Panic had set in.

Just then, a thought popped into Belnapp's mind. Cherry gingerbread snaps. His favorite food!

A tart, sweet, gingery, crunchy delicacy that he could not resist! It permeated his senses. He used to enjoy eating them during the harvest festival in Yarrow when bakers in the marketplace would spend days creating and baking delicious snacks for the kingdom. He hoarded many of the tasty treats to take with him as a snack during training he had with Kaeleos. Next to precious stones, he loved cherry gingerbread snaps! Out of nowhere, a light, familiar odor embodied his nostrils and emptied into his senses. It was the smell of cherry gingerbread. Now he thought he was going mad. It couldn't be true! His stomach loudly growled and ached as his mind registered the tantalizing smell. But where was this smell coming from within this dark labyrinth maze? Belnapp had to find out. With what energy he had left to summon, he gathered his strength and followed his muzzle to the odorous trail of his heart's desire. As he pressed on further into the darkness, he came upon a dead end. Nothing ahead of him but three surrounding walls and the way which he had come from. But the smell was getting stronger. How

could that be? He was at a dead end and there was no archway or visible entry to anywhere.

Disheartened, he glanced downward to notice large glyph symbols on the floor that ended at the wall ahead of him, much larger than the glyph symbols he had seen earlier. Moving the orb's torch light to try to read and understand them, the symbols began to emit an eerie glow upon themselves as Belnapp watched in curious shock. Suddenly, he felt very lightheaded and his body felt very strange and quite lightweight to the point of him being 'transparent' and floating airborne. He was feeling as though he was transparent, like a very thin sheet of 'toscao'. An incredibly light fabric coming from one of the surrounding islands he had heard about from peddlers on the ship trade routes. Feeling weak, nauseous and about to faint, Belnapp tried to catch his balance with his paw touching the wall in front of him just as his entire arm and hand penetrated through, disappearing into the wall! Was he dead or insane? How was this possible?

Retrieving his balance, he pulled his paw and arm back in towards him quickly, examining them to see if both his extremities were all still there and then touched the wall once more. Again, his paw and wrist passed right through the wall startling him. By now the smell of cherry gingerbread was quite pungent and aromatic by now, driving his senses crazy at this point. Strange enough at that moment, something told him to move forward towards the wall, to walk directly 'into' the wall. Shaky and unsure, Belnapp took a deep breath, closed his eyes, put his left foot forward in front of him and walked into the wall. He felt nothing, no barrier or pain in doing so. He stopped short after a few steps, opened his eyes and turned to look behind him. Now there was a wall behind him, the same wall he had 'walked through'! Shocked from the experience, Belnapp looked ahead of himself and yet he was in still another chamber. This chamber was much vaster and even larger than any he had previously entered. Several lit torches emitted a low light encircling the enormous diameter of this chamber. The orb's light had now changed to a dim white light. As he moved the orb's torch light ahead of him, he could see profiles of several large statues along the room's perimeter. A rectangular shape or table stood in the center of the chamber floor covered by a white corporal. There were steps leading from each corner of the room down to the tomb or altar-like object that had a cold, sterile appearance to its geometric placement within the vast chamber.

Belnapp slowly walked down the steps to the level where the object stood. Upon reaching it, he ran his hand slowly along the white linen cover surface and felt its texture. It felt airy and cool to touch, yet very smooth and lightweight. The smell of the cherry gingerbread was very pronounced by now, yet there was no sign of the food he so desired. Belnapp paused to contemplate his current predicament. Here he was lost on an unfamiliar island, starving to death, injured, having lost a lot of blood. Cold, weak and barely the strength to stand if not for the walking staff. And yet, why was he here and what brought him here besides his curiosity? The answer would come quickly as a voice out of nowhere called to him...

mind games

The afternoon returning back home from Fenlow City Pizza seemed an eternity. Jeff now knew in order to begin to obtain Sheila's trust, Jeff would have to remove the obstacle standing between him and Sheila - Kurt Fenlow III. But why was Sheila contradicting anything was wrong with what she was doing handing the waiter a \$100 bill for a \$25 meal? Why was she giving into Kurt? Did she really love him or so it seemed? Was she hiding something secretive that would harm the Fenlow family's political fortune and stature? All these questions began racing in Jeff's mind. He noticed Sheila seemed to have a strange demeanor when Jeff and her first met. But then again, except for her radio DJ gig, Jeff thought he knew her well enough.

As Jeff was driving along, he had the academy's radio station tuned in on his car radio. 'I Think I Love You' by The Partridge Family was playing. It seemed strange to hear an oldies song on the academy's radio station since their format was mostly hip hop, electronica, pop or metal formats. Once the song ended, Damon Howard, the student DJ on that time slot, came on the air:

"...that goes out as a special request from one of our own DJ's here at B.R.R.N., a pretty lady who usually does the metal, hip hop and electronica programs during the nights here at the station. She's requesting it to a school friend out there in radio land who is looking for love but gave no name of who that student is..."

"Whoa, it's me!" Jeff thought.

Hal's car was already in the driveway when Jeff pulled into his shoveled out parking spot. Jeff's father was home unusually early today. His father had been working of late at Conley & Griff Architects the last few weeks before the holidays arrived. Sometimes not arriving home until the wee hours of the morning. Conley & Griff Architects had big accounts with Richard Fenlow II. The structures they designed over the years showcased Fenlow City's growth from it's downtown skyscrapers to the several suburban malls surrounding the heart of the city. Hal was working on designing another large mall structure related to several land purchases made by Richard Fenlow in the Sycamore Valley Park area about 4 miles outside of Fenlow City. Sycamore Valley was once 40,000 acres of prime, fertile farmland. The entire valley was bought out from several contractors last year by the Fenlow accounts to build 3000 modular homes along with the mall structure Hal was put in charge of designing. Of course, Jeff's father was noticeably exhausted these last few weeks. He'd been having little or no rest from working overtime, including working staggered weekend hours to get the designs done before next month's meeting of the Fenlow Board of Directors. That was the set deadline on using Conley & Griff's designs or risk losing the entire Fenlow account.

"Mom. Dad. I'm home," Jeff announced as he dropped his backpack in the mudroom area of the kitchen.

"Glad you're home, Dear," Jocelyn chimed, "Dinner will be ready in awhile. Your father would like to see you in the study."

Jeff didn't like the sound of that. Jeff's father was a firm individual. A former army lieutenant as well as a former military investigator for servicemen who were defendants or plaintiffs on military trials or tribunals. Hard work along with a good work ethic were his father's principles during his early life, though marriage and family eased his tolerance level substantially. Still, his harshness could be like a bullet in his decisions. Something Jeff hoped to avoid. Maybe someone from Brunn Academy or Cutler Art College called to let them know of the 'insufficient credits' Jeff needed to go to Cutler. Jeff knew he had to take whatever his father wanted to talk about like a man. Jeff began walking towards the study where his father usually sat to read the paper after dinner. Hal was sitting in the black leather desk chair at his desk. On his desk were two important looking business envelopes that had been opened. Hal was reading the Fenlow City Times on his laptop while the letters were laying next to the laptop.

"Ah, Jeff. Good to see you, son," Hal said, taking his eyes of his laptop for a moment. "We need to talk for a moment about what's going to happen in the next month or so."

Jeff was worried but hid his worry as best he could for what his father was about to say.

"Yes, dad, what is it?"

"I've already told your mother about what's going to happen so she already knows. I'm home early from work because I feel I have to tell you now since this is necessary," Hal spoke.

Jeff reached panic mode. This was it! He knew about the insufficient credits! He knew!! But Jeff remained tight lipped and held his breath.

"Jeff, there was a big meeting at the company today and I was at that meeting with all the architects at the firm. The company has decided to send me overseas for awhile as a project leader. The Sycamore Valley mall project I've been working on for the last month was handed over to another architect to complete. Our biggest account client, Richard Fenlow II, recently brought land interests in the UK around London and wants me to draw up details for several business buildings to accommodate his corporate partners in his firm located there. I will be getting double my salary for the next few months I am there with all lodging paid for as well. Sad to say, I won't be here for the holidays with you and your mother. But I should be returning here by the end of March at the very least. Mr. Fenlow personally chose me from all the other architects for this project and Mr. Conley was very pleased he did. So while I'm away, I'm hoping you'll keep your studies up and email me from Cutler. I will be submitting the tuition for your classes once I receive notice of your transfer credits from Brunn."

"Thank you, dad," Jeff admittedly hadn't shown him the letter from Brunn Academy. "I'm gonna miss you while you're away."

"I'm gonna miss you both as well. By the way, your mother told me you received a letter from Cutler the other day. Where is it?" Hal asked.

Jeff had to think fast. Lightning fast.

"Uh, I was with Chuck at the library the other night studying. I took it with me to show him. I was looking for it this morning in my backpack and I couldn't find it. I had Chuck looking with me for it too. I think it may have fallen out of one of the books I had it in while I was there. I was going to head over there after supper to see if it was in the lost and found bin at the librarian's desk," as Jeff perpetrated the perfect white lie.

"Well, hopefully you can find it there still. I need that letter of your endorsement from Brunn to cover your tuition at Cutler."

"Oh, I'm sure it's still there."

"Let's hope so," Hal added firmly. "Now, I have to get packed. I have a mid morning flight tomorrow. Tell your mother to call me for dinner. I'll be upstairs starting to pack for what I need the next three months I'm going to be in the UK," as Hal closed his laptop, got up from his chair, carrying the laptop under his arm and headed up the staircase to the master bedroom.

Jeff never did get to tell his father about what happened with Sheila and Kurt since the letter sidetracked Jeff's train of thought. Probably for the better he didn't mention either since the Fenlow's had the upper hand and would ruin Hal's job and reputation if Sheila said or mentioned something to Kurt about Jeff at the pizza parlor.

CHAPTER VI

a soul spirit of the temple

"You are the one known as Belnapp. I can hear your thoughts. You have come to seek me out," the voice seemed to come out of nowhere as Belnapp now thought he was finally going mad now that he was hearing things. "Lie down and you will see me," the voice commanded.

Belnapp felt a presence that he could not see. He felt a tug on his arm yet nothing or no one was there. Suddenly, he started losing feeling in his hands and arms, having no control of his body motions or movements as he was being lifted up onto the cold, altar slab with invisible help. In his mind he wanted to run, but he couldn't. There was nowhere to run in his weakened state while this invisible force was taking over his entire body and mind. He felt hopeless. Words began to fill his mind; repetitive words of a dialect he could not understand.

"Cha...oh...ta..bey," repeated in Belnapp's mind as he became lightheaded and soon found himself helplessly chanting those words while laying on the altar.

Out of the corner of his eye, his blurred vision caught a puff of white mist approaching him from out of the shadows, changing shape as the mist approached. As he watched, the mist began to take on a form of a robed avian priest that stood over Belnapp. As the form came into clearer view, Belnapp could see the outline of the face of his captor.

"Who are you? What do you want with me?" Belnapp groggily whispered.

"I am the temple guardian. My name is Razantrope. When I was in my physical body, my name was Larco," the robed figure replied back. "I am here to heal you. You must relax and remain still."

"You are Larco?" Belnapp questioned. "There are Elite Guards looking for you. General Daellon and Lieutenant Kaeleos. And Xucca."

"Xucca?" the priest replied as his eyes wandered, "Ah, she still remembers me?"

"Uh, yes, you left her alone with her children? Your children? Long ago? Don't you remember? You are in much trouble with the Elite Guard as well." Belnapp moaned slightly as he felt a sharp throbbing pain rush through his body until he relaxed his muscles.

"Please do not move or be upset. There are several reasons why I am here now. For there is much you do not know about me that I will explain so that you will understand why," Larco calmly replied as he held the palms of his talons above Belnapp's body lying on the altar slab.

Belnapp's consciousness was fading in and out yet he could still hear Razantrope's voice.

"Go on," Belnapp murmured as his body began to feel something like a surge of cool water going through every nerve in his body.

"First of all, I am not who I was or what I seem now. When I was Larco, I was banished from Ornathy's by a writ of banishment from the kingdom."

“Banished? Which kingdom? Who banished you?” Belnapp asked.

“King Aegolth of Tyrall and the Cardinal. They had accused me of spying on Tyrall and locked me in prison for some time. Eventually they decided it was better to send me away never to return.”

“I’ve always felt something odd about the Cardinal. So, where did you go?” Belnapp asked.

“After I was banished from Ornathys, I took leave on the cargo ship from Satyreclore that came in for supplies. On the return trip to Satyreclore, the ship sailed into a violent ocean storm and the ship and its crew were lost. But somehow, I was adrift on one of the ship’s timbers and landed here on this island, Haebrugg.”

"I'm on Haebrugg?" Belnapp inquired slowly as his body felt numb but relaxed.

"Yes, and you made it inside the Temple of Chalynn."

"Chalynn? I am inside the temple?" Belnapp puzzled.

"Yes."

"But why do you not return to the mainland? Why not leave this temple?"

"That is the problem. And also the solution. When I washed ashore on the island, I had lost a lot of blood and my body had been brutally battered by the wreckage of the ship during the storm. I believe I was already dead when I reached the shoreline..."

"Dead? But how is that possible? I am talking to you."

"Yes, but as I told you, I am not what I seem. As my body lay there on the shoreline, an old spirit guardian from the temple took my soul's 'essence' from my deceased body back to the temple. There he taught me many mysterious things about the temple overshadowing the stories and legends of wild magick that I had heard of in my youth. Just before he crossed over, he gave me his blessing to protect this temple. Now I cannot leave the boundaries of this temple forever. I am its guardian, its protector."

"Then I am dreaming? You are a spirit guardian?"

"No, you are not dreaming, my friend. Now you must rest, for you will be well enough to leave here soon," as Razantrop smiled back at Belnapp.

The smell of cherry gingerbread snaps permeated Belnapp's sense of smell, as his eyelids began to weigh heavily until he dozed off into a sound, deep sleep.

a plan awaits

A winged, shadowy figure stood by the large fire in the deep snow as several gargoyle and gryphon sat around, looking to the figure as he spoke.

"Tonight, the time for our people is now! Our kind have been ruthlessly slaughtered and banished by

those in power since The Great Conflict divided our races. Our people will not surrender to be caste aside by those who do not accept our kind. And we will not accept their terms any further, for we now have the power of the amulet to guide us to our freedom!" as Jarduche spoke, the subtle glow of the amulet around his neck reflected off the fire's glow.

"We have heard there are those within the kingdoms that support our cause also. Is this true?" a gargoyle from the circle spoke.

"Yes, that is true. For if it were not for them, our possession of this amulet would not have been possible. The plan to free us has already been set into motion by their assistance. All they ask of us is to follow what has been put forth for us to use, such as the amulet. A tool to our victory over the Consul and those that get in our way. We will be a free people once more!" Jarduche stated.

A cheer roared up from the circle of gargoyle and gryphon as the grin on Jarduche's stone facial features glowed with the fire light.

an old friend returns

The snowstorm's intensity increased outside while Cardinal Rigor Mortis felt safe inside his cathedral sanctuary from nature's poignant wrath, sitting rigidly at his throne. His eyes, lifting up occasionally, viewing the few rows of empty pews cloaked by night's suffused ambiance reflected by Yarrow's vast cathedral knaves. Rigor read the small parchment King Aegolth had handed him of quickly written changes of wording involving the shared fiefs between Yarrow and Tyrall as an addendum to Rigor's 'enumerated compact'.

It was still very early in the morning as the Cardinal arrived out of winter's dark reaches of The Iron Crow having met most of the cold winter's evening with Aegolth. Tiredness began settling into Rigor's mind from the meeting between both parties earlier this evening. Only the fire from a single wall torch was throwing little, if any, warmth as well as subtle light and shadows dark around his profile. The granular noise of sleet tingling and scratching against every single stained glass pane in the cathedral; growing louder as the wind from the snowstorm outside grew in intensity. The rhythm and varying intensity of icy sleet hitting the stained glass panes. The sound increasing and decaying in synchronicity at times with the wind outside drew upon Rigor's conscious and subconscious, alternating between alertness and drifting off to sleep.

As Rigor's eyelids begin to weigh heavily, all he hears is the rhythm of the sleet hitting the panes. Aegolth's parchment falls from Rigor's lap onto the marble floor as Rigor's mind wanders to another plane of existence within his dreams...

"Rigor?" announces a voice coming from seemingly nowhere until Rigor notices a silhouette move in the darkness among the back rows pews.

Rigor eyes widened immediately in recognition, startled to hear the familiar voice of his departed friend Lespar clear as day, just as he existed in Rigor's childhood. Lespar's youthful profile is still subdued from the darkened cathedral as he appears to walk down the center aisle towards the great chair Rigor is seated in. As Lespar approaches closer, his features became more prominent. He had not aged one day.

"Lespar? Is...is that you?" Rigor calls out, though it feels like a slow motion effort for Rigor to talk

or even to move as his entire body feels like heavy stone. Like some kind of force or magickal binding was holding him at bay.

"Yes, my old friend," answers Lespar to Rigor sitting in his throne. Lespar approached Rigor, moderating his pace as the suffused light enhanced Lespar's profile as he spoke, "For I have returned, my old friend, to repay you for our friendship. All these years I have missed you and I being together again as the adventurous culprits we were. Do you remember? But first, I have something to show you," Lespar halted as he stopped within feet of Rigor.

As Lespar began to grin a wide, sinister grin at Rigor from one side of his face to the other, Rigor nervously twitched a half smile in return at Lespar's strange grin. Lespar then raised his left paw and pointed to the darkened center aisle of the cathedral where Rigor's body, mind and soul were immediately drawn to. Rigor could feel his own 'soul's rug' being pulled out from under him...

Suddenly Rigor realized he was no longer in the safe confines of the cathedral, but in the same open meadow of his childhood past where Lespar and Rigor were 'play jousting' on that fateful day in his life. Seeing this vision haunted Rigor as his own fears begin to break out through his feathered facial features. For he did not see Lespar anywhere in sight. That is, until Rigor turned around from where he stood and looked directly behind himself. Rigor's jaw dropped sharply as his eyes focused on the lifeless body of Lespar impaled upon the lance, his solar plexus pierced through and bloodied.

"Oh no, this can't be! No, not again!" cried Rigor to himself, backing away in awe and anguish from the sight of the impaled raccoon.

Before Rigor could utter another word, the lifeless, impaled corpse of Lespar opens his eyes, coming to life. Lespar tries to move from his deadly predicament. The raccoon taking clenched paws to the lance begins to struggle frantically and furiously to lift up his body and free himself from the lance's shaft. As Lespar is struggling to remove the instrument of death that has sealed his fate, he turns and stares wide eyed at Rigor. Blood dripping from his lips, his dark eyes aflame with anger pierces into Rigor's psyche.

With a deep, unearthly moan, Lespar yells to Rigor, "You are the cause of all that is happened here and all you have been in contact with since!! You should be the one impaled on this lance, not me!!!" Lespar continued to spurt blood from his mouth as his words read on to Rigor. "You will be wraithed upon such a wraith that no other has escaped from! Death is much too good for you, my old friend! The monument I now caste for you is my cryptic justice for which you shall, upon my ending words, be paramount! You will not exist! You have never existed, except as a sore on the face of all that is life! And you will now pay that price, My Liege, with my final charge!!!"

Upon completing those words came an agonizing yell with a mighty surge and heave of muscles as Lespar began yanking his impaled body from the lance. One he freed himself from the lance's shaft, it left a very large open gash at his solar plexus that had daylight passing through. Just then, the tip of the bloodied lance began to glow wildly with circular colors of light streaming from one end to the other. The raccoon after seeing the bloodied spear tip a fireball of light began grinning a steady, even grin at Rigor.

"My justice for you awaits!!!" Lespar then hurled the spear tip of the lance straight between Rigor's eyes, penetrating deep into his skull! Blindness, then sharp burning pain as the deadly war instrument penetrated deep into Rigor's lobe.

"Aaaiieee!!!"

Rigor screamed loudly, the cathedral hall reverberating the death knell screech of a hawk in deadly, agonizing pain. After a moment, Rigor stopped screaming, opened his eyelids and stared cautiously at the empty hall. Still shaking nervously as his primary feathers loosened scattering midair from his screech his tearing eyes scanning the pews to see if anyone was there.

He was alone.

The cathedral was still empty.

Just a nightmare.

Nothing had happened.

All he could hear was the sleet hitting the stained glass pains of the cathedral and his own staggered breathing as he sweated profusely awaking from the nightmare. But he had lost a friend in that fierce memory along with what he had left of his sanity. He had not been found guilty of the play joust, yet the deadly joust was over nonetheless and far in the past. So why did he run away after his best friend fell on the lance? He couldn't save Lespar from the morbid injury of the protruding weapon, yet, could he have helped him? And why did he run so far away from what had happened in the meadow? He didn't know what to do then except to find an alibi for himself for what had happened, for he would surely be hung or imprisoned for this murderous crime. But one thing was for sure. He couldn't escape from his past, that part of his past that had followed him to his current age he was at now. The ghosts of his past had to do him in tonight to jar his memory once again.

"Leave me alone!" Rigor yelled out, then pausing a moment.

But there was no answer except his own echo reverberating throughout the cathedral. Tiredness and sleep began to lurch upon his troubled mind and body. Still nervously scanning the barren hall, he slowly got up from his throne and walked towards the heavy oaken door of the tower steps that led to the cocoon of his solar. He stepped cautiously looking behind his back with every step he took. The ghosts had made Rigor blink, for he still had to get through the rest of the night until sunrise...

the illusion of order

"Seignoir Lord Cellus, may I have a moment with you and His Majesty, King Orachon, in his chamber?" Nordellan questioned Cellus as individual discussions between groups of Consul members continued in the Great Celestial Hold inside Castle Yarrow.

Thousands of books and scrolls as far as the eye could see scaling the many shelves within the Celestial Hold from its tiered, surrounding wooden balcony catwalk along the highest knaves of its arched ceiling. Detailed reliefs of Yarrow's history lined the tiled stones on the walls and columns in the room as well as on its furnishings. Cellus was preparing to elicit another round of discussion regarding Rigor's 'curiously revised' enumerated compact that had just been presented to Consul when Nordellan interrupted the debacle. The chatter of the room was only seconded by parchments shuffling about on the large, knurled legged wooden table in the middle of the room.

"Yes, My Lord," Cellus replied back to Nordellan the moment just as Seigneur Draemer was walking into the Consul meeting. Draemer's face was looking rather perplexed; his facial muscles paradigmizing knotted features. His gaze fixed upon Nordellan and Cellus rising from their chairs at the end of the large table where the Consul members were sitting. Nordellan and Cellus glanced back at Draemer at the doorway entrance.

Even Rigor Mortis caught notice of Draemer's unexpected appearance at the doorway as he halted his own discussion with one of the Consul members. Rigor had shaken off his nightmare from the previous night, though he was somewhat tired preparing for another day of Consul talks. Rigor's eyes turned towards the end of the table noticing Nordellan and Cellus preparing to exit the room by the archway at the opposite end of the chamber. Rigor became surprised, almost panic stricken at the sight of Draemer's early return from Port Satyreclore.

Just as Nordellan began signaling Draemer to follow Nordellan and Cellus around the opposite side of the large discussion table, Rigor quickly arose from his chair and stood directly in front of Draemer's path, blocking Draemer's advance towards them.

"Seigneur Draemer," Rigor implied as he greeted Draemer, "you've returned in time for reviewing the compact that I've just completed revising for the Consul to decide on the shared fiefs. I've already prepared your itinerary regarding the fief charts of Tyrall and Yarrow that Consul formally proceeded to concur with..."

"Your Eminence, please forgive my great pardons for what you've undertaken arduously at great lengths to prepare for me during my untimely absence, but I wish to see Lord Nordellan as soon as..." Draemer politely urged, interrupting the Cardinal.

Rigor then interrupted Draemer in return, "I'm afraid Lord Nordellan and Lord Cellus have been excused from Consul for a pressing matter at the moment with King Orachon in his chambers, but as soon as he's free I'll will inform him of your immediate concern. However, I do believe King Aegolth will arrive here shortly before the Consul begins final discussions and I can direct you to him promptly for your matter, if you'd like."

"Thank you, Your Eminence, but I need to speak to Nordellan alone as soon as he has a free moment. Is he here?" Draemer responded inquisitively.

The Cardinal felt a verbal 'slap in the face' of distaste and defiance by Draemer's rejection of the offer to speak to King Aegolth personally. Instead, it angered Rigor inside to the point of revealing his 'maw' of disgust and discontent vocally to Lord Draemer. But the Cardinal held back for the plan was already in progress.

"Very well then, but I'm sure Aegolth will also be pleased at your sudden return from defending the potential suzerain attempt on Count LeMay's Monastery-" returned the Cardinal, biting his tongue to hold back the slang that was about to surge forth, finishing his statement.

"Yes," defended Draemer, "that is one of the reasons that I must speak with Nordellan and His Majesty. There was something that was not clear about..."

A trumpet sound announcing the arrival of King Aegolth interrupted their conversation.

"Ah!" interrupted Mortis, "If you will excuse me, Seigneur Draemer, but I do believe His Majesty, King Aegolth has arrived. General Metgare, His Majesty's Elite Guard Commander, has entered into the chamber."

The large iron and wood door opened as General Metgare entered the room, with the guards halting off to the sides of the grand archway door allowing King Aegolth to enter into the room. Metgare stood adamant at attention, casting a quick glance at Rigor as the Cardinal greeted Aegolth. Rigor glanced back quickly at Metgare, signaling a pronounced nod in return.

"My most humble and honorable greetings to the King of Tyral, Your Majesty, and His Personal High Commander to our Consul, General Metgare," grinned Mortis as the Cardinal had hastily left Draemer standing ominously alone and proceeded over to greet Aegolth and Metgare in observance of kingdom protocol. Rigor's wicked grin smearing across his beak from end to end, hiding his false pretense to his present domain of Yarrow.

"Good day to you, Your Eminence," chortled Aegolth, "I was expecting to see Orachon and Nordellan here as well," spoke Aegolth as his eyes scanned the room of Consul members still grouped in discussion. "Another day of discussions," sighed Aegolth.

"Yes, Your Majesty, but His Majesty, King Orachon, is presently in his chamber with Nordellan and Cellus on an urgent matter," remarked Rigor.

"Well then, if it's that important, it's beginning to look like I'm going to be here for awhile, Your Eminence. So shall we get started with the discussions then, hmm?" sighed Aegolth in boredom as in an abrupt hurry to leave.

"Yes, Your Majesty," stated Mortis, "As you can see I have already prepared your itinerary gathered from Consul's formal proceedings of concurrence to the fief proposals along with the 'enumerated compact'."

"Yes, I can see you have everything in good hands, Your Eminence. Well done...for the moment..." replied Aegolth, nearly staring off into space, ready to yawn as if he didn't want to go through another round of discussions on shared kingdom fiefs.

"I am always in your humblest gratitude of any means of service to you, Your Majesty," bestowed Rigor while grinning a sinister grin to Aegolth.

As the Consul began debating within the warmth of the fires inside Orachon's castle, outside the winter's eve was settling its dense frigid temperatures onto the snow packed, rimed layer of dormant frost.

Chapter VII

the unfolding of a disaster

While Consul was chatting amongst one another, Draemer sat down only a chair from where King Aegolth and General Metgare took precedence. Still, no sign of Nordellan, Cellus and King Orachon was to be seen, for the door to Orachon's study chamber was closed. Exhaling a sigh, he began to feel it was going to be awhile before he would be able to talk to Nordellan. As Draemer began reviewing the

fief charts on the Cardinal's compact, a voice called out to him.

"Seigneur Draemer, may I have a word with you?" Aegolth spoke, looking at Draemer, noticing he was alone as well.

Draemer slightly nervous turned to look at Aegolth. "Yes, Your Majesty?" Draemer inquired.

"My Lord, I wanted to congratulate you on your return from Satyreclore and Duchantel Monastery. I've heard you halted a suzerain attempt on Count LeMay's expulsion as Count of Duchantel and I want to express my support on your victorious return," Aegolth smiled back at Draemer as Metgare gave a proud grin of his own.

Draemer was slightly confused with Aegolth's response yet continued to speak. "Uh, thank you, Your Majesty. Indeed, it has been a long trip to return back to Consul."

"Indeed it is so," Aegolth commented, "for now you also have the responsibility of Grimoire to present to Consul the castle's lee of shared fiefs."

Still confused, Draemer replied back, "Um, if you'd pardon me, Your Majesty, you must be mistaken. I no longer have securement of Grimoire. The Consul made the decision to turn securement of Grimoire over to Lord Cellus some time ago."

"Oh? Really? I was briefed by Consul then, Nordellan actually, that you had the securement. I guess I must have heard Nordellan incorrectly. Now with Jarduche's recent escape from Castle Grimoire..."

"Escape?! Excuse me, Your Majesty, did you just say Jarduche escaped from Grimoire?!" Draemer's voice creaked.

"Why, yes. While you were away at Satyreclore, there was a prison breach at Grimoire. And word has it the amulet that kept him in his hold is missing as well. Nordellan, along with Lord Cellus, are both to handle the matter with the gargoyles and gryphons, the lost amulet and the upcoming Eceleiation of Consul before, perish the thought, any possible 'uprising' occurs from these events," Aegolth returned, hiding a slight smirk.

A cold chill ran through Draemer as the thought of the missing amulet hit him like a stone wall! He was responsible for the amulet's return to King Orachon. And now he feared the worst. For the amulet had been stored within his wardrobe inside the carriage he came in - the same carriage that was stolen after his arrival! "What have I done?!" Draemer thought as fear poured over his face.

Aegolth noticed Draemer's sudden pale facial expression. "Is there something wrong, My Lord?" Aegolth questioned.

At that moment, the door on Orachon's chamber opened. Orachon, Cellus and Nordellan entered through the door and sat down at the table directly across from where Aegolth and Metgare were seated. Draemer's eyes caught sight of the three.

"If you would please excuse me, Your Majesty, I have an urgent matter to discuss with Lord Nordellan," as Draemer got up from his chair, bowed and walked around the large table towards Nordellan.

"Indeed," Aegolth replied.

Draemer had gotten halfway around the table when the Cardinal, seeing Draemer approaching, got up from his chair and blocked Draemer's way once more.

"Seignior Draemer, please excuse me once again, but I wish to extend my apologies for leaving you back there. My royal protocol tends to observe the Consul's protocol..."

"Yes, Your Eminence," Draemer interrupted, "I understand, but..." Draemer sighed in context.

"Thank you," the Cardinal interrupted, "but I forgot to mention that King Aegolth also told me to tell you that he would like to extend an invitation for you to attend a celebration at King Aegolth's great hall a few days after Consul departs Ornathys. The Eclection for General Metgare. Now Aegolth has insisted that it's imperative that you attend, for he has something for you regarding your trip to Satyreclore, something quite important."

"Yes, Your Eminence, I am honored to attend His Majesty's celebration. Please thank King Aegolth for me. Now you must excuse me for I must speak with..."

"King Aegolth will be quite pleased that you will be attending the celebration," the Cardinal replied.

"Thank you again, Your Eminence," as Draemer walked around the Cardinal and finally sat down beside Nordellan.

"My Lord, I have something urgent to talk to you about my sojourn to Duchantel..."

"Shh, later, not now, Draemer, for King Orachon has something to say to Consul," Nordellan quietly replied back.

King Orachon stood up from his chair as the room suddenly became still. The crackling noise of the burning wood in the Great Celestial Hold fireplace was all that was heard.

"Members of the Consul, Lord Nordellan, His Majesty, King Aegolth, His Eminence," King Orachon spoke. "We have gathered here these last few days of Consul's visit to our island to discuss and resolve the land on which all of us share, equally and with our people. The purpose of Consul's visit has helped greatly in preparing us the proper forum and manner in which any and all fiefs of land are for both kingdoms to share alike. I am pleased with the efforts on the work of those on the Consul to greatly aid both kingdoms in these discussions. Now, with permission of his Lord Nordellan, Lord Cellus will begin to lead the discussion table this evening," Orachon ended.

"Thank you, Your Majesties, Your Eminence, Lord Nordellan and Consul members," Cellus prompted as he rose from his chair. "This evening, I also see we have Seignior Draemer here who has arrived, returning early from halting a suzerain attempt at Duchantel Monastery in Satyreclore. Before we begin this round of discussions, I would like Lord Draemer to stand and present us with his findings on his mission at Duchantel. Lord Draemer?"

Applause came from the table as Draemer stood up and began to speak.

"Your Majesties, Your Eminence, Lord Nordellan, Lord Cellus and members of Consul," Draemer nodded as he paused a moment before continuing on, hesitating briefly as his thoughts came together. "My return here to Consul came much sooner than expected. I...that is...my mission to Duchantel was something I wanted to discuss with all of you eventually. But I can now tell all of you here and now. When I arrived at Port Satyreclore by ship, there was no feuding or armies present, no visible suzerain attempt on Duchantel Monastery itself," as Draemer took in a great sigh as if he didn't want to say what was next, but continued as all eyes were on him.

"As I entered the monastery, the large wooden gate door opened with ease. The large locks and deadbolts of the gate doors had been tampered with, destroyed or missing as if someone had been there before me. Once inside, walking through the monastery, I called out to Count LeMay several times but there was no answer. I entered several vestibules around the perimeter of the monastery looking for anyone, but encountered no one. That is, until I came to the Great Hall." Draemer paused for what seemed like several moments. "As I entered the hall, off to the side there was an entombment of Counts who had led the monastery over the centuries. It might have been my curiosity to go have a look. Once I entered the chamber, as I began looking down at the floor, along the chamber walls chiseled in stone the names of the several counts whose bones are buried there. It was then I came across one that died more than a century ago. Count LeMay."

Hushed awe was heard from the room - except for those who held it in already knowing what happened there. Draemer raised his hand and the room grew quiet once more.

"What I have told you is true. I do believe that I was part of a ruse. An attempt at deception aimed at myself and the Consul by those who wish to deter these discussions. But there is also something else. The night before I was called to Duchantel, as I had settled down to sleep, I felt as if someone was trying to control my thoughts and my mind as I slept. Another strange thing pertains to the message I received. The message that was the reason I was sent to return to Satyreclore..." Draemer paused once again, "...that the message, itself, was in my own handwriting. And here it is," as Draemer reached into his pocket, handing the message on the parchment over to Nordellan. "In respect to all present here, I do not remember writing that message, nor having that message delivered to me. However I feel there are forces here at work that need to be explained." Low mumbling and chatter was heard around the room.

"You grew up in Satyreclore, did you not?" claimed the Cardinal, "Then you must have known about the Counts at the monastery?"

"Yes, that is true. But I left Satyreclore to go to the Archipelago of Thernopactys for my studies during my youth. I never visited inside the monastery or knew of the Counts who were buried there. Though I do feel that in some way I was 'prompted' to go back to the monastery though a dark magic I've heard of, yet know little about. A dark magick called 'hypnosis'."

Hushed awe was heard again from the room. As King Orachon stood up, the room grew quiet in anticipation of what Orachon would say.

"Seignoir Draemer, what you have spoken here is quite serious and should be taken up with Consul. And I would also recommend that our own kingdom's security be on alert with this event, do you agree Aegolth?"

Aegolth stood up slowly from his chair.

"Yes, Orachon, I do. But I would also advise caution with what Lord Draemer has told us so far. For we do not know of the implications of what this 'hypnosis' he claims he may have been under has anything to do with the fief discussions. We have not seen this 'enemy' of such that comes in one's sleep surely must have some logical explanation for happening. The risk here would be to follow what has no substance or relevance to our current discussions with Consul. I, for one, would advise Lord Draemer to take this up as a separate matter with Consul until more explanation is presented."

"Agreed," Orachon replied. "Lord Draemer, you are to take this matter up with Consul unless something requires our kingdoms to act on behalf of the matter. Lord Nordellan, do you concur as well?"

"Yes, Your Majesties. I will handle the matter further with Lord Draemer along with Consul after the discussions," Nordellan returned.

"Thank you, Your Majesties, Lord Nordellan and Consul" Draemer spoke and sat back down beside Nordellan. Waiting a moment, Nordellan tapped Draemer on the shoulder.

"I know of what you are saying, Draemer, so do not feel that you have accomplished nothing here. We will speak more of this in my chamber after the Consul adjourns," Nordellan spoke quietly.

"Yes, My Lord," Draemer replied, wondering what Nordellan had to say to him.

artistic feelings

"Such a rad night, Chuck! I actually got to go backstage to see ThrushFire with you. So cool! I'd never thought that would happen to me. You made my day. I can't thank you enough," Lisa spoke to Chuck as they walked to the car after the ThrushFire show.

"Yeah, it doesn't get any cooler than this. With those ThrushFire passes and you going with me made such an awesome night, Lisa!"

Lisa suddenly grabbed Chuck's arm, pulling him towards her, planting a kiss on his face. Chuck was surprised for a moment.

"Wow, I guess you really are having a rad night!" Chuck smiled.

"Yeah, I didn't think much of you at first and tried to snob you off there in the library. I misjudged you. I just want to make it up to you. Um, in a couple weeks my folks are going on a trip to Europe for my mom's business and I'll be finishing up my classwork for the semester at home instead of at my dorm. If you want, you can come over and see some of my current art projects I'll be working on."

"Sure, uh, that would be cool," as Chuck opened the car door for Lisa. Chuck got in, started the car and drove off. It was about a two hour drive from Madison back to Fenlow City but Chuck took his time as Lisa leaned against his leather coat while he drove on.

Soon they came upon the Fenlow Commons section of Fenlow City. The swanky uptown section consisted of a mix of old Tudor-style mansions of brick and wood, large contemporary styled mansions, cobblestone driveways and lavish landscaping. As they approached the iron gate of the

Drummond residence, Chuck stopped the car. Lisa got out and fumbled in her pocketbook for an electronic card upon which she swiped into the reader at the gate. The large iron gates began opening on their own as Lisa got back into the car and Chuck began to drive in past the gate. The long driveway ran nearly a quarter mile in length until they got to the front door of the mansion where Chuck stopped the car on the rotary.

"Chuck, I really had a great time tonight, thank you. Goodnight."

"Goodnight Lisa. Hey, when am I gonna see you again?"

"In history class, silly."

"No, I mean, uh, really see you, like now?"

"After my parents go on their trip, you can see me all you want for a month. Really," Lisa smiled back with a slight giggle.

"Cool!" exclaimed Chuck, feeling this was going to be a long term relationship with Lisa.

icy waters

The cargo ship 'Tydal' was returning back to Ornathys from a two season voyage to the archipelagos that inhabited waters far from Ornathys. Daellon and Kaeleos had found no sign of the lost Elite Guard named Larco on their long quest from one island to another. The Tydal was now returning with supplies back to Ornathys from the distant archipelagos it had sailed to. As they were approaching the colder weather that blanketed Ornathys, Kaeleos, coming down from the captain's quarters, approached Daellon leaning on the rail of the ship's deck near the bow, looking out to the darkened horizon ahead of them.

"That weather ahead of our sails is worth taking heed to, my son," noted Daellon, "We've been out at sea for what seems a lifetime looking for one of my soldiers. And now with our return, the dark skies ahead are looking cold and frozen towards Ornathys. That bothers me of what could be happening there."

"Yes it does, father," replied Kaeleos as it began to snow, "The captain just informed me that the weather is changing and we're still a day's voyage to Yarrow. We're passing the outer breakers at Haebrugg now. The captain will be docking us at Haebrugg for the evening to rest before continuing on to Ornathys."

"Aye. I also expect a cold reception when we arrive at Yarrow. Something doesn't feel right. I feel it in my bones. Especially when Metgare is around and we left Berwyck in charge of the Guard. Before we set sail on this sojourn, I discussed Larco's disappearance with Orachon. Orachon agreed that something was rather strange the day of Larco's sudden disappearance from the Elite Guard many seasons ago. Yet, Orachon also told me something else. About four seasons ago, the Cardinal left for Tyral to see King Aegolth on a urgent matter. Something to do with a 'disturbance' within Tyral involving an Elite Guard who escaped aboard a cargo ship."

"Father, I'm sure Berwyck has everything in order. I trust his judgment to command," assured Kaeleos.

"It's not Berwyck I'm worried about. It's Metgare and Aegolth and what that disturbance was about. I believe a visit to the Cardinal is in order once we return to Yarrow," Daellon warranted.

message in a bottle

Jeff had just finished dinner and headed upstairs to his room with backpack in tow. Opening his backpack, he pulled out his iPad and began glancing through his end of term assignments, afterward tossing it alongside his books on his bed. At the moment, Jeff was feeling out of practice lately with his drawing skills, especially from the recent events at the academy. He knew that Chuck was trying to help him out anyway he could. It was then Jeff decided to take an hour of drawing practice before starting on his coursework. He still had hopes to attend some type of art college or academy regardless of how distant that prospect seemed at the moment, financial or otherwise. It was in his mind, his gut instinct to become an artist of some type, incorporating his use of one or several artistic mediums.

Sitting at his drafting desk his parents gave him last year for his birthday, Jeff began trying to create a monster of his own design, using Chuck's reference sketch he had given Jeff as an anatomical guideline. Jeff had mechanical pencil in hand ready to begin when his cell phone rang.

It was Chuck.

"Yo, Monster Mayhem's sidekick!" remarked Chuck.

"Sidekick?" replied Jeff.

"Yeah, are you busy?"

"No, I'm actually outside on the roof, ready to jump off," noted Jeff, sounding serious to Chuck.

"Really? Why? You haven't finished that sketch yet?"

"I'm just getting to it. Until you called," Jeff admitted back.

"Cool. Hey, listen. Great news. My dad got me a client through his boss at work. Someone over in the ritzy part of town. Guess they took one look at my work and made an offer."

"Another tattoo parlor?" Jeff inquired.

"No. Better yet! A grocery store manager. Tressler's Market wants me to do their store window and interior art! Frescos! The works! I'm finally hitting the big time, kid!"

"Hooray. Congrats, man. Now all their customers will be monsters. Okay, now what about my life?" Jeff humored in return sarcastically.

"I'm not worried about you, dude. I'm still gonna be helping you with your drawings skills, when I can."

"When you can? Come again?" Jeff queried.

"Yeah, Lisa digs me! Woohoo!" Chuck exclaimed.

"So I was right thinking the two of you would hit it off somehow."

"Yeah, but don't worry. It's not going to interfere with my work or anything."

"Much?" Jeff surmised.

"Uh, some. Maybe. A little."

"She really got to you?"

"Better than ever! Once her parents fly the friendly skies overseas for a month, Lisa's invited me over to check out her artwork," Chuck beamed.

"Oi!" Jeff murmured.

"You say something?" Chuck inquired.

"Oh, nothing. Got a frog in my throat."

"Anyway, Lisa really dug ThrushFire up close and personal with those passes! It's been awhile for me, dude, to have someone like Lisa like the same things I do and I'm sure she appreciates my talents as well."

"Well, let's hope this train stays on the tracks for you," Jeff remarked.

"It's looking better every day I see her. Hey J.P., I gotta get off the horn right now. I'm heading over to the market tonight in a few minutes to talk with Doug Tressler to set up my work assignments. Chat with you this weekend maybe? Sunday afternoon?"

"That will be good. I've got a mess of classroom work to get done before the week is out anyway."

"Well, find some time to get that drawing done and let me see it this Sunday, okay?"

"Okay, man. Be safe."

"Back at ya, J.P."

As Jeff clicked off the phone, he reminded himself about his own difficult prospects in getting Sheila Corvo while looking at the time on the alarm clock. It was 9:00pm. By now, Kurt had Sheila in his web of wealth and Jeff was left alone to his own predicament. Many questions arose in Jeff's mind. Would Sheila prefer someone of wealth rather than a poor man and his roses? Even if he had a drawing of roses to give her instead of the real thing? The flame inside Jeff began to consume him. He was starting to become determined to have Sheila's love if she suddenly became bored and lost her desire of Kurt's opulent lifestyle. At least Jeff hoped Sheila would change her mind, sooner if not later, to settle for Jeff instead.

Looking around the room, Jeff noticed the old antique bottle his deceased grandfather had left to him

in his will. It had been many years since Jeff's grandfather's death. But his grandfather's spirit was still very present. Jeff felt it as he walked over to pick up the small bottle off the shelf. Inside the bottle was a small rolled up parchment. Jeff pulled out the small cork and carefully removed the parchment. Written in calligraphy on the small, delicate parchment read the words:

*'Here on this paper are the dreams and desires one's heart can brave upon a sea of unknown.
Freedom of the soul. ~ Larco ~'*

Jeff did not know who this Larco was. Perhaps a sailor or soldier of misfortune who may have set this bottle upon the ocean waters. All Jeff knew was that his grandfather was a merchant marine who sailed on several sojourns and collected different objects from distant lands during his service. He did not understand the meaning of the parchment, nor the author, for Jeff never got the chance to ask his grandfather about it. Jeff carefully rolled up the small parchment, placed it back into the bottle and put back the cork. He placed the bottle back on the shelf next the photo of his grandfather and Jeff when Jeff was around four years old. Jeff smiled back at the photo remembering how kind his grandfather was. Jeff was now eighteen and ten years had passed since his grandfather crossed over. All he had left of his memory was this strange, small old bottle.

Jeff went back to his desk, sat down and finished off the hour towards his drawing practice.

Chapter VIII

forgotten ally, forgotten foe

Kaeleos and Daellon had settled into their island quarters at Haebrugg to rest for the cold night's journey home. A light snow began to fall upon the landscape, leaving a covering of white upon the ground. Kaeleos lit the fire in the fireplace and began to ready himself into his bed. Outside his window, the Temple of Chalynn could be seen in the daytime, though not so clear at night through the jungle growth.

As Kaeleos was about to drift into sleep, a dim light flickered across the room. Dim, yet enough of a reflection to be cast on the wall. Catching notice of this, Kaeleos got up to look out the window. To his amazement and curiosity, a floating orb of light seemed to be approaching from the temple towards his quarters, slowly moderating its pace. But as it got closer, the orb grew larger in size. Kaeleos reached for his spear, in case this turned out to be a bad omen. For he had also heard of the ancient stories of the temple. He had to find out what or who this was. Kaeleos went outside around the back of his quarters to where the source of the light was coming from. By this time, the object was larger than when he was inside.

Suddenly, the light stopped moving, hovering in place above the ground. Kaeleos prepared his spear for whatever happened next. The light dimmed to a small figure that eventually collapsed in the snow. Kaeleos ran over to the object that had fallen into the snow. It was Belnapp. He was cold and shivering, yet alive.

"Belnapp? How did you get here? You are supposed to be at the castle!" Kaeleos responded.

Belnapp uttered as he shivered, "Uh, long story. Can we talk where it's warm?"

Kaeleos picked up Belnapp into his arms and carried him into his quarters, placing Belnapp into a

chair next to the warm fire. "Wait here," Kaeleos noted to Belnapp.

"Trust me, I'm not going anywhere away from the warmth of this fire," replied Belnapp groggily as the heat from the fire penetrated his chilled pelt.

Kaeleos ran over to Daellon's quarters, knocking on the door. "Father, come quick! It's Belnapp, the Scout! I found him outside."

"Belnapp?! Here?! On Haebrugg?! How?!" replied Daellon as he opened the door.

"Yes, come quickly!" Kaeleos urged.

As soon as Kaeleos and Daellon arrived at Kaeleos's quarters, Daellon was as surprised as Kaeleos to see Belnapp here on Haebrugg.

"Belnapp, how did you get here? What are you doing here? Can you tell us what happened?" Daellon questioned.

"It's a long story. Larco res-"

"Larco?! Here on Haebrugg?!" Daellon exclaimed.

"Yes, but he's not who or what he was before," Belnapp spoke as he coughed slightly.

"I knew we'd find Larco eventually!" Daellon spoke, looking at Kaeleos. "Once he's captured, it will be the gallows for him for kidnapping an Elite Guard Scout!"

"That won't be necessary, General, for he saved my life."

"What do you mean?" Daellon questioned, turning an inquisitive look at Belnapp.

"Larco told me on the day he left the Guard, he was actually following Metgare back to Tyral. Larco had caught Metgare spying on our defenses at Keltyck Rock. He thought it best to follow Metgare back to Tyral without informing the rest of the Guard. That is, until Larco was captured by Metgare's Guard and charged with a disturbance within Tyral. He remained a prisoner there for some time. Eventually, King Aegolth had him 'banished' from the island with a 'writ of banishment' drawn up by the Cardinal," Belnapp related.

"What?! Writ of Banishment?!" Daellon exclaimed.

"Father, wait! Let him finish! Please go on, Belnapp."

"Larco fled onto the next cargo ship to Satyreclore. Yet nor Larco, the ship, or its crew ever made it to Satyreclore alive due to an ocean storm."

"Not alive? I don't understand," Kaeleos questioned.

"Larco's body washed up on Haebrugg's shoreline. His spirit was taken to the temple by a temple guardian. Larco is now a guardian of the temple. A spirit guardian named Razantrope. He cannot leave

the temple for he is magically bound to it much like a prison. Yet, his powers can extend far outside the domain of the temple. Razantrope, uh...I meant Larco, told me I was captured by the gargoyles while I was looking for Lord Draemer's coach on Ornathys. The gargoyles took me here to Haebrugg on the remote side of the island to die. I nearly died trying to find someone, yet somehow I found the temple. That's when Larco, I mean Razantrope, brought me back from the brink of death and sent me back to you with a message," Belnapp slowly recanted.

"The cold must have gotten to your mind. Larco is now Razantrope and he's a temple guardian. This is starting to sound a bit preposterous," Daellon replied to Belnapp.

"But what if what he says is true, father? You've heard stories about the guardians of the temple from Orachon and Nordellan," Kaeleos added.

"Yes, but none were about missing Elite Guard soldiers. This also could be a ruse to keep us away from Ornathys."

"Or it could be a premonition to the danger that lies ahead of us?"

"True. What was the message, Belnapp?" Kaeleos inquired.

"To let you know that the amulet is now in the hands of the gargoyle king, Jarduche. But there is one thing that can stop him and the powers of the amulet. The locket. Lord Cellus is the possessor of the locket of Chalynn. It contains the ashes of a powerful spirit guardian. Razantrope can work his magic through the amulet and the locket. Yet, at the same time, he can also become a prisoner within either if the possessor wills it to be so."

"Jarduche escaped Grimoire as well?" Daellon replied.

"Yes, that is what Larco, uh, Razantrope sensed, as he told me. Jarduche is regrouping his armies for battle once again."

"Father, we must return to Ornathys before another conflict arises with the gargoyles and gryphons," Kaeleos stated.

"Indeed, with the approaching weather, it will be more difficult if we stay here any longer. Orachon needs our assistance as soon as possible. I'll inform the captain to curtail our stay here and to set sail for Ornathys immediately," Daellon warranted.

in confidence

After Consul had adjourned for the evening, Lord Nordellan asked Draemer to follow him to his chamber, Nordellan closing the door behind them. Once inside, Draemer related his concerns to Nordellan.

"My Lord, my sincere apologies for not getting to you sooner on the details of my sojourn to Satyreclore. But you were with King Orachon and Lord Cellus..."

"Not to worry, Draemer. I understand. Don't feel embarrassed at the matter or for explaining it in front of Consul. It's not any fault of yours, I assure you. And don't feel you haven't accomplished

anything either. In fact, I expected you to find something unusual at the monastery," as Nordellan walked over and stood behind his desk.

"You...you knew? How?" Draemer questioned.

"Well 'almost' nothing unusual. Now, you did say that the gate had been tampered with at the monastery?"

"Yes, My Lord, as if someone had been there before me," Draemer explained.

"Hmm. I did feel that there was something wrong to begin with. Yet, I still sent you there to confirm my suspicions..."

"Your suspicions?" Draemer looking puzzled.

"Yes. Aegolth must have told you about Jarduche," Nordellan quietly related, looking down at the revised 'enumerated compact' parchment the Cardinal had presented to Consul.

"My Lord, how did you know? We are all doomed because of his escape from Grimoire! Now the gargoyles and the gryphons will return and the Great Conflict will start over again and...!"

"Draemer, calm down and listen. As a Consul Elder, I know these things. While I was discussing the fief proposals with Cellus and King Orachon in his chamber, I also told Orachon and Cellus about the message I received from the Spirit Guardian the evening before," Nordellan quietly spoke to Draemer, looking back up at him from behind his desk.

"Spirit Guardian? My Lord, I am confused."

"That's okay, Draemer. Please listen carefully. The only ones who now know or who may have had contact with the Spirit Guardian are myself, you, Cellus, Orachon, Kaeleos, Daellon, Belnapp and, unfortunately, Fedrox. Now you must not let anyone else know about the Spirit Guardian for what I have just told you and for what I am about to tell you. This conversation cannot leave this room, do you understand? Even the Consul members must not know at this time," Nordellan whispered to Draemer.

"What? My Lord, this is insane! They already know?" Draemer loudly whispered.

"Shh, Draemer. Listen to me," Nordellan quietly implored, "Now, I had you keep the amulet, yes?"

"My Lord, forgive me, I-!"

"I already know Jarduche has it in his possession. It was not your fault. That was to happen. And Jarduche plans to overthrow the kingdoms with some help from a 'certain someone'..." as Nordellan moved around away from the table.

"H...How did you know...? Overthrow the kingdoms? A certain someone? What do you mean, My Lord? Jarduche can destroy us all with the amulet and- !", as Draemer began to speak louder while approaching Nordellan.

Nordellan raised his open talon interrupting Draemer. Draemer halted and stopped talking.

"Now, this someone has quite a bit of authority and is also quite cunning. But he will eventually fail, for he has a weakness," Nordellan spoke.

"A weakness?"

"Yes. He has a brother."

"A brother? How can that help the situation when...?"

"All that has happened before this moment will be revealed. But not until the 'portal' is open," Nordellan interrupted.

"Portal, My Lord? I don't understand."

"No need to understand now, my friend. Just have faith that what will happen now from this moment on will be revealed to all. Just keep all what I have just discussed with you in confidence and trust with me, as your Lord and friend, until the time comes, agreed?" Nordellan reminded.

Draemer let out a sigh, "Yes, My Lord. I will try."

"Good. Now we will discuss what changes this 'enumerated compact' is going to have by the next meeting of Consul and kings. I have already had discussions on it with Orachon and Cellus with their notes. I think it's time to change some of the wording on this compact, don't you agree, Lord Draemer?" as Nordellan reached for the parchment on his desk.

"Yes, My Lord. I believe in whatever you say," Draemer sighed.

Nordellan smiled in return as he knew that things were in motion within the universe.

a cruel twist of fate

The last day of the Consul visit to Ornathys had arrived, or it had seemed that way. The heat of the sun was slowly melting the large amounts of snow on Ornathys, being out more often than the cloudy days since the blizzard. The daytime temperatures were still chilly, yet bearable to some point. Inside the Great Celestial Hold inside Castle Yarrow, Consul was finishing up another day's session of mediation talks. Of a stay of several weeks, the Consul of Aviatyre had not yet come up with a conclusive decision on the control of the shared fiefs within Gryth Wood between the kingdoms. However, before leaving, the Consul deemed a 'temporary truce compact' between the two kingdoms with actual plotted areas. Areas defined on the maps as 'blended fiefs' within the Wood that had Aegolth's and Orachon's blessing on the reworded compact for the time being.

Meanwhile, inside the Cardinal's mind, his anger was boiling over with the Consul's rewording of his and Aegolth's carefully chosen wording of the original compact. The only noticeable outward sign of the Cardinal's displeasure being the half-hidden scowl on his beak. The Consul agreed to return back to Ornathys the following season to continue negotiations with ongoing areas of fief concerns between the kingdoms. The hearing on the tribunal of Berwyck and Belnapp would have to wait as well. For the Consul had to visit several other smaller archipelagos under their engagement for discussions of sovereign rights of land that limited their current time on Ornathys. With the Eclection only a few

days away, Nordellan was about to give the Cardinal permission and authority to represent Consul for the upcoming royal presentation to General Metgare in Tyral.

"Your Eminence, may I see you a moment?" Nordellan was standing as he called over to the Cardinal from the end of the table. The Cardinal abruptly stopped his discussion with a couple members of Consul and walked over to Nordellan.

"Yes, My Lord, can I be of some assistance?" Rigor inquired to Nordellan.

"Very much so. As you know, Consul is about to leave Ornathys shortly. We have engagements on several archipelagos within the next few days. Being that we will have to postpone our continuing fief discussions, the Ecceiation ceremony in Tyral as well as Lieutenant Berwyck's and Belnapp's hearing on the tribunal, I will have to appropriate a suitable mediator to take Consul's place. This appropriation King Orachon, King Aegolth, myself and the Consul have agreed on will only last until Consul returns back to Ornathys. Therefore, with both King Orachon's and King Aegolth's permission as well as myself and Consul, I am appropriating you as Mediator for Consul here on Ornathys," Nordellan recommended as he handed Rigor the signed parchment.

Rigor was beside himself in shock! He was granted high authority by Consul to act on behalf of Consul! He now had the power of Consul within his grasp!

"Thank you, My Lord. I will serve the Consul and your wishes in my highest resolute for both kingdoms on Ornathys," the Cardinal besmirched.

"Excellent. Now there is something else I must do. Lord Cellus? Lord Draemer? May I see you both a moment?" Nordellan prompted to both Cellus and Draemer sitting at the corner of the table with a few members of Consul.

"Yes, My Lord?" Cellus replied. "My Lord?" Draemer seconded as both stopped their discussions with Consul members and walked over to where the Cardinal and Nordellan were standing.

"Before I and the rest of Consul leave Ornathys for other engagements, I am instructing both of you to remain here on Ornathys. Cellus, you are responsible for Castle Grimoire. And since recent events have put much pressure on the kingdoms for possible interventions of gargoyle and gryphon, Draemer, I am leaving you and Cellus both in charge of Grimoire. Also, I have appropriated His Eminence as Mediator for Consul until Consul and I return. All three of you now hold the balance of Consul and Ornathys in your hands."

Cellus and Draemer looked at each other as both were both taken back by these unusual steps from Nordellan and Consul, but did not challenge Nordellan's authority for time was running short.

"One other thing. I have also let Orachon and Aegolth know that I will be sending an armada from the archipelagos ahead of our return. In case there is an outbreak of war before Consul returns, Ornathys will have an additional army of soldiers ready to do battle. Be well until our return."

"Yes, My Lord. Thank you, My Lord," all three responded in unison; the Cardinal wearing a steel grin on his beak.

After the ship left Ornathys's port with Nordellan and the rest of Consul, the Cardinal returned back

to his solar. Once inside, the Cardinal watched as Consul's ship sailed off into the horizon from the tower window of his solar. The 'plan', however, was not a total loss, he thought to himself. He was now Mediator for Consul. And Nordellan ordered Cellus and Draemer to remain on Ornathys with both sharing responsibility of Grimoire. It was still in the Cardinal's favor to continue with the plan albeit some slight changes. Changes that would involve 'his allies' in waiting whom would reign in the beginning of his 'new regime'...

dark ceremony

Several days after Consul left Ornathys, preparations were being made inside the Great Hall of King Aegolth's castle in Tyral for the Eclection Ceremony. The royal flags of Tyral being raised along the hall's knaves were dank and disparate of any bright color. Even the food and drink being prepared for the celebration were just as void as its coat of arms. Yet Aegolth's kingdom had always ebbed and thrived on a 'darker path' that shunned light and revered the dark of night. The wars that his father, King Adrid, did battle in took many lives of his followers in other lands. Followers that worshiped the dark in that they would defeat their enemy easily in the shadows rather than the light. Even the sunlight during the day that shown on Tyral's fortress could not penetrate the dark walls of its enclosure.

Back in Yarrow, a very light snow had begun to fall as Lord Cellus and Lord Draemer were preparing to go to the Eclection in Tyral. While finishing securing his doublet, Lord Cellus heard a knock on his chamber door.

"Yes? Who is it?" he replied.

"Lieutenant Berwyck," Berwyck replied.

"Enter," Cellus answered. Berwyck entered the room.

"The royal carriage is ready to leave for the Eclection in Tyral. His Majesty, King Orachon, asked to send his Honor of Service to General Metgare as well, though His Majesty must stay within the kingdom's boundaries with the heightened alert," Berwyck noted. "Here is the parchment to give to Aegolth and Metgare," as Berwyck handed the parchment to Cellus.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Draemer is going as well. I don't know if you've heard but your brother is now Mediator for Consul. Nordellan appropriated the Cardinal just before he left with Consul. And Draemer and I are somewhat confused by Nordellan's logic in appointing him." Parsing his lips, Cellus placed a finger over them, thinking about what to say next.

"Yes, I know. Maybe Nordellan knows something we don't," replied Berwyck.

"Perhaps. He has more wisdom on his years of service than we do at the moment. I just hope he is right in his decision."

Just then, another knock came on the open door.

"Cellus? Are you ready to leave?" Draemer questioned as Berwyck turned to see Draemer standing in the open doorway.

"Just about," as Cellus placed his sword in his sheath. "It's going to be very interesting with His

Eminence in charge of us," Cellus replied.

"He is?" Draemer looking puzzled for a moment.

"Remember? Nordellan gave him the title of Mediator. Being a Cardinal, it goes without stating on the procurement of Consul that the Consul's appropriation to a sovereign hierarchy consists of an endowment of the same authority as Orachon's or Aegolth's," Cellus noted. "Though now the Cardinal has the same powers of both kings combined on Ornathys, equal to Nordellan or the Consul."

"And what are we?" Draemer asked.

"Pretty much his servants, or guard. With a potential invasion on our hands, would you think it could get any worse?"

"There must be a reason Nordellan gave my brother the Consul's blessings," Berwyck noted.

"To hang us all as well as himself, if indeed a war does or doesn't come to pass," Draemer answered.

"Then what do we do, Cellus?" Berwyck inquired.

"For now, go along with him as we all should. As long as we follow the Cardinal's word, we should be okay. However, if something comes up that calls to override the Cardinal's immediate authority, I believe that is the time we all take action, agreed?" Cellus stated.

"Agreed," noted Draemer and Berwyck in unison. "The Consul and Nordellan would believe us?" Draemer asked.

"Nordellan would by his own rule. One thing I do know about Nordellan. He can be very intuitive when it comes down to a difficult situation. And that is where I and Consul would trust his resolve in any situation while also being very clever in his objectives to solving problems."

Draemer was thinking at that moment of what Nordellan had told him about the spirit guardian.

"I-," as Draemer caught himself about to mention what Nordellan had told him earlier about the spirit guardian while Draemer was looking at Berwyck.

"Yes, Draemer? What is it?" Cellus replied as both Cellus and Berwyck looked at Draemer.

"Let's hope Nordellan is right. I'm ready to leave," Draemer referred, after pausing a moment.

"Yes, let's not keep His Eminence, King Aegolth and the Captain of the Guard waiting," Cellus noted as he smiled at Berwyck. Berwyck smiled back as all three left for the carriage stables.

Since a temporary truce had been formed on a compact between the kingdoms by Consul, Cellus and Draemer were invited by King Aegolth to the Eclection. Along with the Cardinal, chosen to represent Consul, all three left in a carriage for the honor presentation to General Metgare for his service during the Consul's visit. Berwyck, however, was not on the invitation list. For without Daellon or Kaeleos, he was now Yarrow's Captain of the Guard since the high alert of an attack was still very probable on Yarrow and its king. If Kaeleos and Daellon had returned, the Consul would have had a different guard

during the discussions. Yet, no word from Daellon and Kaeleos's sojourn at sea had arrived. Berwyck wondered if he'd ever see them again with the events on Ornathys while they were out at sea. General Metgare was content. For this was his day to receive a recognition of honor for his security and assistance to the Consul during the discussions. Although plans were drawn up prior with Nordellan and the entire Consul being present for the ceremony, no changes were made with the guard for the missing guests. The securing of the Eclection was still in place. The guards outside were still on their watch as well as the guard inside during the ceremony. From the seating arrangements to the honor presentation itself, nothing was changed. Still, things could go awry within the day.

As Metgare was suiting up into his ceremonial Elite Guard uniform, he came across the package that Chancellor Gareruff had given him from the Cardinal. Opening up the well-sealed package, Metgare took out a black-clothed chain of office. A small parchment inside the package next to the chain read:

'Place around your neck. But do not remove the black cloth covering the chain of office until I officiate your Eclection of Service. -The Cardinal-'

Seemed simple enough. Metgare placed the black-clothed chain of office around the neck of his gambeson and strode over to the mirror to view his newly acquired accoutrement. He could hardly wait for the Eclection to begin!

The daylight glancing through Great Hall stained glass created scattered shards of dim multicolored facets, levitating dust particles to float in midair. The beginning of the ceremony seemed quite somber. A dulcimer and lute were heard playing quietly from one of the chamber rooms off to the side of the Great Hall. The Cardinal sitting next to Aegolth's throne eyed the hall's entrance. Cellus and Draemer standing attentive aside the Cardinal were wondering what would happen next. As the General approached the Great Hall entrance and stopped, The Cardinal and Aegolth rose up from their seats. Metgare then proceeded to walk down the length of the aisle towards the throne chairs, keeping time in step with the rhythm of the dulcimer playing.

As Metgare approached within a few feet of the throne, he stopped as Aegolth raised his talon. The dulcimer and lute stopped playing as well. The Great Hall became quiet as Aegolth began to speak.

"We are gathered here at this Eclection, a celebration to honor the Captain of Tyrall's Elite Guard, General Metgare, for his service in securing the Consul's visit to Ornathys. In honor of being chosen by Consul for securing their visit, the kingdoms present this Eclection to General Metgare in his honor."

Aegolth then opened a royal parchment from the table next to his throne and began reading from it.

"General Metgare, as Captain of the Elite Guard of Tyrall, in recognition of securing the kingdoms of Tyrall and Yarrow upon Consul's visit to Ornathys, I hereby bestow upon you the Honor of Service from both kingdoms."

Aegolth handed Metgare the parchment from Tyrall and reached back to the table to hand him the second parchment from King Orachon of Yarrow. Metgare bowed his head in acceptance of the Honor of Service from both kingdoms. A round of applause followed, but it is cut short as Aegolth holds up his talon and all is quiet again.

"I am also pleased to announce that His Eminence, Cardinal Rigor Mortis of Yarrow, will officiate the securing of General Metgare's Honor of Service with the presentation of the 'high chains of office', for his loyalty and service to Tyral, Yarrow and the Consul," Aegolth spoke.

As the Cardinal walked over to General Metgare, Metgare knelt down, head bowed at the Cardinal. The Cardinal then spread his wings open wide to all as he spoke. To the Cardinal, it was his moment in the sun as Mediator.

"As His Excellency's High Officiate Mediator of Consul to the kingdoms of Yarrow and Tyral, with the permissions of King Aegolth, King Orachon, Lord Nordellan and the Consul of Aviatyre, I now officiate your securing with these 'high chains of office' for your service to all."

With that performance, he should've been presented with the chains of office instead.

Metgare rose up from his kneeling position as the Cardinal went to remove the black cloth covering the chains of office. As the Cardinal removed the cloth, Aegolth recognized a familiar sight...his long lost stolen gems adorned the chains of office around the neck of Metgare's gambeson. Metgare looked at Aegolth's open mouthed expression.

"What's wrong, Your Majesty?" Metgare inquired.

"My stolen gems! My royal treasure! Is this some sort of trick? They were stolen from me!" Aegolth roared.

"The stolen gems?" Metgare spoke as he looked at the chains of office.

A hushed awe came from the crowd. "If this is someone's idea of a joke, their life will be done with, here and now!" Aegolth yelled.

"Your Majesty, I can assure you I did not know that these were yours!" Rigor replied. "I had the craftsman in Tyral create the chain for the Elevation. The chain was delivered to me inside a package by Belnapp, the Squire of the Stables in Yarrow, who picked up the finished chain. After I received the package from the squire, my Chancellor, Gareruff, delivered it to Metgare," the Cardinal replied.

"Squire?!" Aegolth questioned, his face angered by the statement.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Metgare injected, "Chancellor Gareruff arrived at my hold carrying the package along with the Cardinal's parchment instructing not to open the package until the Elevation ceremony. It's true, Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty," the Cardinal continued, "I sent the Squire to retrieve the chain from the metalsmith here in Tyral to see if it was finished. When the Squire arrived, the package was sealed and I had my Chancellor deliver it to Metgare."

"Did the Squire know what was inside?" Aegolth demanded.

"I'm not sure, Your Majesty, for you would have to ask him yourself," the Cardinal hypothesized.

Cellus and Draemer approached King Aegolth. "Your Majesty," Cellus injected, "there seems to be

some confusion here, for the Squire is nowhere to be found on Ornathys at the moment."

"Well, I'll send every guard out to find him and bring him here to seal his fate!" Aegolth's face reddened.

"Your Majesty, my brother, Lieutenant Berwyck is in charge of the Squire. Maybe he knows where he is," Rigor implied.

Cellus and Draemer became irritated at the Cardinal's statement.

"Don't be so sure, My Liege!" retorted Cellus, Draemer and Cellus looking at the Cardinal.

"How dare you threaten Your Lord and King Aegolth! Release one more breath, I will hold you both for treason!" demanded the Cardinal.

"Well, why don't you send us to Yarrow to seek the truth? To bring Berwyck here!" demanded Cellus. "Yes!" followed Draemer.

"No need to! You have both drawn your last breath for defying Consul and me!" Aegolth interrupted. "Guard?! Take these two to the dungeon!"

Suddenly, a loud crash and explosion was heard that shook the room. Two guards came flying midair through the entrance to the Great Hall, one hitting hard against the wall and another smashing into one of the tables of food and drink, knocking both unconscious. Chunks of brick and mortar went flying with smoke pouring through the entrance way. Just then, several gargoyle made their presence known, Jarduche being in front of them as the crowd of servants and guard began to scatter.

"Someone forgot to invite us to the party," Jarduche announced with a wicked grin on his face, wings spread open, wearing the amulet around his neck.

His loyal servant, Farris, the Dark Gryphon, stood next to the larger figure of Jarduche; Farris's cold eyes staring ahead at the chaos they had just created within the Great Hall. Metgare and Aegolth fell to their knees, fear cast in their eyes as they looked upon the freed Jarduche. Cellus and Draemer, having been thrown against the wall from the explosion, managed to get up to look at the Cardinal as he was walking over to Jarduche.

"It's about time you arrived," related the Cardinal calmly to Jarduche. "I was getting worried."

The Cardinal had not been affected by the blast. He was still upright.

"Yes, Your Eminence," Jarduche replied. "Just a slight delay with the guard," Jarduche grinned as he handed the amulet to the Cardinal. Aegolth, Metgare, Cellus and Draemer stared back in shock at Rigor as he was talking to the gargoyles like they were his allies.

"Oh no, it's worse than I thought," Cellus muttered to Draemer.

"I can't believe what I'm seeing either!" Draemer related back to Cellus. "I thought I was supposed to receive something quite important," Draemer added.

"Really now?" Cellus sarcastically ad libbed.

"Gareruff?" the Cardinal inquired at Jarduche.

"Still with Berwyck at Yarrow. My men are surrounding Yarrow and Grimoire within the boundaries of Gryth Wood as we speak. There are more followers coming from the archipelagos as well. I had my messengers send word to them," Jarduche related. "The plan is still on?"

"Yes, but with some changes," as the Cardinal placed the amulet around his neck and walked over to Metgare and Aegolth. The Cardinal began to laugh a hideous laugh as he stopped in front of Aegolth and Metgare.

"So, you thought the Great Conflict would never return to Ornathys, eh?" The Cardinal chided. "Such fools are you that cannot understand the power of fate that comes with the power of the amulet!" relayed the Cardinal to Aegolth and Metgare, staring coldly at them both while the amulet glowed red.

"You deceived us! You are the traitor! You had this all planned!" Aegolth replied back.

"Yes, My Liege, but I was not the one who insisted on creating fief squabbles within the kingdoms. I want it all! Yarrow! Tyral! Grimoire! Gryth Wood! Ornathys! All of it!"

"You have disrupted the House of Adrid! You are hand in hand with the gargoyles and gryphons! You're mad! You're crazy! You shall be put to death! You are a traitor to the crown!" Aegolth cried.

"Ah, yes, but I have it all in my favor now, Aegolth. For within the next few days, all of Ornathys will be under MY control!" the Cardinal demanded, "Jarduche?"

"Yes, Your Eminence?" Jarduche replied.

"Do what you will with these fools. I have no need for them. Take them away from here."

"As your wish, Your Eminence," Jarduche nodded with a steel grin. The gargoyles were slowly walking over to Aegolth, Metgare, Draemer and Cellus about to take them by flight to the remote side of Haebrug when Fedrox entered the room.

"... I'm late for the Eclection and..." Fedrox was saying to himself after waking up late from another drunken binge at the Iron Crow. Fedrox was at a trot as he entered through the great hall's archway. He stopped short, looking around the room, seeing the gargoyles ready to pounce on his brother Metgare, Aegolth, Cellus and Draemer.

"What is this? What happened here...?" Fedrox exclaimed.

"Get him too!" the Cardinal yelled.

Suddenly Fedrox became the target of the gargoyles objective. Seeing a chance as the approaching gargoyles turned their attention to Fedrox, Cellus bolted off the floor into a vestibule to escape, leaving Draemer behind. Running as fast as he could, Cellus found an outside balcony off to the side of one of the rooms and leapt out over the edge. Falling fast, he landed several feet down, bouncing off the berm

of the wall, landing on a snowbank, finally rolling off into the icy moat. Momentarily underwater, he swam up to the water's surface, catching his breath in the frozen air. His coat of fur dampened by the icy water offered little protection from freezing in the winter's cold. Not looking back, he swam hard for his life to the shore where a large snow covered hedge of shrubbery provided cover. Once on shore, shivering and panting hard from the icy swim, Cellus began to run into Gryth Wood, unknown what direction he was heading, hoping he would reach Yarrow within the cover of the Wood.

"Your Eminence, one of them escaped!" Jarduche alerted.

"Find him! He must not reach Yarrow!" Rigor implied to Jarduche, sending two gargoyle off to look for Cellus.

CHAPTER IX

the return home

The three travelers arrived in Ornathys's port at nightfall. Daellon had ordered the ship's captain to return to the archipelagos to send for reinforcements in case conflict had broken out within the kingdoms from Daellon and Kaeleos's absence. As they embarked off the ship in the chilled air, Belnapp was happy to be back on familiar ground but had an odd feeling that something wasn't right.

"I've got a bad feeling right now. I think we all should be on alert," Belnapp quietly stated as the ship began to sail out from Ornathys's snow covered shore.

"I agree we should be cautious with what you've told us, Belnapp. Who knows what has happened since we've returned," Kaeleos noted.

"Aye, the sooner we reach the hold of Yarrow, the better," Daellon replied.

While all three were walking in Gryth Wood along the snowy paths heading to Yarrow, halfway through the Wood, Belnapp spotted something odd not far ahead of them.

"Wait! There up ahead, near the pass!" Belnapp spoke as all three stopped in their tracks near the open meadow of Celdoom Pass. In the distance, standing around a fire were several gargoyle and gryphon moving about. Quickly, all three hid behind several large boulders not far the meadow.

"Gargoyles and gryphons. Something has happened. This could only mean one thing. Jarduche escaped from Grimoire," Daellon quietly noted to Kaeleos and Belnapp. "The kingdoms are sieged. A Second Conflict is about."

"Maybe they haven't yet, father. Maybe this is only one group. A scouting party. But I don't see Jarduche anywhere in the group," Kaeleos quietly responded.

"Aye, but this makes my feathers stand on end for what I see," Daellon replied.

"I'm going to move up ahead and listen to what they're saying," Belnapp inquired.

"Don't get too close. Just enough to hear."

"I'll cover you in case you're seen," Kaeleos added.

"Okay," Belnapp whispered back as he crept up closer to the gathering, keeping low to the ground and a safe distance to overhear their conversation.

"Has the word been given?" one gargoyle asked another by the fire.

"Soon. When Jarduche has the amulet, we will march on Yarrow. Right now, he's with the Cardinal at Tyral to seize the throne. Once Tyral falls, Jarduche will make sure Aegolth and Metgare will not leave Haebrugg once we fly them to the remote side," the second gargoyle replied back.

Belnapp gasped. The Cardinal was involved in the plot as well. The Second Conflict had begun.

Belnapp quietly crept back with Kaeleos, keeping low to where Daellon was.

"Well?" Daellon asked.

"It's much worse than we thought. Jarduche has already taken Tyral and plans to overthrow Yarrow next," Belnapp responded, "And the Cardinal is involved in this as well. He's in Tyral with Jarduche and he has the amulet."

"I knew he couldn't be trusted!" Daellon quietly angered. "His folly with Aegolth sent us out searching for one of my men and now the Conflict is upon us all. If he's sided with Jarduche and his minions, his head will roll!"

"Father, either Jarduche or the Cardinal may or may not have complete possession of the amulet yet. Remember, Belnapp told us that Larco informed him Lord Cellus has the locket. The locket has the same power as the amulet. If we find Cellus, we can stop the Cardinal, Jarduche, the gargoyles and the gryphons in their tracks."

"Yes, but we do not know where Cellus is right now. He could be anywhere as well as the Consul," replied Daellon.

"Let's hope Consul is still here on Ornathys somewhere safe. Right now, we need to get word to Berwyck and Orachon before anything further happens."

"We should make Yarrow by daybreak if we take the alternate paths around Celdoom Pass. We shouldn't be seen, though, as it takes longer than heading directly through the Pass," Belnapp added.

"Yes, we should leave now," Kaeleos noted.

"Aye," Daellon added, "before what little time we have left runs out."

keeper of the locket

Cellus knew he had little time to return to Yarrow, if only he could reach Yarrow in time before the Cardinal and his minions got there first. The temperature continued to descend into the afternoon as the light snow continued to fall. A frigid blast of air winded through the Wood as Cellus pressed on. Frozen and shivering from the cold swim along with the bruising and battering he had taken from the

long fall from the castle balcony, pain racing throughout his body. Yet every step in the deep drifts of snow brought him closer in the knowledge that he would make it. His eyes focused, his destination always forward. Cellus's mind and body synchronously pacing and forging along, with his strong will, determined he would reach Yarrow.

Daellon, Kaeleos and Belnapp had managed to circumvent the scouting party of gargoyle and gryphon within the alternate path they knew would take more time to traverse. The path wound up well outside Celdoom Pass, hidden by dense wood and deep snow for coverage. Reaching a point overlooking Celdoom Pass, one could also see Raedre Mountain in the distance. As Daellon looked towards the mountain, thoughts of his lost mate and son ran across his mind, along with the voices and echoes of his past. He paused for a moment in the snow.

Hearing only a couple sets of footsteps, Kaeleos then Belnapp turned around to see Daellon standing still, looking off into the distance.

"Father?" Kaeleos called back to Daellon as Daellon remained still in his spot, looking ahead, frozen in his tracks. "Are you okay? Is something wrong? Is it the mountain?" Kaeleos asked again, approaching Daellon, looking in the direction of Raedre Mountain.

Daellon let out a heavy sigh. "There has been much to be thankful for having you come into my life, Kaeleos," Daellon responded as if in a trance. "Your mother would have been proud of how you turned out," he added.

"Father, I know of the deep pain of your past you've gone through that you told me of," Kaeleos spoke somberly. "I am forever grateful to you for having me here and giving me a chance to prove myself to you. We were both lost within the Great Conflict. Yet for how everything turned out, I am very proud to be your son."

Daellon turned and looked at Kaeleos. Striding over to Kaeleos, he put his talon on Kaeleos's shoulder.

"I could never be a prouder and honored General or father to anyone as I am of you, my son," Daellon returned to Kaeleos, as he smiled to his son.

"As I, too, am honored to call you, father," Kaeleos smiled back, putting his talon on Daellon's shoulder.

"Hey, you two!" as Belnapp called out to both, standing in his spot. It's nice to have a father and son bonding, but it's getting darker and colder out here and I'm freezing! Besides, we are losing valuable time while Yarrow could be under control of the gargoyles and gryphons by now!"

"Yes, we must get going, for we will have to find shelter with this weather if we delay any longer," Kaeleos noted.

"Aye, let's make haste ahead," Daellon added.

As the three travelers approached a small clearing, Belnapp stopped short hearing the crack of a branch followed by a low moan coming from a few feet ahead of him.

"What is it?" Kaeleos, looking at Belnapp, also heard the noise. "Step back," he alerted to Belnapp as Kaeleos withdrew his sword from its sheath. "Come out! I know you're there!" Kaeleos ordered in the direction of the noise, sword ready at hand ready to smite whatever came at them.

Daellon, astride Kaeleos, had sword drawn in position when another low moan came from behind a large, snow covered shrub. This time, a moan of 'help' came from the shrub as a paw hit the snow covered ground next to the shrub's base. Daellon and Belnapp recognized the voice.

"Lord Cellus? Is that you?" both called out in unison as Kaeleos, Daellon and Belnapp rushed over to the spot where Cellus lay in the snow; his features frozen and shivering as he was about to go into hypothermic shock.

"Cellus, what happened?" Kaeleos spoke as he sheathed his sword. Kaeleos removed his cloak and began wrapping it around Cellus's body in the snow to keep him from going into shock.

"M...must reach Yarrow. The g...gargoyles will attack. They are coming. They have already taken...T...Tyril. Jarduche and the Cardinal have the amulet..." Cellus rambled as he shivered from the cold journey alone he had taken upon himself to get help. "Must let Lord Nordellan know..." Cellus continued.

"Yes, we know of the plan, Cellus. We are on our way to Yarrow as well, " Kaeleos assured.

The warmth of the cloak gave Cellus some comfort from being exposed to the freezing temperatures after his escape from the castle. Cellus paused a moment, looking at Daellon and Kaeleos.

"You've both returned to Ornathys so soon? Did you find the missing Elite Guard you've been searching for these several seasons that have passed?" Cellus shivered.

"Yes and no," Kaeleos replied, shooting a brief look at Belnapp, "but at least you're alive. What happened to you and what are doing here in Gryth Wood alone?"

"The gargoyles. I escaped from Tyril just as the Cardinal along with Jarduche and his gargoyles stormed the Elevation ceremony for General Metgare, " Cellus panicked. "They will surely be looking for me."

"Don't worry. You will be safe with us. Cellus, do you still have the locket?"

"Uh, I think so. Somewhere in one of my surcoat pockets. How did you know I have a locket?"

"The locket has magical properties, yes?" Kaeleos hinted in return.

"Yes, but how did you know that? Did Berwyck tell you about it?"

"No. Belnapp informed us."

"The Squire?"

"Yes. He was inside the temple of Chalynn. He spoke to the spirit guardian and Larco, the missing Elite Guard whom Daellon and I sojourned to the archipelagos in search of."

Cellus's face turned into surprise. "Inside the temple? I don't understand. I've heard stories that those who enter the temple never leave."

"The spirit guardian and Larco are 'one' in the same, Cellus," Belnapp interrupted. "I've seen them...er...him. His name is Razantrope now, the spirit guardian of the temple. After the gargoyles had captured me and left me to die on the remote side of Haebriegg, somehow I managed to find the entrance to the temple. Razantrope saved my life from the injuries I suffered at the hands of the gargoyles. He told me of the locket's power that comes from the ashes of ancient spirit guardians contained within the locket. Razantrope can work his magic through both the locket and the amulet to stop the gargoyles in their tracks. But, at the same time, either possessor of the locket or amulet can enslave him to control his magic if a certain incantation is spoken. Razantrope released me from the temple to let others know he does exist."

"Sounds like we now have an ally in this Conflict," Cellus procured.

"We'll have to rescue the others once we get control of the amulet. Belnapp, do you know how we can let Razantrope know when we need his help?" Kaeleos added.

"I only know that he can 'sense' who has possession of either object, locket or amulet," Belnapp replied.

"We may need his help sooner if Yarrow is sieged. Orachon, Berwyck and Gareruff are in danger as we speak. Cellus, are you up to travel?" Kaeleos inquired.

"I believe so, Lieutenant. Thank you all for rescuing me. My hope is that Nordellan has already contacted the armada to head for Ornathys as quick as possible," Cellus returned.

"Cellus, may I hold on to the locket for our protection and to keep it safe in case we are attacked?" Kaeleos asked.

"Yes, but unfortunately I don't know of any incantation spells that pertain to the locket or the amulet. But I know someone who might. Nordellan and possibly Draemer...oh!...Draemer! I left Draemer to face the gargoyles in my escape! He was doing research on the amulet for Nordellan and Orachon!" Cellus panicked as he handed the locket to Kaeleos.

"Let's hope Draemer doesn't give the gargoyles or the Cardinal too much information of what he knows about the amulet or we may need Razantrope sooner," as a concerned look came over Kaeleos's face.

a hidden truth

It was very early morning in the Cardinal's chancery as Gareruff's eyes began to droop from several hours of sorting, reviewing and reorganizing certain parchments the Cardinal had Gareruff pull to use for changes to his enumerated compact. The room's fireplace glowed subtle red embers of a previous fire, now unattended, throwing little heat into the room by now. Sitting on the large table were documents pertaining to the fief boundaries on Ornathys. Most of the ancient surveying maps by the early settlers had no clear definition of whom owned a particular fief outside either kingdom's peripheral walls, albeit Yarrow, Tyral or a peasant landowner due to the age and faded details on the

parchments themselves.

Stopping a moment, Gareruff dropped the inked quill onto a separate parchment he had been taking notes on to let out a yawn, breaking his attention span. Leaning back in his chair, he began stretching his arms in mid air. Thinking perhaps a good dose of evening air would revive him from his current tired state of mind, he got up from the long back chair he had been sitting at for so long. Walking across the study, he put on his surcoat and exited the room, closing the large oak and metal door behind him.

Heading down the spiral turret stairway to its base, Gareruff approached the massive ornate iron and wooden yett of the tower's donjon leading onto the courtyard grounds.

Berwyck had just finished making his nightly rounds of securing Yarrow's infrastructure as Gareruff stepped out into the courtyard, his feet crunching through the previous layer of fallen snow that had frozen on the ground. The breath from his nostrils creating small wisps of clouds rising slowly up into the air above him.

"Chancellor," Berwyck hailed out to Gareruff as Berwyck was approaching him across the courtyard from the portcullis. "I didn't expect to see you out here in the chill of this winter's eve. Do you need my assistance for anything? Is something wrong?"

"No, Lieutenant. I just stepped out for some air. Been very busy with my duties for His Eminence lately," Gareruff replied.

"Well, let me or one of the guards know if you need anything," Berwyck noted.

"I will, Lieutenant. Thank you," Gareruff acknowledged as he slapped his coat arms together and rubbed his paws from the frigid air to keep warm.

After a few moments in the cold air, Gareruff returned back through the tower donjon and up the spiral stairway to the chancery.

Upon entering the room, he stopped short noticing a parchment roll on the room's carpet. Thinking it must have fallen as he got up from his chair to retrieve his surcoat, he picked it up, brought it over to the table and sat down in the long back chair. Curious, he unrolled the parchment to read its contents.

As he read on, his face became pale in shock to find out this was the same parchment banishing Larco he had found earlier while preparing the Cardinal's itinerary for Consul's visit to Ornathys.

"What was this parchment doing out in the open?!" Gareruff thought to himself nervously. He wondered if the Cardinal had been to the study while Gareruff had stepped out for some air. But the Cardinal was attending the Eclection in Tyral for General Metgare. The Cardinal couldn't have possibly been in the study! Unless something changed?

Not waiting to find out, Gareruff quickly rolled up the parchment, grabbed a small piece of twine stored in one of the desk drawers and tied it around the parchment. Scanning the room, Gareruff eyed a spot where he could hide the incriminating document. Across the room, several shelves containing some of the study's larger books, a pair of bookends resembling a figure of a dragon surrounded by hawks decorating its facade sat. Gareruff was familiar with this set for they had a hollow area at their base just large enough to hold a small parchment.

Gareruff went over to one of the bookends, stuffed the parchment into the bookend and returned it back on the shelf, hoping the Cardinal wouldn't bother looking there. Feeling somewhat relieved, Gareruff went back to the desk and continued to work on the parchments through the early winter morning.

wet paint

"Wha-?!"

The store manager at Tressler's Market, Doug Tressler, took one look at Chuck's portfolio and concept artwork of the planned fresco on the market's windows and gasped. The maniacal montage of monster menagerie musings had sprung from Chuck's imagination running wild at full wide open throttle onto the paper. From giant prehistoric creatures morphed by clumping several exotic species with human traits together to form what appeared to be anthropomorphic beasts of another world.

"My customers will flip over this!" Doug exclaimed at Chuck. "I have never seen anything like this! And I'm sure my customers never have either!"

"So I take it you like what I've done, Mr. Tressler?" Chuck questioned.

"What you've done," Doug continued with a serious look back at Chuck, "will either put me out of business or into the looney bin! Do you really expect me to do this to my store windows?"

"Well, I guess I probably should have drawn the monsters pushing around shopping carts full of food. Would that help?" Chuck surmised, a bit concerned.

"Help?! That would-" as Doug's emotional swing paused a moment to reflect upon what Chuck had just proposed for changes to the fresco, "that would be terrific!"

"Huh? I mean, yeah! It would!" Chuck related back, a bit perplexed at first.

"That's a fantastic idea! It's genius! Our slogan can be 'We're Full of Monster Deals Here at Tressler's Market!' If you could incorporate those monsters pushing full shopping carts along with that slogan into the window fresco, you've got a deal, Mr. Ravick," Doug beamed.

"I can! Not a problem, sir! And I will rework in those changes for you, Mr. Tressler."

"Very good! As soon as possible!"

"Right away, Mr. Tressler. Just give me a day and I'll have the reworked concept with the changes in your hands by tomorrow!" Chuck countered with a smile.

"Excellent. See you then, so we can begin work as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Tressler. Thank you, sir," Chuck replied.

"You can call me Doug. Good night, Mr. Ravick."

"Thank you, Doug. Good night," as Chuck placed his artwork back into his portfolio. Picking up his portfolio bag, he pumped his fist in victory as he walked out of the store to his car.

At his desk at home, Jeff was admiring his artwork, taking his eyes off his computer screen momentarily as he finished typing his homework assignment. The monster drawing he had completed the previous evening laid next to his laptop. This was Jeff's latest attempt at drawing a monster with mechanical pencil using the reference drawing Chuck had provided him with. A good workout for Jeff at creating his own monster without tracing or using an opaque projector or mirror to trace with. Jeff had drawn his creation totally freehand by letting his imagination do most of the work for him without any tools. Overall, it looked nothing like Chuck's monster - it looked better! Yes, it took a lot longer to complete, little more than seven hours combined of patient work, but the details were extraordinary. The anatomical structure of the creature seemed to jump off the paper to the viewer as Jeff got up from his chair to view the artwork at a slight distance. Acknowledging a smile that it was well worth it, he let out a sigh of accomplishment.

He could hardly wait to show Chuck...

CHAPTER X

seeing is believing

The four travelers braved the elements of the cold winter's night on their trek towards Yarrow without being seen by the enemy. Just as daylight was about to break, Kaeleos caught sight of several gargoyle at the edge of Gryth Wood leading towards Yarrow's drawbridge. Stopping short, Kaeleos outstretched his arms and wings downward to signal the others behind him, crouching down low to the ground as they mimicked his actions.

"Gargoyles," Kaeleos quietly spoke to the others.

"We've arrived too late," Daellon whispered back. "How are we going to get past them?"

"I have an idea," Belnapp thought, "if we could only disguise ourselves like gargoyles..."

"What? Even if we could, that would be suicide," Daellon interrupted.

"No, that is a good idea. With disguises, the four of us could slip past them," Kaeleos answered, looking back at the others. "We can't turn back now. Orachon and Yarrow need our help. Belnapp, you said Razantrope...uh, Larco, can sense who has possession of either the amulet or the locket, yes?"

"Yes, he can," Belnapp replied, "but the Cardinal and Jarduche have the amulet."

Kaeleos paused a moment in thought.

"You've just given me an even better idea. But first, let's all move down into that ravine for cover from the gargoyles."

The four walked down into the shallow ravine lined with many trees and brush. Once they reached the bottom, they were surrounded by the dense terrain. Feeling they were a safe distance away, Kaeleos took out the locket and began to speak to it as if it would talk back.

"Razantrope...uh...Larco, we need your help. If you can hear us, please respond." A few moments passed before anything happened. Then suddenly the locket began to glow a steady glow as a voice began to speak through their thoughts. "I am Razantrope, Guardian of the Temple of Chalynn. I've heard your call. What is your need?"

"We are trapped here in Gryth Wood on Ornathys surrounded by gargoyles at the edge of the Wood where it meets Yarrow. We need your help to get inside Yarrow as well as sending the gargoyles back where they came from," Kaeleos answered back.

A pause came before Razantrope responded. "So you want to appear as those who possess the amulet?" was heard through both their minds.

"Yes, if you could," Kaeleos acknowledged.

"I can. Very well, then."

A flash of light and sound surrounded Kaeleos and Daellon. Within a few moments, there appeared the Cardinal and Jarduche standing before Cellus and Belnapp.

"Oh no, they found us!" cried Cellus. Fear raced in their eyes as they turned and began to climb the ravine out of harm's way, their paws ripping through the snow covered ground as they seemed to be getting nowhere fast.

"Wait, Cellus! Belnapp! It's us, Kaeleos and Daellon. How do we look?"

The shock hearing Kaeleos's voice coming from the Cardinal surprised Cellus and Belnapp as they stopped in their tracks and turned to see where the familiar voice came from.

"But how-?" Belnapp spoke as Cellus and him did a double take looking upon the two creatures they both feared most at the moment in amazement.

"It's us, in disguise. I never thought I'd ever become the Cardinal," as Kaeleos's voice came from the figure of Cardinal Rigor Mortis. "I take it Razantrope read my mind."

"And I never thought I'd ever look like Jarduche, the enemy," Daellon spoke as his voice came from the figure of Jarduche, his wings and giant physique throwing fear into their eyes.

"You both sure look real! Just like them! Razantrope's magic is amazing! But your voices could be a dead give away," Cellus responded.

"Yes, but now we have a chance at foiling the Cardinal's scheme and stop this conflict from getting any worse than it is," Kaeleos added.

"Well, father, what do you say we go save Yarrow from this invasion?"

"Right behind you," Daellon answered as his gargoyle wings spread open.

"What are you going to do?" Cellus asked.

"Make them believe that the amulet was stolen by the gryphons. That will send them away from Yarrow to give us time to come up with a plan to stop this conflict," Kaeleos noted. "You two remain hidden until the gargoyles leave, okay?"

"Good luck, and may the spirit of Larco be with you both," Belnapp added.

"Don't worry. We have the locket in case we need to call on Razantrope."

As Kaeleos and Daellon, in disguise, climbed up the ravine and walked toward the gargoyles, both were quickly spotted by the group. Cries of 'Your Majesty and Your Eminence' came from several gargoyle as the group surrounded Kaeleos and Daellon not knowing who they really were.

"Your Majesty, Your Eminence, has Tyral fallen? We did not hear word of your immediate return to Yarrow," the group's leader spoke.

"Fools!" Kaeleos returned loudly at the leader, "The gryphons cannot be trusted anymore! They took the amulet from us once we invaded Tyral! Jarduche and I have been looking for them as you all should be!"

"We did not know, Your Eminence and Your Majesty, that the amulet was missing," the lead gargoyle panicked.

"Well, you had better start looking! We cannot resume the conflict until we have the amulet!" Daellon roared to his men.

"Right away, Your Majesty, Your Eminence," the lead gargoyle returned, as he called to the gargoyles to begin flight towards Tyral. "We are leaving now!"

Once the last of the gargoyles had left, Belnapp and Cellus came out from hiding to join the disguised Kaeleos and Daellon.

"It worked," Cellus noted. "They believed you both."

"Yes, but we now need to revert back to our former selves, especially you, father," Kaeleos added looking at Daellon, "for if you were seen at Yarrow's gate as Jarduche, the Guard would not hesitate to shoot at you."

"Aye, but it sure feels different in these bodies compared to our own," Daellon replied. "I can feel the strength and power of a gargoyle."

"This is a good ruse for deceiving the enemy, yes, but I wouldn't want to be caught in this disguise when the real Cardinal returns," Kaeleos acknowledged.

"We'd better have Razantrope change us back to ourselves before we head for Yarrow."

Soon after, Kaeleos had Razantrope revert Kaeleos and Daellon back to their own bodies as the four headed off in the direction of Yarrow's drawbridge.

Xucca and Berwyck

The morning sun's rays shone upon the open chamber doorway of General Daellon's hold where Berwyck was standing, catching the first light of day; his eyes focused on a particular direction he was to be heading towards. Closing the door of the hold behind him, Berwyck walked along the path of Yarrow's market place towards the Innkeepers How at the far end; his paced breath creating wisps of clouds in the chilly air as he strode on. Reaching the inn's doorway, Berwyck was met by the inn's caretaker, Callas, who was gathering seasoned wood from a stacked cord along the wall to bring inside to the large fireplace.

"Lieutenant Berwyck," Callas called out, "what brings you to this part of the kingdom this early morning?"

"Is Xucca busy?" Berwyck replied. "I must speak with her."

"She's out back in the small kitchen preparing the meals for the day. You want me to tell her you're here?"

"No. I'll go see her. I need a few moments alone with her."

"Okay then. I have to finish bringing in firewood for the cold night ahead. Let me know if you need anything else," as Callas walked over to the woodpile.

"I will," as Berwyck proceeded to walk around to the back of the inn where a trail of steam and smells of food being cooked came from a small, partially open window.

As Berwyck walked up the stone steps to the door, he reached over and tapped a talon on the open window pane. Hearing the noise, Xucca popped her head out to see her son.

"Berwyck?" she spoke, smiling at first until she looked at his troubled expression. "Is something wrong?"

"Mother, I need to see you for a moment," Berwyck replied back. As Xucca opened the door, Berwyck greeted her with a large hug, his wings wrapping around her.

"Come over here to the table," Xucca spoke as Xucca and Berwyck walked over to a small side table with its leafs folded and both sat down. It was then Berwyck related what was on his mind to her.

"I wasn't sure whether to tell you this or not, but the Consul may hold a tribunal upon their return to Ormathys. It involves King Orachon's amulet. Lord Draemer of the Consul lost the amulet when his wardrobe inside his coach was stolen. The accusations point to myself and Belnapp for not guarding the amulet. Belnapp and I may be found guilty if the amulet is not found before then."

"I can not see that happening to you, my son," Xucca replied, "for they do not know you as well as I do. I do not believe you are guilty of another's responsibility."

"Yes, but the Chancellor convinced Consul I was responsible for that coach where the amulet inside the wardrobe was contained in. Luckily, Cellus believes me and had Nordellan set a hearing for me and Belnapp with Consul. Cellus gave me a reprieve to find the amulet. But until Daellon and Kaeleos

return, I am in charge of protecting the kingdom and cannot search for it." as Berwyck held back a sigh finishing his statement.

"What about Belnapp?" Xucca inquired.

"He has not returned to Yarrow. He is still missing with the coach, the wardrobe and the amulet. He has been gone for some time now and tensions between the kingdoms are on the rise along with a possible outbreak of war. At first, I did not want to tell you what I've just told you. But I felt if something happened to me, it would be another loss for you."

"No," Xucca halted, "I could not bear losing you, my son. Kaeleos will return soon. And so will Daellon." As she spoke those words, in the back of Xucca's mind, a distant memory of Larco struck her that moment, her mate she searched for whom she felt would never return. "Nothing will ever happen to you, my son. I truly believe that the amulet will be found."

Just then, the call of an Elite Guard interrupted the conversation, getting Berwyck's attention.

"Lieutenant! Lieutenant Berwyck!"

Berwyck got up from his chair, exited out the kitchen door and walked around to the front of the inn where the guard was standing.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Commander, General Daellon and Lieutenant Kaeleos have returned from their sojourn. They are at the drawbridge gate returning with Lord Cellus and Squire Belnapp," the guard noted as he gave a proper salute in return.

"Belnapp has returned," Berwyck thought to himself. "Lower the gate. I will meet with them as they enter," Berwyck replied.

"Yes, sir," the guard returned with a salute.

It was then Xucca arrived from inside and stood next to Berwyck, looking at him.

"Kaeleos?" Xucca questioned in anticipation.

"Yes," Berwyck answered. "Father has returned with Daellon, Cellus and Belnapp. I go to meet them at the gate."

"I will go with you," Xucca nodded as she took hold of Berwyck's feathered arm.

As soon as the drawbridge lowered, the four traversed across the structure through the portcullis, awaited by Berwyck, Xucca, and several Elite Guard. Catching sight of one another, Kaeleos and Xucca ran to meet, throwing wings around one another into a tight hug. As they held each other, Berwyck came over to hug both. Once they broke from the hug huddle, Xucca looked into Kaeleos's eyes.

"I've missed you so," Xucca softly cooed softly.

"I've missed you much as well," Kaeleos lovingly acknowledged. "The journey took us longer than expected. But we made in back in time before the invasion."

"Invasion? What invasion?" Berwyck replied.

"We need to secure the kingdom before the Cardinal, Jarduche and his minions arrive," Kaeleos warned. "Orachon?"

"He's in his solar. My brother? In league with Jarduche?" Berwyck worried.

"I'm afraid so, Lieutenant," Daellon added. "We need to be on alert and battle ready."

"It's true, my friend," Cellus spoke, placing his paw on Berwyck's shoulder. "I managed to escape the gargoyles after they breached Tyral's defenses during the Ecleciation. Unfortunately, they captured Aegolth, Metgare and Lord Draemer."

As Cellus was talking, Berwyck began looking around the group as if he had lost something important.

"Father, on your sojourn, did you and the General ever find the missing Elite Guard?" Berwyck asked Kaeleos as Xucca and Berwyck both eyed Kaeleos and Daellon looking for different, yet anticipated answers.

"Yes and no," Kaeleos responded, "but I believe both Belnapp and Cellus can provide you with the answers you seek," as Kaeleos turned to look at Cellus and Belnapp. "Right now General Daellon and I must prepare the guard and castle for the invasion. We will need you and Belnapp as soon as Belnapp and Cellus tell you what transpired."

Kaeleos then turned to hug and kiss Xucca.

"Return to the inn. You will be safe there," as Kaeleos and Daellon left to secure Yarrow's defenses.

Once Kaeleos and Daellon left, Berwyck and Xucca turned to look at Belnapp and Cellus.

"Uh, Berwyck," Belnapp spoke first, hesitating slightly, "I don't know exactly how to explain this," as Belnapp paused to gather his thoughts as Berwyck and Xucca eyed him intently, "but Larco, the missing Elite Guard, is the guardian of the Temple of Chalynn."

"The guardian of the temple? I don't understand," Berwyck questioned in return as a slight gasp came from Xucca. "Larco? He's alive?" Xucca thought to herself.

"He's not the same as he was before. He is a spirit guardian. He calls himself Razantrope. He's an immortal being now," Belnapp continued.

"Immortal?" Berwyck inquired.

"Yes, for he told me his spirit, his essence as he called it, cannot leave the confines of the Temple of Chalynn for he must guard the temple through eternity. Larco died in the shipwreck of a cargo ship

heading to Port Satyreclore during an ocean storm. Everyone aboard perished. He told me that once the husk of his mortal body had washed ashore on Haebrugg, his soul, his essence, was transformed into a magickal being by a former guardian of the temple. Larco's name is now Razantrope. He is our ally as well as your 'true father', Berwyck. Razantrope saved my life after the gargoyles kidnapped me as I was out looking for Lord Draemer's coach. Once they captured me, they took me to the remote side of Haebrugg to die. I would have died if I had not found Razantrope."

"Larco? My 'true father'?" Berwyck whispered as Xucca looked at Berwyck, tears in her eyes.

"Yes, your true father," Xucca acknowledged as she softly wept. "Kaeleos is your surrogate father, Berwyck." Berwyck paused a moment in thought.

"Why was he on that ship?" Berwyck asked Belnapp.

"Larco was captured and held in Tyrall's prison against his will for seeing Metgare spying on Yarrow's defenses. The Cardinal and King Aegolth had drawn up a 'writ of banishment' for Larco in exchange for his freedom. He had no choice but to leave Ornathys on that ill-fated cargo ship heading to Port Satyreclore. And now the conflict has already begun. Your brother and Jarduche along with the power of the amulet have sieged Tyrall and are planning to invade Ornathys as we speak," Belnapp explained.

Xucca gasped as anger began to fume inside of Berwyck.

"If not for the sake of Larco, my father, Ornathys shall not fall victim to my brother's doings. Belnapp, we must now ready with the General and Kaeleos for innocent lives will not be taken by those who've changed mine." as Berwyck began to head off to help with the defenses

"Berwyck," Cellus interrupted, placing his paw on Berwyck's shoulder, stopping Berwyck in his tracks, "There is one other thing. The locket. It contains the ashes of the spirit guardian. I gave it to Kaeleos for safe keeping. Whomever possesses the locket, Razantrope can work his magic through it. His magic is just as powerful in either the locket or the amulet. Kaeleos and Daellon had Razantrope transform their physical bodies to look like the Cardinal and Jarduche as a disguise to fool a group of gargoyles positioned near Yarrow at the edge of Gryth Wood. They lured the gargoyles into a ploy to go find the gryphons who supposedly had stolen the amulet from them."

"Yes, it's true," Belnapp seconded. "We've seen Razantrope's power. He can help us."

"But my brother and Jarduche have the amulet. For surely Razantrope must also obey whomever possesses that as well?"

"Interestingly," Cellus explained, "Lord Nordellan once told me that it depends on the incantation that is used on or with the amulet or locket. Lord Nordellan and Lord Draemer have extensive knowledge of incantations regarding both using white, gray or even dark or black magick. But I fear the gargoyles and gryphons knowledge of magick must have found certain incantations that work with the amulet as well. And, unfortunately, they also have Draemer. During my escape, I foolishly left him behind at the Eclection thinking he would follow. At the moment, Nordellan and the rest of Consul are much safer somewhere among the archipelagos far from Ornathys shores than we are. Also, Nordellan left Draemer and I in charge of Grimoire. However, since both of us are not within Grimoire's fortress, the gargoyles and gryphons could overtake the castle to potentially us it as a

stronghold for their attack on Yarrow."

"Then we will need a plan to rescue Draemer as well as save Yarrow from my brother. Belnapp. Cellus. Come with me," Berwyck spoke, then turned to Xucca. "Mother, you need to return to the inn where you will be safe. I must go now."

"Be careful, my son," Xucca replied as she hugged Berwyck before they parted.

Draemer's remorse

Back at Tyral, things had taken a turn for the worse. Several gargoyles had already taken flight, including Jarduche, carrying off Metgare, Aegolth and Fedrox to their fate on Haebrugg. Inside the castle, the Cardinal scanned the great hall, catching sight of Draemer in a corner.

With a hideous grin on his beak, the Cardinal with Farris by his side, began striding over to Draemer, his back up against the corner wall, cowering in fear at the sight of both.

"Well, what do we have here?" the Cardinal implied in a low tone to Farris, the amulet around the Cardinal's neck began to glow red.

"I think he's lost, Your Eminence," Farris responded.

"Oh, now I know," the Cardinal returned with a small chuckle, "I do believe this is Lord Draemer. He's returned from Port Satyreclore to participate in the General's Eclection of Consul. How noble."

"Stay back!" relayed Draemer, seeing escape was several yards away from him at the moment, the closest being the archway where Cellus had fled.

"Be silent and remain still!!" Farris warned loudly as he placed his talons around Draemer's throat, holding him fast against the wall. "What shall we do with this one, Your Eminence?"

The Cardinal's hideous grin became a dark leer as he stood inches away from Draemer's face. The amulet glowed wildly as Draemer caught a glance first at the amulet and then at the Cardinal's face.

"You are the one who spurned my offer of help during Consul," the Cardinal slowly whispered in an evil tone to Draemer, loud enough for him to hear. "Seems now you are in need of help again, My Lord? However, I have something to tell you. I already know of the knowledge you possess about the amulet. My chancellor informed me that he happened to come across a scroll containing yours and Lord Nordellan's description on harnessing the amulet's power with certain incantations. King Orachon had requested your research into the amulet's power. Once I obtain that knowledge, I can rule every land there is from Ornathys on. So, my friend, you have a choice. You can either tell me all you know of what power the amulet is capable of and I will spare your life. Or you can hold your tongue and seal your fate with those that cross me."

"I don't believe you! Cellus?! Where are you?!!" Draemer called out as Farris tightened his grip on Draemer's throat nearly choking him while holding Draemer fast against the wall. "What have you done with them?!" Draemer coughed out, looking in fear at the Cardinal.

"I've given them ample time somewhere else to think about their miserable existence."

"Where?!!" demanded Draemer, struggling hopelessly against Farris's powerful grip.

"Very far away from here," Farris answered back, showing his fangs as he spread his wings open.

"Fiend!!" Draemer managed to speak before coughing again.

"The same holds true for you if you do not tell me what you know of the amulet's power," the Cardinal demanded. Draemer's fears had come true, feeling responsible for all that had happened so far.

"What have I done?" he thought to himself.

Mandy

Four hours into his first night, Chuck was already at work on the multi-paned fresco at Tressler's Market. Using a marker, he had traced larger templates from his sketchbook drawings to use as outlines on the store windows for the fresco. Once the outlines were completed, Chuck would begin painting the fresco using his selection of acrylic paints. The last customer, an elderly gentleman, had just left the store, taking a glimpse at the monster outline Chuck had started coloring in with the paints. "What's this world coming to?" grumbled the elderly man at Chuck.

Brushing off a quick retort with a sigh, Chuck kept working on his project regardless.

"Nice artwork," came a voice from a register aisle as Chuck stopped working to see who and where the voice came from. "You must be the artist the store manager commissioned for the window display."

As Chuck caught sight of her, he noticed she was a very attractive, dark skinned brunette wearing an unusual hairpiece in her hair. A small ivory unicorn figure on a cloud emblazoned with several colorful stones adorned the hairpiece. Chuck's attention span was entirely focused on the unicorn hairpiece for a few moments as Mandy walked over to him.

"Hello?" she cautiously replied, looking concerned at Chuck's blank expression and non-movement.

"Are you okay?"

"Uh, oh!" Chuck replied as he came out of his trance. "My name's Chuck. Chuck Ravick," as Chuck's words stumbled along introducing himself. "Excuse me, but I couldn't help noticing the unicorn in your hair, Miss?...uh...Miss?"

"It's Mandy, Mandy Patterson," her voice sweetly returned with a smile. "Thank you. It's one of my great grandmother's hairpieces she had for many years. I'm one of the night closers here at the market."

"Yeah, I kinda figured you were...something...like...that," Chuck haphazardly replied with a smile, using a rag to wipe his hand and fingers after they had fallen inside an open can of green paint while he was in a trance.

"You have quite a talent for drawing monsters, but I think you can do more than that," she added back looking at one of Chuck's sketches laying on a work cart.

"Yeah, it's a living," Chuck returned, sighing to himself.

Mandy giggled slightly at Chuck's retort. "I get off work at ten. Would you like to join me for a late night coffee at the Red Gryphon Diner?" Mandy invited.

"Yeah, sure. I could use one. I'll just finish up to a point here where I can begin tomorrow where I left off and I'll join you," Chuck accepted.

"Great," Mandy returned with a smile. "I'll start locking up the store and meet you there," replied Mandy as she removed her work apron.

A half hour later, after driving a few blocks, both arrived the Red Gryphon Diner across town. Being a quiet Monday evening, no one else was in the diner except for Chuck and Mandy as they sat down in the last booth at one end of the diner in the corner. An orange haired waitress came over to their table bringing small, thin plastic menus.

"Can I get you anything?" she asked Mandy and Chuck.

"I'll have the Catapult Cappuccino," Mandy ordered without glancing at the menu.

"Chuck delayed slightly while browsing over the beverage section on the menu. "I'll have the Very Late Latte," as the waitress smiled and took both menus back to the counter and went to make the order.

"So," as Mandy began the conversation, "you come here often?" she smiled.

"Not really," Chuck responded. "I'm usually at Tin Can Coffee most of the time ordering a cup of mud."

"The coffee's good here but to each his own."

"Yeah. It's cool," as Chuck looked around the diner.

"I've been working at the market a few years now and I haven't seen you around here before," Mandy inquired.

"I live over in Edgemont Green. My dad helped me get Tressler's window project."

"He knows Doug Tressler?"

"Through a co-worker friend of his who knows Doug. Geno Martin. He's the head of maintenance at the city maintenance department whom my dad works for. My dad told me Geno knew Doug from college and helped Doug with building Tressler's Market a few years ago. My dad's a contracting electrician helping with the new courthouse addition being built. Dad told Geno I was an artist and I let my dad show some of my artwork to Geno and Geno's son, Sal."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Geno is kind of an art aficionado and his son Sal works at an online gaming company in California as a character development animator for the games. Sal's here on vacation visiting his dad and he thought my artwork was pretty cool so I guess Geno asked Doug to interview me for the job."

"The monsters?"

"Yeah. At first, Doug wasn't sure until something I said changed his mind then I was hired for the job."

"That's interesting."

"So, what do you like to do besides work at Tressler's Market?" as Chuck jumped in and changed the conversation about him to Mandy.

"Um...well...I'm into...things...spiritual in nature," as Mandy caught herself in thought.

"Oh, like camping or hunting or canoeing?"

"No, nothing like that except for the camping part, perhaps. Being out in nature, mostly."

As the waitress brought over the two coffees with the receipt, Mandy reached into her purse.

"It's okay. I'll take care of this one," Mandy commented to Chuck as Chuck started to reach in his pocket for his wallet.

"You sure?" Chuck asked.

"No problem," Mandy replied. "My treat."

After the waitress left, Mandy paused a moment while looking quietly at Chuck. Then she whispered to him as he started drinking his latte, "You are one of many talents, my friend. I'm a psychic and I understand this. You are a very gifted individual, more than you think."

"Uh, you're a psychic?" as Chuck stopped sipping his latte, thinking she was trying to come on to him.

"Yes, I could give you a reading if you'd like,"

"Uh, I've heard about psychics but I never met one before. Guess I didn't believe in them or something."

"Well you're talking to one right now. Lisa wouldn't mind, would she?"

"Whoa!!" Chuck yelled, nearly spitting his sip of latte. "How did you know I had a girlfriend named Lisa? I never even told you that! How do you know that?"

"I have many spiritual connections in nature, as I've told you," Mandy whispered to Chuck, seeing the waitress at the counter turn to look at their table. Once the waitress turned her attention back to what she was doing, Mandy continued.

"You also have a friend nicknamed 'J.P.'. His real name is Jeff. You two are about to help save the world," as the expression on Mandy's face changed for Chuck to notice. Chuck was now feeling she could look right through him, deep into his thoughts at the moment."

"You know J.P? Jeff?!" Chuck gasped. "Save the world? This is freaking me out! How do you know him?"

"Shh! I will tell you more but be quiet. Come with me. I have something to show you," as Mandy stood up, got her purse and left a generous tip on the table next to the receipt she had already left money to pay for.

"Where are we going? What about our coffees?"

"Don't worry about them. We're going to my studio. Follow me in your car."

"Uh, this is so sudden," as Chuck started to feel like the beta rather than the alpha in this situation. "I hope Lisa doesn't see me."

"She won't. Come on," Mandy urged.

After they had arrived at Mandy's apartment a few blocks away, Mandy got her keys and opened the main door to an old brownstone building. Once they were inside, an elderly woman from a flight of stairs above whispered down.

"Mandela? Is that you?"

"Yes, Helga," Mandy returned.

"You have someone with you, yes? The 'chosen' one?" the voice creaked back.

"I do," Mandy replied.

"The 'chosen' one? What does that mean? This is getting weird. Who is she? What's going on here?" Chuck panicked.

"Shh! Quiet! You'll wake the other tenants in the building. Follow me," as Mandy took her keys again and opened up a very old door that led downstairs to her basement studio. As Mandy turned an old rotary switch on the wall, at the bottom of the staircase hanging on a wire, an ancient clear light bulb appearing to be a very old street lamp the size of a large vase, lit up slowly. The light from its filament dimly lit the old wooden staircase to the basement floor.

As she reached the bottom step on the basement floor, next to the staircase on a shelf, Mandy opened a small metal basket containing wooden matches. Striking one of the matches, she began lighting several candles of various sizes around the perimeter of the room.

Once the entire room became bathed in candlelight, Chuck could see a large, round shag carpet in the center of the room containing various symbols in its weave he had never seen before. Several large pillows and small woven scatter rugs and carpets with similar symbols were scattered about the floor of

the room while some were hanging on the walls. In one corner, a single large bookshelf contained several books of all sizes on magickal subject matter. A laptop computer sitting on one of the small tables was the only modern convenience besides a small college dorm fridge in the corner. An old porcelain wash sink with a large cabinet partially hid behind a very old curtain draped across one corner of the basement. An ancient but very small cast iron radiator was the only source of heat in the stone walled foundation of the brownstone's basement besides candlelight. Chuck stood at the bottom step of the staircase wondering what would happen next. The eeriness of candlelight filled the room overshadowing the dim glow of the ancient glass bulb hanging on a wire.

"Take your shoes off and leave them here by the stairway," Mandy noted doing the same after taking off her shoes. "Then come over to the center of the room," she added as she took two of the small rugs from the floor. She placed them in the center of the large circular rug along with a couple of large pillows.

Opening a small wooden chest, Mandy pulled out several incense pugs and a deck of tarot cards she placed on the table. Lighting the pugs, she waved them over the area where they were to sit, then placed them into a thin ornate vase in the center of the room. Over to another wooden chest, larger than the first one, Mandy removed two necklaces holding smoky quartz crystals, amethyst, aquamarine and kunzite in their settings, placing them around her neck. As she was closing the lid of the chest, Chuck could see two large crystal balls in the larger chest. One clear quartz and the other a dark obsidian. As Chuck sat down on the rug, he was feeling uncomfortable about what was about to happen, yet his gut instinct told him everything was okay at the moment.

"Are we gonna do something weird and kinky here?" Chuck asked Mandy, sitting on the carpet across from her.

"No. You will understand once I give you the reading."

"Uh, okay," Chuck replied, a bit puzzled to why all this was happening as Mandy began going into a trance-like state. Placing her hands on her legs, palms facing up, she sat in a lotus position with her legs crossed.

A few moments into her trance with her eyes closed, her hands reached for the tarot deck and began shuffling the cards very quickly, throwing Chuck into amazement.

"Wow! You must have been a card dealer at a casino at one time!"

Oblivious from Chuck's comment and her surroundings, Mandy finished shuffling the deck. She began to lay each card down, one by one, on the large center rug. The cards formed a pattern similar to a celtic cross, Mandy's eyes still closed. Then Mandy spoke, her voice seemingly ethereal and different.

"You and Jeff are to confront an ancient Celtic lore. One a hawk, the other an albatross," Mandy spoke slowly in a deep voice as she finished laying down the cards. "A cardinal from the past and his brother. One is good. One is evil," she continued.

"Um, Mandy, can you hear me?" Chuck asked, noticing the different pitch and tone of her voice.

Mandy's voice seemed to take on another persona as though Mandy was someone else.

"To restore universal balance, the brothers must return the amulet to its true source, the guardian," the ethereal voice coming from Mandy continued, "Trust one of the brothers but do not trust the other. When the portal opens a second time, Larco and Razantropé will be there to guide as one and welcome both brothers home," she concluded as she slowly awoke from her trance, her eyes slowly opening. Chuck was waving his hand in front of Mandy's eyes to try to get her attention.

"Amulet? What amulet? Earth to Mandy?" Chuck whispered softly.

"What are you doing?" Mandy asked, catching Chuck waving his hands in front of her eyes.

"Oh. Nothing," Chuck returned from being caught waving his hand. "Just checking to see if you were awake."

"I am. We don't have much time. The portal will open soon to our dimension, I was told. We need to find your friend Jeff."

"Uh, what's with this portal 'thing' anyway?" Chuck inquired.

"It's an interdimensional door to another place and time where one can enter and leave through as one wishes."

"Kind of like a time machine, right?"

"Yes, but the portal can appear anywhere at anytime," came an elderly voice from the stairway, startling Chuck, as he turned to see who was there.

"Whoa!" Chuck shouted as Helga's presence got both Chuck and Mandy's attention.

"What's she doing here?" Chuck asked Mandy.

"She's the landlady who gave me this apartment. I am her student," Mandy calmly replied.

"Student?"

"Yes, Helga Geist is one of the finest master psychic, medium, mystic and seer in this area. Once she had seen my psychic abilities, she offered me this studio apartment in her building to live and do my work at. Helga and I offer both walk-in and psychic phone readings for people who want psychic readings. When I'm not working at the market, I do readings as well to help supplement my income and make a living. Helga offered me half the rent of this studio apartment as long as I help her with readings."

"My student of the occult," Helga added, her elderly voice creaking like a rusty door hinge in desperate need of oiling.

"Helga, I'd like you to meet -" as Mandy was interrupted.

"- Charles Mathias Ravick, otherwise known as 'Havock Ravick' to your friends," answered Helga, finishing Mandy's sentence, standing over both of them like a vulture eyeing carrion as they sat on the carpet. Her four foot frame seemed to cast an imposing long shadow from the candlelight onto the

walls of the basement dwelling.

"How? How did you know my name? My full name?" Chuck nervously replied, panicking at Helga's response.

"I know of many things mystical on this plane of existence. You are the one who is the gifted artist. The one who creates...monsters..." she ended in a long pause.

Chapter XI

of gifts and of responsibilities

"Aww, c'mon, Mandy must've told you that," Chuck replied, a bit skittish.

"No, you dropped a small piece of paper with a sketch of a monster on it in the hallway. And you signed your name on the back," Helga spoke as she handed Chuck the paper.

"Oh...must've fell outta my back pocket."

"And from the looks of it, you must have been a student of one or more of the Great Masters during the Renaissance period. Very interesting soul you have there, Mr. Ravick. You've had many lives, many past lives I should say, as an artist. A magickal one, indeed."

"Yeah, well this is sssurree interesting so far," Chuck inferred, a bit skeptical, looking back at Mandy.

"Chuck! Shh! Let Helga finish," Mandy added.

"Wha-? And she's got something else to tell me what I don't know already?"

"Yes, I do. Something very important," Helga noted.

"Okay then, I'm ready. Lay it on me," as Chuck folded his arms as if waiting for the inevitable.

Helga's eyes seemed to grow dark for a moment as she stood still looking into Chuck's eyes. Without batting an eye, she spoke.

"You must use your talents to defeat the 'beaked one', the creature that will cause more harm than good onto this world. Beware of his cunning and the power he possesses. For you and your friends are the world's only hope once this creature comes through the portal! Befriend the brother and not the other!"

Chuck paused several moments before speaking as Mandy and Helga waited in anticipation for what he was about to say.

"...Uh...so...uh...how do I know which one is which?" a puzzled look erupted on Chuck's face.

"For that is what you will have to find out for yourselves," Helga firmly returned. "I must go. I hear a

call coming in," as Helga quietly turned and walked up the wooden staircase and out the door, closing it with a thud, leaving Mandy and Chuck.

"Okay, that was pretty weird. I didn't hear any phone ring, either. Really weird," Chuck answered with the still puzzled look at Mandy.

"Chuck, I want to help you and your friend anyway I can. This sounds serious," Mandy replied.

"Serious? I feel like I've just gone through some strange mis-communication thing and I haven't a clue of what just happened here," as Chuck was feeling anxious about the whole thing. "Did I just miss something, Mandy?"

"No. I'm here to help you out as much as I can. Trust me," as a smile glistened across Mandy's face.

"Uh, okay. I don't know what to believe anymore. Just let me know what I'm up against when it happens, I think..."

"You'll be fine," Mandy calmly noted. "First, we've got to get a plan together before 'it' arrives."

"Uh, sure. Yeah. Right. Good idea. Uh...what's the plan?" Chuck sounding concerned.

"We're going back to the Red Gryphon to meet your friend Jeff," Mandy suggested.

"Oh. Good plan. I could use another brew about now," Chuck looking in pretense as he hid his puzzled look, waiting for another coffee to wash down the many questions he still had.

a false reprise at Tyral

Leaving Tyral's Great Hall, the Cardinal and Farris led Draemer up the dark stairway to the tower dungeon at Tyral. Upon reaching the top of the tower stairway, Farris motioned Draemer to go inside the dungeon hold. As Farris closed the hold's iron gate, the Cardinal, holding a single lit torch throwing light into the dark crevice, began walking over to the iron gate. The fire's light cast an eerie glow onto the Cardinal's profile.

"You should be thanking me, My Lord, for sparing your life," the Cardinal taunted, looking eye to eye at Draemer. "I could have let my gargoyles take you to the same fate as the others are at right now. But I want to give you a chance to tell me what you know about the amulet's power, My Lord, before I decide otherwise."

"I don't believe you! You will send me there with the others as well or finish me off once I tell you what you want to know!" Draemer quivered.

"Of course, My Lord. Whatever your mind, whatever your mind," grinned Rigor back.

"My Liege, I hear something," Farris noted, turning his head to the side into the direction of the stairway.

"What now?" inquired the Cardinal, turning to Farris.

A moment later, a loud crash echoed within the perimeter of the tower room. Not soon after, Farris headed down the spiral staircase to see what the commotion was about.

"We'll see what you're up against when you defy my words, My Lord," quipped Rigor as he headed down the stairs after Farris, leaving Draemer in the darkness of his prison chamber.

Once outside, Farris eyed the gryphons battling the gargoyles at the outer ward of the castle, hurling boulders at one another. Some smashing into and damaging Tyral's castle structures, causing debris to fly everywhere. Finally reaching the bottom of the stairway outside the tower entrance, the Cardinal spotted the commotion between his warring ally factions. It was then he noticed a lead gargoyle ordering an attack on the gryphons. In shock of the chaos, he let out a screech of anger.

"Stop! I command you!" the Cardinal ordered loudly, taking the amulet in wing and holding it above him, speaking an incantation as he did so. A multi-faceted wide beam of multicolored light emanated from the amulet, arcing and encapsulating each gargoyle and gryphon. The beam freezing their motion into an estranged, paralyzing state. They began dropping one by one much like falling statues from the sky, falling hard onto the courtyard grounds.

"What's going on here?!!" demanded the Cardinal as he trotted over to his now stagnated army of minions. Slowing his pace towards the lead gargoyle of the group, the amulet grew bright red, ready to emit another beam. Once he was in close range of the gargoyle, the Cardinal aimed his wings directly at his target. The amulet's beam hit the hapless gargoyle. The gargoyle flew across the courtyard like he was shot from a cannon, eventually slamming hard into the inner ward wall. The gargoyle's body leaving a large impression into the stone from head to toe. A moan of pain came from the surprised gargoyle, his face wincing at his evil master.

"Well?!! I want answers now!!!" he screeched as an invisible force repeated slamming the gargoyle a second time back into the wall.

"Your Eminence," the gargoyle moaned in reply and astonishment, "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?!" His anger building, the Cardinal's feathers ruffled at the gargoyle's response. "Wrong answer!" yelled Rigor as the invisible force slammed the gargoyle a third time into the wall with his arms flailing, making him moan louder as his body crunched against solid matter once more.

"Your Eminence, I did not mean to anger you!" gasped the gargoyle, catching his breath.

"Well, you've certainly got my attention, fool!" Rigor replied, becoming more riled.

"You told us the gryphons took the amulet from you," as the gargoyle winced in pain waiting for another shove into the wall from his poor response. "You told us back at the edge of the forest at Yarrow!" as some gargoyles were starting to come out of their trance from the amulet's spell.

"I told you nothing of the sort!!! I have the amulet!!!" The Cardinal becoming peeved at the gargoyle's slanderous remark, Rigor's blood pressure was about to burst. "I've been here at Tyral with Farris all this time!!! My patience grows weary if you don't tell me what is going on here, I-"

"He's right, Your Eminence!" interrupted another gargoyle, having recovered somewhat from the fall

looked up at the Cardinal, risking his own fate as well for responding. "We were there waiting for your word on the capture of Tyril and Grimoire to move on Yarrow. But you and Jarduche showed up and told us the gryphons stole the amulet from you."

Right then and there, the Cardinal became absolutely furious, turning his attention to the other gargoyle's blatant outburst.

"How could Jarduche and I be there when I'm here while Jarduche is at Haebrugg with the prisoners?!!" he demanded as he aimed the amulet's beam at the gargoyle raising him high, far up into the air then letting the lead gargoyle free fall. The gargoyle's mass creating a large divot in the courtyard floor once he made contact with solid earth.

"Your Eminence," Farris calmly interrupted, "excuse me, but they may have the locket in their possession."

"Locket? What locket? What are you talking about?" a scowl gleaned across his beak as the Cardinal turned his attention from the lead gargoyle's unfortunate supporter to Farris. "And who is 'they'?"

"Lord Cellus and Lord Nordellan. The locket that contains the ashes of the temple guardian. It has the same powers as the amulet," quietly noted Farris.

"Wh...well, why wasn't I told this before?!" stuttered the Cardinal, fidgeting slightly, looking at the gargoyles and then back at Farris.

"I wasn't sure, Your Eminence, That is until we retrieved Draemer's coach and found a parchment inside a small metal chest within his wardrobe. The parchment contains a small incantus pertaining to the amulet and of the existence of the locket that Draemer knows of. Lord Cellus received the locket on a sojourn to Haebrugg some time ago. The parchment also states that he asked Lord Nordellan to have Draemer study the locket. My dark magic sorcery only goes so far, Your Eminence, but I'm sure that the amulet can serve us in seizing the opportunity to retrieve the locket when that opportunity arises," related Farris, bearing his fangs.

The Cardinal thought a moment. "Well, how does that explain 'me' being at Yarrow when I'm obviously 'here'?" as he anxiously awaited a logical response.

"Disguises. They tried to deceive us by looking exactly like you and Jarduche, Your Eminence. The locket can summon the temple guardian as well as the amulet. Also, my dark magic knows of a shape shifting incantation. The guardian must have used a shape shifting spell, magically changing their appearance to look like Jarduche and yourself. Then tricking us by turning gargoyle and gryphon against one another for the amulet," noted Farris.

Brushing off his prior anger at his minions, the Cardinal leered at Farris, pausing a moment as he slowly related.

"Well then, next time if they want to deceive us again, we'll have something to bargain for. Something real and tangible. Lord Draemer's life in exchange for the locket!" the Cardinal coldly hissed as deadly smiles came across Rigor's and Farris's profiles.

game on

Having completed his rounds securing the inner ward of Castle Grimoire, Trelayne advanced inside the armament hold to inspect the battle weaponry. As Trelayne started his inspection, a thunderous crash came from outside, shaking the entire hold, causing some armaments to fall from their locations inside the hold. It was then Trelayne bolted out the door to see what the noise was about. Once outside, Trelayne was met by several of his guard laying unconscious on the ground of the inner ward, surrounded by smoke and scattered debris. As some smoke cleared, a voice from above called out to Trelayne.

"Over here, My Captain!"

That's when Trelayne raised his eyes skyward to see where the voice came from.

"Your new King and master beckons you! To surrender!" hailed Rigor to Trelayne as the Cardinal hovered effortlessly in midair a few feet above the parapet wall.

As the amulet around the Cardinal's neck glowed turquoise, the aura from the amulet completely encased the Cardinal's profile. From the spot where he hovered at just above the parapet wall, the Cardinal began a slow descent to a spot directly in front of where Trelayne stood, staring intensely at Trelayne as he floated down. Once the Cardinal's footing firmly landed on solid ground of the courtyard, the protective aura surrounding him and the amulet dissipated. Thereafter, several gargoyle followed in procession landing on either side of the Cardinal; one of them being the half tiger, half bull-looking gargoyle, snarling, his stature dwarfing the Cardinal and Trelayne, towering over both.

"You and your men are relieved of command and duty, My Captain," Rigor firmly stated at Trelayne, his eyes piercing into Trelayne's as he spoke.

Trelayne stood his ground, though, as he was nervously anticipating reinforcements of Elite Guard coming from either kingdoms at any moment.

"I only take direct orders from King Orachon or King Aegolth regarding Castle Grimoire, Your Eminence."

"Indeed!" the Cardinal snapped back. "However, at the moment, My Captain, King Aegolth and General Metgare have already been relieved of their prominent positions within Tyral as we speak. King Orachon, General Daellon and Yarrow are soon to follow once I obtain Castle Grimoire and its regiment eventually claiming my right to Ornathys!" the Cardinal demanded.

Trelayne stood silent for the moment realizing his guard couldn't defeat the stone warriors, nor the power of the amulet while it was in the Cardinal's possession.

One of Trelayne's guards, who was thrown from the explosive breach of the parapet wall, had come around out of his semiconscious state to hear most of the Cardinal's conversation with Trelayne. Still groggy, he rose up from his spot where he laid and proceeded at a haphazard trot towards the Cardinal.

Catching sight of the approaching guard, Rigor quickly spoke another incantation just as the guard removed his sword from its sheath, holding it high above his head ready to strike. The amulet began to glow red as the Cardinal quickly released a beam of energy at the approaching guard, ready to smite his intended victim. Bang! A loud crack ensued along with a cloud of smoke. It was over in a second. A

dark, ashen spot was all that remained of the guard, aside from a few singed feathers floating gently down from where the guard last stood.

"As I've stated before, Captain," the Cardinal continued, "I claim Castle Grimoire to be under my rule! The consequences of that unfortunate guard was the exception, as will be your fate as well if you do not relinquish Grimoire to me."

Trelayne's eyes widened as his heart saddened from the sudden loss of one of his guard. He could not chance any more lives to be taken from the siege.

"I acquiesce, Your Eminence," came a humble sigh from Trelayne admitting defeat from the current odds too great against him with such magick.

"Majesty, if you please," remarked the Cardinal as a hideous grin slid across his beak, giving a cruel chuckle of satisfaction.

"Your Majesty," Trelayne replied as he bowed down in shame before Rigor.

"It's good to see whom you now recognize to take orders from, Captain. Much like your friend here," the Cardinal replied as Farris approached over the parapet, flying in midair. He held one end of a rope in his talon while the other end of the rope held Lord Draemer, bound and gagged, dangling in midair.

"I have plans for you both as you shall see."

waiting to arrive

"The guard are in position, father," noted Kaeleos to Daellon as they met one another at the inner ward courtyard. "Yarrow's outer defenses are secured. The periphery along the parapet wall is contained. I have archers ready along the surrounding embattlements as our first defense against the gargoyles and gryphons."

"I've placed additional guard around the barbican and bastions as well as the turrets along the chemise and brattice in case of a breach," Daellon replied. "Catapults are armed and ready the length of the shell wall."

"And if all else fails, we have the locket," Kaeleos added.

"Aye. The very thing the Cardinal would want once he has complete control of Ornathys," Daellon hinted. "With possession of the amulet and the locket, his conquest of the surrounding archipelagos would be next."

"Let's hope Razantrope's allegiance to us is stronger than the Cardinal's," Kaeleos replied.

"Remember, he was once an Elite Guard of Yarrow, much like Berwyck and yourself are," Daellon added, "though, the Cardinal chose another path to serve Yarrow."

"Yes, Berwyck and the Cardinal are both my sons as well as Larco's. My adopted sons," Kaeleos humbled. "Xucca's sons."

"Aye. A difficult choice for Razantrope. His allegiance lies similar to yours. To Berwyck, Rigor, Xucca or only to himself?"

"I fear that decision is his alone to make," Kaeleos answered, "be it spiritual, for family, for allegiance to a kingdom and its people or for power."

"Kaeleos, I knew I made the right decision in taking you in, in trusting you. I, too, had to make a decision for the same reasons. And I'm glad I chose only the ones that support those I care about and care for, not for world conquest," Daellon noted.

"And I'm happy I made the same choices as you did, father," Kaeleos acknowledged.

"Aye, you are a good son, Kaeleos," Daellon smiled back as suddenly they were interrupted by a call.

"Lieutenant Kaeleos! General Daellon!" hailed Berwyck across the courtyard as he ran from one of the bastions towards Kaeleos and Daellon.

"Yes. Lieutenant?" replied Kaeleos as he turned to see Berwyck approach both of them.

"The tower guard spotted several gargoyle in flight approaching from Gryth Wood towards Yarrow along with what appears to be the Cardinal, Lord Draemer and Captain Trelayne," returned Berwyck.

"Draemer? Trelayne?" inquired Daellon.

"The Cardinal must have taken them prisoner," Kaeleos noted turning to Daellon, "most likely to attempt to trade their lives for the locket and overtake Yarrow."

"Not without a fight!" Daellon angered.

"Wait, father!" Kaeleos halted. "If he's taken Tyral and Grimoire, we can't risk Draemer and Trelayne's lives as well as Yarrow's. We need to create a diversion. I have a plan but it's risky. Berwyck?"

"Yes, father?" returned Berwyck.

"Take Cellus and Belnapp with you to the armorment keep and retrieve the short, gray wooden crate at the far end of the hold. Inside it contains unusual weapons that need to be handled carefully. They were a gift to Orachon awhile ago on his visit to one of the island archipelagos. Hopefully, they still work. Take the crate and stop by the kitchen at the Inn and ask Xucca for one of the small cauldrons with the hot coals. Take the cauldron and crate and leave by the garden courtyard iron wicket on the far side of the castle that passes over the small moat bridge. There's a path on the other side of the bridge that leads into Gryth Wood. It's the path I showed you that winds through the dense underbrush to the front edge of the castle. But try not to be seen. You, Cellus and Belnapp use the hot coals to light the weapons and aim them to an area behind the gargoyles. That should distract them long enough for Daellon and I to use the locket against the Cardinal and the gargoyles to free Draemer and Trelayne."

Berwyck nodded in agreement and motioned for Cellus and Belnapp to follow him. As they were passing the King's keep, the iron yett opened as Gareruff exited the donjon to see all three heading past

him in a heated trot towards the armorment.

"What's going on? Where are you all going?" the Chancellor asked the group; his head turning back and forth inquisitively as each one passed by him.

"Yarrow is on alert for an attack by the gargoyles, gryphons and His Eminence!" Berwyck replied, briefly stopping abruptly in his tracks.

"Inform King Orachon immediately to remain in the solar hold along with yourself! It's the safest structure in the kingdom for you both to be right now!"

"What?!!" exclaimed Gareruff, nervously shaking, as he frantically mumbled something under his breath of 'the plan', fearing he failed again. "Not now?! Why now?! I'm not ready!! What's he up to?!" Gareruff thought frantically to himself in his analytical but panicked state of mind; his head bobbing erratically back and forth as he thought.

"Go!! Now!!" Berwyck shouted back as Gareruff scurried back inside the donjon, in his haste slamming the iron yett shut; the gate making a loud clanking sound in return. Gareruff began running up the spiral stairway to Orachon's chamber.

"Must find the king! Must find the king!" Gareruff was repeatedly telling himself along the way.

Reaching the main floor of the King's solar, Gareruff began running across a rug that ran the length of the hallway. As he approached the end of the hallway, King Orachon appeared from around the corner. Seeing Orachon appear out of nowhere ahead of him, Gareruff began quickly back peddling his steps as the carpet beneath him began folding into several folds in front of his feet, causing Gareruff to fall down clumsily in front of Orachon.

"Gareruff?" Orachon inquired as Gareruff stumbled back up to his feet.

"Y...Your Majesty. Thank...g...goodness," Gareruff panted, slightly stuttering from being out of breath from the fall.

"Gareruff, what's this all about?" Orachon politely asked as Gareruff finished catching his breath.

"Your Majesty, Yarrow is under attack by the gargoyles and gryphons! We must seek shelter in your solar immediately!" Gareruff responded back.

"Attack?" Orachon questioned.

"Yes, Your Majesty. Lieutenant Berwyck informed me just now. We will be much safer in your solar," Gareruff nervously insisted.

"Where is Lieutenant Berwyck now?" further questioned Orachon.

"He was heading towards the armorment keep along with Lord Cellus and Squire Belnapp," Gareruff added.

"Armament keep? Lord Cellus was with him? Squire Belnapp has returned as well?" Orachon firmly

inquired.

"Yes, Your Majesty, but-" Gareruff replied as he was interrupted by Orachon before he could finish.

"Chancellor, I am going outside to see what this is all about. You can stay here if you want, but I have a kingdom to defend," as Orachon reached for a longsword on a hallway wall plaque and headed down the spiral stairway, leaving Gareruff alone in the hallway.

"The Cardinal will surely have my head now!" Gareruff nervously thought as he ran looking for cover towards the King's solar.

Outside, Kaeleos and Daellon watched the horizon seeing the dark enemy approaching from the edge of Gryth Wood just as snowflakes began to fall.

"I hope the distraction works," Kaeleos spoke to Daellon as he eyed the sky.

"Aye, it's our only chance to stop another conflict from happening," Daellon added.

"I agree," came a voice from behind Daellon and Kaeleos as they both turned around at the same time to see King Orachon.

"Your Majesty," Daellon spoke as he turned to see Orachon appear.

"General. Lieutenant," as Orachon nodded an acknowledgment to both. "It's good to have both of you back at this moment ready to help defend Yarrow in its time of need. The Chancellor informed me of the gargoyles attacking Yarrow and that Belnapp has returned," Orachon replied.

"Yes, Your Majesty, but unfortunately we found out the Cardinal is behind this recent conflict. He has the amulet. Lord Cellus was at Tyral for the Eceleciation when the Cardinal, Jarduche, the gargoyles and the gryphons laid waste to Tyral. Cellus escaped and found us once we arrived on Ornathys. Earlier, we found Belnapp lost on Haebrugg after the gargoyles had taken him prisoner and left him there to die. Now, Yarrow is about to be under siege by the Cardinal and his minions," Kaeleos noted as the enemy was halfway in flight from the Wood to the castle at that moment.

"So where are Berwyck, Belnapp and Lord Cellus now?"

"Right now, Your Majesty, I've just sent Berwyck, Belnapp and Lord Cellus to create a distraction. Remember the 'gift' you received from the king of the distant eastern archipelagos you visited many seasons ago?" Kaeleos spoke as he pulled the locket out from his gambeson to show Orachon.

"The 'fire stars'?"

"Yes. Berwyck and the others will create a distraction using those 'fire stars' while we use the magick within this locket to defend Yarrow and ourselves against the amulet, the Cardinal and his minions," Kaeleos finished.

"The locket has the same powers as the amulet?"

"We'll soon find out," Kaeleos slightly nodded to Orachon as they turned to see the Cardinal, the

gargoyles and gryphons halt their approach just outside the parapet wall.

CHAPTER XII

fate versus fate

Rigor felt a burst of satisfaction at this moment. His wide grin besmirched any notion of an unsuccessful coup attempt on Yarrow, having already defeated Tyral and Grimoire. All inhabitants of Tyral now had to follow the orders of their 'new king' as well as those outside the castle perimeter, be it serfs or farmers of the surrounding land. Taking the final obstacle ahead would allow him complete control of Ornathys.

Yarrow's archers were armed and ready along the embattlements, aimed at Rigor's minions. Dead silence lingered moments before Rigor spoke as he floated effortlessly in midair surrounded by the amulet's protective aura.

"Your Majesty," as Rigor chortled a slight laugh, "I now have the unpleasant task to inform you that I am no longer in your service. As High Officiate Mediator to Consul per Lord Nordellan, I have gathered my legion of gargoyles and gryphons to 'help remove' you from your position in Yarrow. Just as I have already removed Aegolth and Captain Trelayne from theirs," as two gargoyles held both Draemer and Trelayne tied up and dangling by ropes and chains in clear view of Orachon. "Your services here are no longer needed, Orachon. For I now claim myself as the 'new King of Ornathys'. Any resistance on your part and I will cease their existence here and now."

Seeing the Cardinal had taken hostages to bargain with, Orachon hoped the distraction attempt would work in turn saving Draemer's and Trelayne's lives. Intentionally pausing for a few seconds of dead silence to give Berwyck time to set the distraction, Orachon eventually responded,

"Where is Aegolth?"

"It is not of your concern, for you shall be joining him, whether or not you surrender," Rigor demanded as the amulet began to glow red.

"When I became king, I took a solemn oath to defend Yarrow and its people. Just as my father, King Orax, did before me, from those who attempt to take Yarrow by force," Orachon replied.

"You have no call of arms to bear, my former king," Rigor replied, bearing a sinister grin on his beak, "for I have the ultimate power at my side - the amulet. I see Nordellan's armada has not arrived as of yet to assist you at your kingdom's moment of need. Therefore, you would risk the lives of Lord Draemer and Captain Trelayne for Yarrow?"

"I am standing firm and will not yield, nor acquiesce, to your demands, Your Eminence!" Orachon firmly stated as he drew his sword.

"Aye! We stand with Orachon!" Daellon seconded in motion as he signaled the guard to ready their weapons.

"Then you will all be joining Lord Draemer and Captain Trelayne to your fates!" shouted the Cardinal.

While the Cardinal was speaking, Kaeleos could see Berwyck and the others in position at the edge of Gryth Wood. Holding his spear, Kaeleos began moving it back and forth quickly to reflect a signal off its gold work to Berwyck.

"What are you doing?!" yelled the Cardinal; his eyes filled with fire and rage as he eyed Kaeleos's movements with the spear and quickly turned around, seeing that Kaeleos may be trying to signal someone outside the castle perimeter.

Several things began to happen quickly from this moment on. Seeing the signal, Berwyck, Cellus and Belnapp had lined up several 'fire stars' on the ground and began lighting the fuses on them by holding the hot coals with tongs from the small cauldron. The weapons shot high up into the air, exploding behind the gargoyles and gryphons in a mass of light and smoke. During this halcyon of chaos, Kaeleos took hold of the locket in his talon to call Razantrope in thought and voice to come to their aid.

Rigor, seeing the locket in Kaeleos's possession, took the amulet as its red aura glowed intensely and aimed it at Kaeleos and the locket. Several beams of red and white light emitted from the amulet, their energies clashing in midair between the amulet and the locket. It took all of Kaeleos's strength to fight against the current of energy the amulet was hurling at the locket he was holding onto. During the clash, some of the beams became erratic between them and began hitting Yarrow's castle walls and structures, hurling chunks of stone and debris as they reflected back off of them.

"What's going on up there? That's not the weapons doing that!" as Berwyck eyed the cross stream of beams, telling Cellus and Belnapp.

"Sounds like a war going on," replied Cellus as some of the erratic beams began reflecting down to the ground in front of their location, creating divots as they struck.

"We'd better go take a look," Berwyck answered back, gathering his spear off the ground as another round of beams hit the ground.

The three of them proceeded to run towards the side wall of the castle. Once they had nearly reached the front corner turret of the castle, out of the corner of his eye, the Cardinal took note of them approaching the castle and switched the aim of the amulet's beams towards Berwyck, Cellus and Belnapp. The beam from the locket Kaeleos was holding, now without resistance from the amulet's beam, continued on, striking the two gargoyles flying next to the Cardinal. Once they were hit, the gargoyles released the ropes holding Draemer and Trelayne, letting them fall.

As Draemer and Trelayne fell, they bounced off the parapet wall edge onto the wall walk while the two gargoyles landed haplessly outside the castle wall. After hitting the gargoyles, the beam from the locket struck the amulet and the Cardinal, in turn whose beam from the amulet only struck Berwyck and his spear, missing Cellus and Belnapp entirely. The beams ricocheted very quickly back and forth between Berwyck and Rigor for several moments. Finally, a very large white flash along with smoke overcame both sides of hawk, gargoyle and gryphon alike; blinding them all until the flash finally dissipated.

Once the chaos completely stopped and the smoke had cleared, Berwyck, the Cardinal and the amulet were nowhere to be seen.

huddle to destiny

Jeff was sound asleep in his bed when the distinct 'bleepety-bleep' tone of his cell phone laying on the nightstand went off, sluggishly awaking him. In reaching for the phone, Jeff fumbled it off the nightstand, hitting the carpet and turning on the speakerphone. A voice loudly carried across the room.

"Hey, J.P.! Jeff? Ya there? It's Chuck! Pick up your phone, man!"

Turning on the nightstand lamp, Jeff's eyes tried to adjust to the light as he reached his hand down to pick up the fallen phone and hit the button to turn off the speakerphone feature so as not to awaken his parents.

"Yeah?" muttered Jeff, half asleep in reply, bringing his cell phone to his ear.

"Dude, ya gotta meet me at the Red Gryphon Diner. It's urgent. There's someone ya gotta meet here who knows you," Chuck continued.

Jeff looked at the time on his cell phone. "Huh? She knows me? Who? Dude, it's three in the morning," yawned Jeff.

"I know but this is real important."

"Is it Sheila?"

"No. Her name is Mandy. Just get over here quick."

"Mandy?...uh, okay man, but you owe me for this one. I've got classes in a few hours," as Jeff sat up on his bed, stretching his back and arms as he cradled the phone with his shoulder and ear.

"Yeah, sure. See ya there," the phone clicked as Chuck hung up.

Jeff thought to himself, "Mandy? Who's Mandy? First, it's Lisa. Now, it's Mandy...*yawn*..." mumbled Jeff as he quickly got dressed, grabbed his car keys, headed downstairs and out the back door.

Arriving at the Red Gryphon, Jeff pulled his car in next to Chuck's 'hand painted' rat rod. Though a 'beater box' like Jeff's car, Chuck's car had a mural of his monster creations covering over the entire vehicle's faded blue paint.

As Jeff entered inside, the diner was empty except for Chuck sitting with a woman in a back corner booth at the end of the diner car, both waving back at Jeff.

"J.P.! Over here!" Chuck announced, as Jeff began to walk over to their booth where they were sitting. "Hey, have a seat. I want you to meet Mandy Patterson."

"Hello, Jeff," Mandy replied, extending her hand in greeting Jeff to shake hands.

"Hi," Jeff answered back. "Uh, do I know you?"

"Now you do," smiled Mandy. "Pleasure to meet you. I work at Tressler's Market. Chuck's told me all about you. Care for some coffee?"

"Yes, thank you. That sounds good about now. Boy, this place is busy, huh?" Jeff sarcastically answered in a slight yawn as he sat down looking around at the empty tables and counter and then at the menu.

"By the way, uh, Chuck?"

"Yeah?" as Chuck attention was currently diverted at pointing to something on the menu to Mandy.

"Um...Lisa? You know?" Jeff inquired casually.

"Oh, yeah, it's cool. It's all good," Chuck looking up momentarily at Jeff, nodding assuredly, then his eyes back at the menu, hiding his pretense that Lisa would probably have a fit seeing him with Mandy right now.

"Really?" Jeff asked again, surprised slightly, prodding slightly for acknowledgment from Chuck.

"Yeah. Mandy told me. She knows about Lisa. No worries," Chuck confidently confirmed as his eyes returned to look at Jeff.

"Oh. Okay. Sure," Jeff began to whisper as the waitress arrived over to their table.

"Okay, what will it be, folks?" the orange haired waitress asked.

"I'll have the Very Late Latte," Mandy returned.

"Same here," Jeff added as he put the menu back in the holder.

"Make it three including me," Chuck finished as he held up three fingers.

"Funny you say that," Jeff remarked.

"Comin' up," the waitress replied as she flipped the page on her receipt book and walked back to the counter.

"So what's the rush?" Jeff noted after the waitress left the table.

"Mandy here is a psychic," Chuck casually let on with a slight smile on his face.

"Really?" Jeff frankly spoke. "So that's why you woke me up out of a sound sleep at three in the morning?"

"Jeff, I asked Chuck to meet you here. I have something very important to tell you both," Mandy elaborated.

"Well, I'm ready as I'll ever be at this time in the morning. Shoot," as Jeff gave a long winded, drawn

out yawn, extending his arms upward then crossing them against his chest. Jeff was trying to focus his attention on what Mandy was about to say rather than give in to his lack of sleep.

"Earlier this evening, I gave Chuck a psychic reading and what came out of the reading involves both of you. Actually, all four of us, including Helga, my landlady. She is a mystic herself."

"Wow, this already sounds interesting so far," chimed Jeff.

"Shh! Dude, listen! It's important! There's more!" as Chuck interrupted both.

"Okay, okay. My bad. Sorry, go on," Jeff acknowledged, pardoning his initial interruption.

Mandy continued. "As I was giving the reading to Chuck, I saw visions of two feathered creatures that came through a portal and landed here in Fenlow City. They were chasing one another for an amulet. And we were chasing them as well to retrieve this amulet and-"

"Whoa, stop there! Portals? What's this about portals?" Jeff interrupted again, about to jump out of his seat in a heightened panic. "Now I am losing it! We're about to chase 'feathered creatures'? Portals? Amulets? Us? I think I'm still dreaming and I haven't even had my latte yet! Does this have anything to do with your doings with those monsters creations?" as Jeff gave an annoyed look at Chuck.

"Dude, I didn't believe it either but her landlady with the dark eyes validated it!" Chuck replied as Jeff settled back into the bench seat, exhaling a sigh.

"So, I take it my next response would be: 'Do we have a plan of action regarding this upcoming potential invasion?'" Jeff inquired quickly just as the waitress brought over their lattes. After she returned back to the counter, they continued their conversation; the waitress pausing a moment, shooting a look or two at their table before she left through the swinging kitchen door.

"That's why we are meeting here. But it would probably be safer at my studio to discuss this further," Mandy continued, thinking the waitress may have overheard some of their conversation.

"Good idea. Let's finish up our brew and head over there," Chuck answered as he tossed a few bills from his wallet on the table. "My treat this time," Chuck spoke to Mandy and Jeff.

"Will this take very long? I've got a term paper to finish before class in the morning," Jeff replied back.

"Dude, this is the world we are about to save! Totally forget the term paper!" Chuck noted.

"And what about your job at Tressler's Market?" Jeff added.

"Doug Tressler's gonna have to take a rain check on my commission until we can stop this invasion. This is more important," as Chuck turned to look at Mandy and then back at Jeff.

"He is right," Mandy added. "The accuracy of mine and Helga's readings do come true most of the time. We are the ones to receive this message from the spirits. We must unite our talents and save the world from this creature."

"Well? Let's get hopping then!" Chuck noted as they got up from the table, left the diner and the three headed over to Mandy's studio.

"How do I get myself into messes like this? I should've stayed in bed," Jeff mumbled, looking at the ceiling.

battle aftermath

As both sides were still recovering from the blinding white flare, Kaeleos's eyes were beginning to adjust to the snow covered landscape. The Cardinal and Berwyck were nowhere to be seen.

"My sons, where have you gone?" thought Kaeleos. Being a step and surrogate father to both he began thinking about where both had disappeared to so suddenly. His eyes kept scanning above and below the snowy landscape around the castle for an answer or clue.

Laying on their backs in a snow bank, Belnapp and Cellus finally stood up after being knocked to the ground from the white flash of light that hit Berwyck in front of them.

"Where did he go?" Belnapp sadly asked as Berwyck's footprints in the snow ended at the spot where the white flash had hit him.

"I don't know," Cellus said somberly, pausing a moment, "but we'd better keep moving to get back inside the castle before the gargoyles or gryphons see us and capture us here. Berwyck would've wanted us to keep moving," as both of them began to run to the small iron wicket entrance at the back of the castle.

Once inside, both ran to the parapet wall walk where Orachon, Daellon and Kaeleos were standing. The gargoyles and gryphons were just coming out of their catatonic state from the white flash. Seeing their leader, the Cardinal, nowhere in sight, they began to attack the castle figuring he had already been taken captive. Just before they had the chance to strike, Kaeleos held the locket again in front of him as a large, wide beam of orange emitted from the locket, encasing all the gargoyles and gryphons including Farris, surrounding them inside a giant, orange colored bubble-like container. The container then fell to the ground, landing just outside the moat surrounding Yarrow. The container began rolling away towards Gryth Wood, knocking down large trees in its path. Inside the behemoth, semi-transparent bubble, the gargoyles and gryphons were haplessly tossing about around inside its mammoth circular dome.

"Help free Lord Draemer and Captain Trelayne from their bonds," Kaeleos ordered at two of the guard. Immediately both guard scrambled over to Draemer and Trelayne and began cutting the ropes bound around them.

"How did you do that? You did not speak an incantation!" Cellus asked, as Kaeleos, Daellon and Orachon turned to see Cellus and Belnapp standing still in amazement at what they had just seen.

"Where's Berwyck?" Kaeleos asked. "Wasn't he with you?"

"His footprints ended in the snow after that white flash of light hit. We didn't see him anywhere, Lieutenant," Cellus answered, the sadness imprinted on Belnapp's and Cellus's faces showed through then and there.

"The Cardinal is missing as well," Kaeleos added, his mind hampered in thought and concern about where both could be. "Those red and white beams bounced off the amulet the Cardinal was wearing and hit Berwyck. I don't understand exactly what happened. It's my fault. I put everyone's lives in danger."

"Berwyck knew it was dangerous, Lieutenant," Cellus replied. "He knew the risks of what we were doing to help save Yarrow from the siege. We all did."

"I'm sure we will find them," Belnapp added. "Razantrope is the one who will know what happened."

"Yes, you are right, Belnapp," Kaeleos acknowledged.

"That was amazing what the locket did with those gargoyles and gryphons. How did you do that? You did not speak an incantation," Cellus replied to Kaeleos with Daellon looking on.

"When Daellon and I confronted the group of gargoyles at the edge of Gryth Wood at Yarrow, I was calling on Larco and Razantrope to hear us. He replied back to us in thought," Kaeleos replied looking at Daellon and Cellus as Orachon approached the group.

"T'is true, Your Majesty," Daellon answered, while turning to look at Orachon. "I thought I was hearing things."

"The spirit guardian, through the power of the locket and the amulet, can read one's thoughts as well as hear those of whomever speaks to either object," Cellus interrupted, "for Nordellan had told me he had used it for such a purpose during the Great Conflict. Incantations can be used as well, but the locket and the amulet may serve only the possessor. Unfortunately, my only regret is that I didn't use it for both Draemer and I to escape from Tyral."

"I asked Razantrope to disguise Daellon and I. And he did. He transformed us into looking like the Cardinal and Jarduche. We then told the gargoyles the gryphons had stolen the amulet at Tyral during the Eceleciation and the gargoyles believed us," Kaeleos added.

"Really?" Orachon's eyes widened. "You were lucky you didn't show up here as them. Still, that was a useful strategy."

"Yes, the disguises fooled them. For instead of attacking Yarrow, they flew back in the direction of Tyral," Daellon spoke.

"Wisdom can either be an ally or an enemy to one who knows not of its true purpose. True, Nordellan and I had used the amulet during the Great Conflict," as Orachon spoke to the four. "During the Conflict, negotiations were far and few within the surrounding archipelagos where the gargoyles and gryphons wanted complete control over many cultures. Haebrugg was a turning point for us when the power of the amulet became a useful tool for controlling the turn of battle. Without Nordellan's help or knowledge of the amulet, Oranthys would have been under control of the gargoyles and gryphons right now. In his youth, Nordellan traveled on several sojourns to many archipelagos to study different cultures. On one particular sojourn, he happened to find the amulet on Haebrugg while exploring a deep cave on the island-"

"I was there! Inside the chambers!" Belnapp exclaimed in a loud outburst, interrupting Orachon, realizing his mistake of talking over Orachon, covering his mouth briefly. "Oh! My sincere apologies to Your Majesty for my inappropriate outburst! I did not mean to speak over you, Your Majesty! Have mercy on your humble servant!" pleaded Belnapp to Orachon.

Orachon smiled back at Belnapp.

"I forgive your interruption, Belnapp. I see you discovered several chambers inside the temple? And you used the walking stick on the scone that glows to follow the path to the innermost chamber?"

Belnapp looked back in surprise and curiosity at Orachon relating details of the cave entrance to the temple. "If you will pardon me for asking, Your Majesty, but were you there inside the temple as well as I?"

"Yes and no," Orachon returned. "Nordellan told me much of what the cave looked like and where it could be found on Haebrugg. I've seen the cave entrance from the outside but Nordellan was the one who ventured inside to speak to the temple guardian. Now I see you have spoken with the temple guardian as well."

"The guardian calls himself Razantrope," Belnapp added, "but he also told me his name was Larco. His spirit, his soul, is that of Larco."

"The missing Elite Guard both of you went out to search for?" Orachon said, turning to look at Daellon and Kaeleos.

"Yes, Your Majesty, with Belnapp's and Cellus's help, we were able to find out what had happened to him and where he went," Kaeleos replied, "Many seasons ago, Larco had caught Metgare spying on our defenses by the ocean caves. He followed Metgare back to Tyral. Little did Larco know he was walking into a trap. They imprisoned Larco in Tyral for causing a disruption within the kingdom."

"And once the Cardinal had heard about Larco's imprisonment, he went to see Aegolth on the matter and returned back to Yarrow saying that 'the matter was being handled accordingly' with Aegolth. That is to say that Larco was imprisoned there for quite awhile. Belnapp related to Kaeleos and myself much of what the spirit guardian had told him about Larco's capture," related Daellon.

"Yes, I do remember the Cardinal informing me of the matter being handled accordingly with Aegolth. I'm beginning to now understand what really transpired. So what did the spirit guardian tell you, Belnapp?" Orachon spoke as he looked at Belnapp.

"Your Majesty," Belnapp replied, "About the time I met Razantrope...er, Larco, he told me what had happened to him while he was healing my injuries. Larco told me he was being held prisoner in the dungeon at Tyral for quite some time until the Cardinal and Aegolth had eventually drawn up a 'writ of banishment' that forced Larco to leave Ornathys on the next cargo ship due to set sail to Satyreclore. Before reaching Satyreclore, that same cargo ship became shipwrecked in a storm at sea where Larco's body washed ashore on Haebrugg."

"I have not seen this 'writ of banishment'," Orachon inquired, a look of surprise on his face.

"I did not know about the writ involving one of my soldiers, Your Majesty. It seems the Cardinal was the only one involved in this with Aegolth and Metgare," Daellon spoke. "The Cardinal is a traitor to the crown. Not just to Yarrow, but to Tyral and Grimoire as well, Your Majesty,"

"I agree with you all for the events that have happened," Orachon noted to the four. "Things are now starting to make sense. Belnapp, tell me what do you mean when you say 'his soul', Larco's soul, is now Razantrope?" Orachon inquired at Belnapp.

"Maybe I can explain, Your Majesty," Cellus spoke, as Orachon and the others turned their attention to Cellus. "Larco had given his life to become a spirit guardian of the Temple of Chalynn. The previous spirit guardian having found Larco's body washed up on Haebrugg's shoreline transferred Larco's soul into Razantrope in order to become the next spirit guardian of the temple so that the elder guardian can return back into the 'light'. That's according to an ancient ritual pertaining to the Temple of Chalynn Nordellan once told me. Also Nordellan told me he had found something within the translation of the glyph lettering on the temple walls that both the amulet and the locket contain the ashes of ancient spirit guardians within their structures. He told me that is what gives both objects their magical properties."

While they were speaking, Draemer and Trelayne, after finally being cut free from their captive bonds by the guard, came over to join the group.

"You are both lucky to be alive, My Lord and Captain," Orachon related to both.

"They've captured Tyral and Grimoire, Your Majesty," Draemer acknowledged as Captain Trelayne nodded with him in agreement.

"Yes, I know" Orachon replied. "But right now, we need to find where Lieutenant Berwyck, the Cardinal and the amulet the Cardinal was wearing went to."

"They're not here?" Draemer asked in concern.

"There were white and red beams of light coming from the locket that bounced off the amulet and the Cardinal, hitting Berwyck. That's when the beams seemed to be captured between Berwyck and the Cardinal. There was a bright flash of light and the next thing we knew was that they both had seemed to vanish," Kaeleos somberly related to Draemer.

"I may be able to explain that, Lieutenant and Your Majesty," Draemer responded. "In Nordellan's and my translations of the glyph lettering on tablets we found in the cave entrance. Those tablets Nordellan had found in the other chambers leading to the center chamber, the temple's innermost chamber. We were able to decipher certain glyph lettering that relate to the colors emitted from different magical incantations that are able to be seen. When there is a color of white, there is a strong indication of a transformative doorway of an object what Nordellan referred to as he explained it to me called a 'portal'..."

"A portal?" Kaeleos and Orachon spoke together.

"Like how my hands passed through the wall leading into the center chamber?" Belnapp exclaimed.

"Uh, yes, something like that..." Draemer continued, though a bit confused about Belnapp's

statement since Draemer had not yet known of Belnapp's visit to the inside of the temple. "According to several glyph tablets, it seems the ancient ones knew of this 'portal' that has the power to transform anything what we see now by placing it somewhere else. Nordellan understood the portal's workings having himself translated most of the tablets eventually passing on some of that knowledge to me. Lieutenant, you also said there was a red beam of light emitted from the locket as well, yes?"

"There was, but I had no control over the beams coming from the locket. They seemed to go in any direction at times. I think Razantrope was fighting against his own magic between controlling the amulet and the locket, but still I can't understand why both the Cardinal and Berwyck had to vanish," Kaeleos noted.

"That seems to make sense, Kaeleos. For there are different quantifications of colors found in the translations of the incantations. According to what I've gathered in my research, I feel the red and white beams once having gone against one another, then clashing several times against one another, created the resulting flash, opening a portal and taking along with it whatever the light captured within the clashing of beams, including the amulet," Draemer described. "I only wish Nordellan was here to explain more about portals than what I have been able to decipher. He knows more about the amulet, the locket and the temple than what I have researched so far, along with a few incantations he translated."

"Don't feel you haven't provided us with enough information, Lord Draemer," Orachon said. "I thank you as well, Lord Cellus. That's more than enough for us to understand what happened here. Nordellan and I, as well as all of Yarrow, appreciate your work, Lord Draemer, into the origins of the temple, the amulet and the locket."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. By Consul, I am deeply honored to serve you at this moment of need with whatever help I can give." Draemer humbly acknowledged.

"Well, that explains the flash of light between the Cardinal and Berwyck, but the remaining question is where are they now?" Kaeleos noted somberly.

Just then, Draemer thought of what Nordellan told him earlier about the portal and the spirit guardian.

"...the solution to the problem has already left with the problem..." Draemer began talking out loud to himself what his mind was telling him without realizing they all were listening.

"What did you say, Lord Draemer?" Orachon inquired, looking at Draemer as others turned to look at Draemer as well. Seeing them look at him, Draemer stopped talking, pausing a moment before speaking.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty," Draemer answered. "but Lord Nordellan told me in confidence before he left that once the portal opened, the Cardinal would have a weakness. His brother, Berwyck."

"So what are you trying to say?" Kaeleos responded back.

"I believe that Berwyck was meant to follow the Cardinal through the portal. This was meant to happen. At least Nordellan felt that it was," Draemer elaborated.

"For Berwyck to retrieve the amulet," Orachon summed up what Draemer was inferring to, "to proclaim Berwyck's and Belnapp's innocence and to end the Conflict."

"Yes, but how are we to know where they are-?" a worried Kaeleos questioned before Orachon interrupted.

"The spirit guardian, using the locket," Orachon replied. "He should know where they both are."

"True, Your Majesty," Kaeleos nodded in agreement at Orachon before turning to Draemer. "Lord Draemer, is it possible to recreate the same beams that emitted from the locket to the amulet? To have the same beams clash to open a portal, taking two of us with the locket to wherever the Cardinal and Berwyck went?"

"Uh...yes, I believe so," Draemer added with uncertainty. "But the locket will go with whomever possesses it through the portal much like the amulet."

"But what if the gargoyles and gryphons return to attack us again? Without the locket, we will have no protection against them!" Belnapp spoke up. "Also, Kaeleos and I overheard a group of gargoyles at the edge of Gryth Wood mention they had already taken Aegolth and Metgare prisoner to Haebrugg just as the Cardinal had instructed them to do."

"Then we would have no choice but to stand and fight," Orachon agreed, as the others nodded with agreement.

"I agree, Your Majesty," Kaeleos agreed, "It would be risky to not have the locket protect us from another attack. Let's try to contact Razantrope to tell us where Berwyck and the Cardinal are before the gargoyles and gryphons return," as Kaeleos, Orachon, Daellon, Cellus, Belnapp, Draemer and Trelayne attempted to contact the spirit guardian in meditative thought through the locket.

a psychic plan into action

Once all three had arrived at Mandy's studio, Mandy took a large wooden matchstick from a metal tin and began to light some candles, a bundle of sage sticks and incense. Jeff curiously eyed the interior of her converted basement studio inside the antiquated brownstone building. Mandy motioned for Jeff and Chuck to sit in the center of the large rug with several symbols woven into its weave as she gathered a very small, short-legged table from behind the couch and brought it over to where both were sitting, placing it in front of them. The table was an old piece of furniture that someone had refinished adding similar symbols to its table top that were taken from the furnishings around the room. Mandy brought over a salt grinder filled with sea salt and began grinding as grains of fine sea salt fell over the table top, lightly covering the table top surface.

Grabbing a few sticks of lit sage in her hand, she began swirling them around the perimeter where all three were sitting until a cloud of sage smoke filled the area where they were sitting at. Once she completed the cleansing of the room with sage smoke, Mandy then gathered two large indigo colored velvet bags from the wooden chest. She brought them over to the table and sat down next to them, pulling two card decks out of the bags.

"These cards will help us with what our plan of action we decide on will work or not," Mandy elaborated.

"Uh, pardon me for saying, but this is really strange to me. I guess I never believed in psychics," Jeff commented, coughing slightly from the sage smoke.

"Me too, dude!" Chuck added. "But just wait a moment, let Mandy do her thing and it'll blow yer mind!"

Jeff still wasn't convinced about what was happening. "I hope this isn't a dime store trick."

"Dude," Chuck interrupted, "Give her a chance," as Chuck gave a serious look into Jeff's face.

"Okay, okay," Jeff apologized. "Sorry, I take that back," looking at Mandy.

"That's okay. There's a lot of non-believers out there that have the same feelings about psychics. You'll understand once we begin," as Mandy began shuffling both decks, one a playing card size deck and the other deck, a much larger card sized deck. Once she finished completely shuffling both decks, she laid both decks face side down on the table top, the larger deck in front of Jeff and the smaller deck in front of Chuck.

"Now I want you both to shuffle the decks of cards of cards I've placed in front of you and once you finish shuffling them, cut them into two piles, then back into one pile and lay each deck face down in front of you."

Jeff and Chuck did as they were told and laid the cards face down on the table when they finished shuffling and cutting them. Mandy then took both decks and proceeded to lay her left hand on one deck and the right hand on the other deck. She closed her eyes and began to take several large breaths inhaling through her nose then exhaling out her mouth until she gradually slowed her breathing. Without opening her eyes, she began to lay out a spread of both decks face down on the table in front of her, one deck at a time. She placed her hands back on the table once she finishing laying out the cards of both decks.

"What happens now?" Jeff asked Chuck.

"I dunno," Chuck answered. "Never saw this done before with two decks."

Slowly, Mandy's left hand turned over three random cards on the smaller tarot card deck and then her right hand turned over three random cards on the larger oracle card deck, her eyes still closed. It appeared eerie to Jeff and Chuck that she was not seeing what she was doing. A few moments later, Mandy came out of her trance as her eyes opened while taking a deep breath inhaling through her nose and exhaling out her mouth.

"Okay, let's begin," she spoke as she looked at the three tarot cards first, then looking up straight at Jeff. "One brother will appear outside your bedroom window in a snowbank while the other is outside a structure that looks like a castle."

"Okay," Jeff wondered what that meant. "Guess I should have shoveled the entire backyard if I knew we were having company."

"Shh," as Chuck admonished Jeff.

Mandy continued, looking at the oracle cards first, then turning to look at Chuck straight on.

"The one at the castle will meet metal with feather as a large bus appears."

Chuck thought a moment about this as his face contorted slightly trying to understand what Mandy predicted.

"Well?" Jeff asked Chuck, "what's that mean?"

"Hey! I think I know!" exclaimed Chuck as a thought popped in his head. "When I took Lisa to the ThrushFire gig in Madison, I happened to see another band's poster there. There's another big, heavy metal band coming through town this month and they're gonna arrive here today! Sledgewing! They've been around a lot longer than Thrushfire and they still kick butt when they play! They're staying at that castle styled hotel, the Camelot Hotel downtown. And they're playing two gigs this weekend at the convention center across from the hotel! I saw the band's poster at Mega Riff Records downtown. I tried to get tickets two months ago but they've sold out months before online. Bummer."

"Can your old boss Kirk at the sign shop get you some backstage passes again, like quick?" Jeff inquired as Mandy looked on.

"Well, he knows a couple of agents with local metal bands in and around Fenlow City, but Sledgewing is national. It's really tough to even get Sledgewing passes through the underground college channels like my bud Sid Schaeffer can usually get cheap. Hey, but Sid told me Tiger's dad, Monte, can get tickets like he does. The WWF and national bands and get them cheaper than Ticket Turnstile can! He's got definite connections and networks with some top agents, man! Front row seats plus! Just ask your neighbor Max."

"No. That airhead won't let me talk to his dad," Jeff responded in disgust. "He's a muscle bound workaholic. His ego's bigger than his skull. When I talk to him, he takes offense to anything I say, even 'hello'."

"That's his way of being neighborly, dude," Chuck said with a smirk. "I've heard Max is like that to everyone anyway. Doesn't bother me."

"Well, why don't you ask him?" Jeff asked.

"I don't live next door to him like you do," Chuck returned. "Besides, he doesn't know me as well as you or your folks. Ask your dad then to talk to Monte."

"I would, but since Tiger broke dad's chainsaw a couple years ago after letting Monte borrow it to remove that giant oak tree out of their front yard, dad's been reluctant to even talk to Monte Neutermann. Mainly because Monte wouldn't even offer to repair the chainsaw once Tiger dropped that large branch on top of it," Jeff reminded Chuck.

"This is all very interesting," Mandy injected, "But aren't we supposed to be focusing on the two brothers?"

"Oh, yeah," Chuck alluded.

"Sorry. Got sidetracked there for a moment," Jeff added. "Hey, by the way, is this about the feathered creatures you mentioned earlier?" as Jeff looked at Mandy.

"Yes, they are anthros," Mandy noted, as she turned the rest of the cards over. "Avian would be how we look at them, but they have half-human, half-animal attributes, as well as communication," Mandy spoke as she viewed the rest of the cards from the spread.

"Wait a minute. You mean that they are birds that talk? They actually talk? Talking bird brothers?" Jeff inquired, hesitating a bit.

"Why, yes," Mandy acknowledged, turning over the rest of the cards of both decks. "They are coming here from another plane of existence, another time, another world."

"Alien creatures?!" Jeff gasped.

"Whoa! Very cool!" Chuck exclaimed. "Now I gotta see them!" as Chuck thought what their profile would look like so he could draw them for another tattoo idea. "Let's go check the hotel first and then your backyard after to see if they showed up yet!" as Chuck stood up to leave and Jeff was about to follow.

"Wait!" Mandy halted, as Chuck stopped in his tracks. "I'm going with you both," as Mandy put the cards away, blew out the candles and grabbed her coat and shawl. "We need to know which brother is which."

Jeff had an idea. "Hold on. Tell you what. Chuck, you go with Mandy to the hotel to see if one of the brothers has arrived there yet. I'll head back home to see if the other brother arrived in my backyard. Boy, do I sound nuts right about now."

"Sounds like a plan, dude. Excellento!" Chuck agreed. "We can get in touch with each other on our cell phones once we arrive at the locations. Sounds cool?"

"That's a good idea both of you," Mandy related. "But what if either of us finds the evil brother?"

"Uh, Call the cops?" Jeff suggested.

Mandy injected, "Actually, I am a 'super sensitive' in my abilities. I can sense different levels of energies in people, mostly psychically sensing and feeling their emotional state. Maybe it's possible I can sense the same energies in these creatures to see if they have evil or good intentions."

"Well what's your gut instinct tell you right now about the intentions of the one at the hotel?" Chuck asked, giving a patient look at Mandy, as she locked her studio door behind her.

Mandy paused a moment before speaking, "It won't be good. Not good at all. And they both haven't arrived yet through the portal."

"Deja vu!" Chuck exclaimed. "You can see into the future?"

"Yes," Mandy responded. "Helga can as well," as the group arrived outside next to their cars.

"Uh, before it gets any weirder, we'd better start to head off to both locations," advised Jeff.

"Sure thing," Chuck okay ed, as he was about to get into his car. "Will call you when we get there," as Mandy got into Chuck's car and Jeff in his as both drove off to their destinations.

CHAPTER XIII

the accidental visitor

As Jeff pulled into his driveway and shut off his car motor, it was nearly 6am. The cold morning air kept Jeff awake as he walked around to the backyard of his home. Nothing unusual but the single path he shoveled to the backyard shed amongst the four feet of accumulated snow from last week's storms. The sunlight had broken through the night sky, hailing it's call to another winter morning.

Suddenly, a beeping sound came from Jeff's cell phone. His battery had become low and his phone went into auto shutoff mode, turning the phone's display screen blank. "Great," Jeff thought to himself, "perfect timing," realizing he forgot to charge his phone before bed last night. Jeff never bought a car adapter to charge his phone and there wasn't enough time to go back inside the house to recharge it.

Seeing nothing in his backyard, Jeff was about to head back to his car to drive to the hotel to catch up with Chuck and Mandy when a bright flash of light appeared above him.

Ooof!

The next moment Jeff was flat on the ground, having the wind knocked out of him with something heavy that fell onto his back. Feathers were scattered around Jeff as his eyes focused on snowy driveway. Jeff tried to move at first, but couldn't. That was until he pushed himself up with his arms, making the heavy object roll off his back. Once he got to his feet, brushing snow off his jacket, Jeff could see a large bird-like creature lying on the ground. Nearly the same height as himself, it wore a medieval looking leather tabard around its chest. As the creature began to stand up on his talons, picking up its spear and scabbard, Jeff began backing up slowly and cautiously, the palms of his hands facing the creature.

"Stay back!" Jeff warned, as the creature looked back at Jeff in curiosity.

"Huh?" Berwyck spoke in a low voice. "You spoke. You can speak?"

"Yeah, I can speak," Jeff replied in caution back at the creature, looking around erratically. "What are you? Who are you? Where are you from? You kinda look like a large albatross dressed up for a medieval battle re-enactment at a renaissance fair. Halloween was a few weeks ago, buddy."

"My name's not Buddy. I am Lieutenant Berwyck," Berwyck responded, "I am of His Majesty's Elite Guard serving King Orachon of the kingdom of Yarrow. I'm part Phyorcthorian hawk, part Nombrus albatross, actually. What creature are thou, I ask?" asked Berwyck, staring at Jeff.

"My name's Jeff. I'm human. I've never heard of Yarrow," Jeff replied.

"I've never heard of human before, nor Halloween," Berwyck countered.

"So are you the good or evil brother?" asked Jeff.

"Good? Evil? Oh," replied Berwyck, "I guess you haven't met my brother yet, I see. The last thing I remember, before that beam of light hit me, my brother had possession of the King's amulet and was about to attack Yarrow along with his gargoyles and gryphon minions."

"Attack? Amulet? Gargoyles and Gryphons?!" Jeff queried, more nervous about the prospect of seeing those kind of creatures next.

"Yes," Berwyck answered. "Before I arrived here, my brother, the Cardinal, had already laid waste to Tyral and Castle Grimoire and intends to use the power of the amulet to rule the world. I must find him and stop his conquest of rule and destruction," as Berwyck began looking around at his strange surroundings. "Are we somewhere on Haebrugg? It looks very different to me."

Still cautious, Jeff approached Berwyck slowly. "This isn't Haebrugg. You are in Fenlow City. The year is 2014. This is my home where I live."

"Fenlow City? 2014? Year?" surprised Berwyck, "I came from the kingdom of Yarrow on the island of Ornathys where I have been all my life. That is until the amulet brought me here. Right now, I need to find my brother, retrieve the amulet from him and return us back to where we both belong. I need to start looking for him right now before he harms anyone else," as Berwyck began to start walking away.

"Wait," Jeff halted. "Fenlow City covers a lot of area. You're gonna need help looking for him. Some friends of mine may know where your brother, the Cardinal, may be. Come with me and I will show you," as Jeff walked to his car, opening the squeaky driver's door. "Let me help you find him."

Berwyck looked at Jeff's rat rod with curiosity. "That's an unusual looking chariot. Where are the horses to pull such a coach? In your stable?"

"Under the hood. What's left of them," Jeff sarcastically remarked to himself out loud, knocking a quick rap of his knuckles on the dented hood.

"They ran away?" Berwyck noted.

"Pretty much," Jeff answered. "Let's get going so we can catch up to him," as Jeff started up his car. The noise startling Berwyck, he hesitated a moment before opening the car door.

"What kind of magick is this?" Berwyck spoke as a cloud of smoke erupted from the exhaust pipe of Jeff's car.

"Don't worry. It's good mojo! Get in!" Jeff said, as Berwyck reluctantly got in Jeff's car, closing the door. At that moment, Jeff drove off with Berwyck to the Camelot Hotel.

metal meets feather

By this time, Chuck was on the phone trying to reach Jeff to let him know if he found anything.

"J.P.'s not answering his phone. I left him a voice mail. He should have called back by now," Chuck

worried. "See anything unusual?" Chuck mentioned to Mandy as they sat in Chuck's car parked across the street at the convention center in front of the hotel.

It was already 7:00am. The sun was just coming over horizon, casting shadows from the surrounding city architecture onto the buildings and streets. Inside the hotel, the conventioners were having a buffet breakfast in the convention hall.

"No, nothing. Just a few, brave faithful fans of Sledgewing out in the cold, holding a welcome banner...wait! wait a minute! hold on!" Mandy replied, looking anxiously out the windshield.

"What? You see something?" Chuck asked.

"I saw a flash of light coming from the street running along the east side of the hotel just now," Mandy alerted.

"A flash? You sure?" Chuck questioned.

"It was more like a very bright flash of light, like someone set off a large firework or something," Mandy related.

"Probably a city plow with its lights flashing clearing one side of the street," Chuck surmised.

"No. It was definitely brighter than that. I felt a surge of energy when the flash happened. Possibly the portal?" Mandy stated, turning to look at Chuck.

"Portal, eh? Well let's say we go check it out then," replied Chuck as he started his car up and began to drive in the direction of the street running along the east side of the hotel.

As Chuck's car disappeared around the corner down the side street, a robed figure came around the west side corner of the hotel sidewalk. Slowly approaching the front entrance to the hotel, the figure stopping once or twice, looking up and around at its surroundings. At the same time, in the distance, a tour bus was slowing its approach to the hotel's front entrance, finally stopping in front of the hotel's canopy extending across the sidewalk to the hotel's front entrance. Seeing the bus, the figure quickly hid behind some small shrubs in front of the hotel, his eyes peering through the shrubs. The whooshing sound of air escaping from the bus's air brakes ended as it stopped. The bus door opened slowly and two of the members of Sledgewing exited the vehicle, pausing a moment on the blue carpet under the hotel canopy. Seeing them, the fans ran over with their autograph books to the two band members coming off the bus.

"I hope Nigel's done us right this time, Odeon," noted Rage, large cobra tattoos on both arms, signing one of the books.

"He'd better or he'll drop the other shoe with what this tour's breaking even with so far, Rage. Love the crowd control detail here, eh?" hailed Odeon's Scottish accent. Odeon's electric blue leather jacket along with his large white and blue Mohawk were his trademarks as lead singer of SledgeWing, smiling back at the fans as he signed their books.

Once Odeon and Rage finished signing, both carried their bags and backpacks through the hotel's revolving door. As the tour bus left, the figure came out of the shrubs and slowly continued to walk

towards the hotel's revolving door. A moment later, just before the figure was within a foot of the entrance, Odeon came rushing back out of the revolving door of the hotel towards the spot where the bus had parked to drop them off. The figure quickly hid back behind the shrubs, looking at Odeon take out a small rectangular object, cursing out loud to himself "blasted phone signal!" as he placed it up to his ear and begin talking into it.

"Nigel? Odeon. Rage and I arrived at Camelot just a few minutes ago. The bus is gonna be at the hotel's underground garage loading dock to unload our instruments. We're meeting up with Chaos and Mayhem. They checked in last night before we got here. Bring the van and the dollies. We're setting up across the street before practice around 1pm, okay? And make sure that sound tech is sober as well as the rest of the bleedin' roadie lot that's with 'im at Stubby's Pub. They called me earlier on the bus trip the way here. Hangin' out at a local rave night before our show date cuts into our practice and set up time. And I ain't playing these gigs if I don't see them 'ere in one hour, contract or no, okay Greer? Off!" as Odeon hung up the cell phone.

"Excuse me?" came a voice from the shrubs, getting Odeon's attention just as he was about to walk down the sidewalk in the direction of the hotel's underground garage.

As Rigor came out from behind the shrubs, Odeon stopped in his tracks to eye this strange bird-like creature in a robe with a glowing amulet around where his neck should be.

"Where is this place?" Rigor casually asked as he approached Odeon, who was startled at what he was seeing. Odeon then remembered his agent, Nigel Greer, telling him there was a fursuit convention going on at the same time in the same hotel Sledgewing was staying at. For their concert gig was going to be across the street at the convention center.

"The Camelot," Odeon returned to Rigor. "Hey, you must be one of those fursuiters attending the convention inside."

"Convention? Fursuiters?" Rigor asked, a bit confused.

"Yeah," Odeon replied, gesturing a smile on his face, pointing at the hotel, "the fursuit costume convention going on inside the hotel. By the way, sweet costume you've got there, mate. Looks real! Prize winner, for sure!"

"Costume? Mate?" Rigor injected.

"Yeah, there are others inside at the convention here at the hotel," Odeon noted, seeing Rigor's confusion. "Aren't you supposed to be here? Don't you remember?"

"The last thing I remember is that I was trying to get...er...find my brother. Have you seen any gargoyles or gryphons around?" Rigor elaborated as he tried to think what happened to him and Berwyck after the white flash hit both of them. "This doesn't look like Yarrow or Ornathys. I must be somewhere else, but where?" Rigor thought to himself, looking up and around the area where both him and Odeon were standing.

Yarrow? Ornathys? Odeon now began to think that whoever was inside this fursuit was either high on drugs, intoxicated or both.

"Like I told ya before, they are inside the hotel here. Your brother's probably among the gargoyles, gryphons and other creatures inside," as Odeon held back a chuckle at Rigor, gesturing only a smile.

"There are others?" Rigor inquired, looking upward at the structure, "Inside this...this castle?"

"Yeah, inside the castle," Odeon related again, his chuckle began fading to a frown at this fursuiter as he pointed to the revolving door. "Just go through the revolving door there, follow the blue carpet up to the front desk and ask the clerk there where they are."

"Hmm," Rigor thought out loud. "Okay," as Rigor began to walk towards the door. He stopped short as he reached it, trying to figure out as how to get through to what was on the other side of the thick panes of glass in front of him.

"Push against the glass," Odeon instructed, motioning with his palms pushing against an invisible object as Rigor turned around to look at Odeon. "The door turns when you push and step forward."

As Rigor pushed on the glass, the door turned a complete circle as he stepped within the door space, bringing him back outside.

"What kind of magic is this?" Rigor exclaimed as he found himself back outside the hotel in front of Odeon.

"Push again, but slower!" Odeon reprimanded Rigor, "Remember to get out of the doorway once you're inside!" Looking at Rigor, Odeon shook his head in confusion at the strange creature as he began walking down the sidewalk to the side of the hotel where the underground garage entrance was.

"Oh, I see now," answered Rigor as he began to figure out how the door worked. Once the door revolved a half turn, he stepped out of the doorway, arriving inside the large, expansive lobby of the hotel.

croc feathers

While walking along the wide blue carpet leading to front desk of the hotel, far off to a side wall next to a set of lobby elevators, Rigor noticed a tall gray rabbit. The rabbit standing on his hind legs appearing to be having a conversation with a tall, muscular dragon-like creature he had read about in certain parchments within King Orachon's study. According to the description of this particular dragon-like creature in one parchment about creatures from other lands, the natives had named it a 'crocodile', noting the name had its origins somewhere on a distant land.

Rigor looked at the crocodile bare his banks of sharp teeth while in conversation with the rabbit. Rigor thought the overpowering presence of this dragon creature and others of his kind would make fine soldiers in addition to Rigor's army of minions in his conquest to rule the world.

"You there, dragon!" Rigor hailed out to croc, pointing his wing at the rabbit and the croc, stopping their conversation to look at Rigor.

"Who's that, Roy? Never seen him before," the rabbit whispered to the croc, looking at the strangely robed, feathered creature approaching them.

"I dunno, Trevor, but he doesn't have a badge," the croc replied in an English accent. "Bring me a coffee back from the buffet, mate. I'll see about this bloke."

"Will do," the rabbit replied, heading off in the direction of the hotel's convention hall.

"Hail, oh mighty, noble dragon!" Rigor related, looking upwards to the much taller croc. Shadowing Rigor in height as the croc fursuiter stood up on his hind legs, balancing himself with his large tail as he listened to Rigor. "I wish to have you join my legion of minions on a world conquest. I could use a strong, fire-breathing soldier as yourself to defeat our enemies in battle. You would make a fine captain to my guard."

"I'm a croc, not a dragon. Where's your badge, mate?" replied the croc.

"Badge?" Rigor questioned. "What's that?"

"This," noted the croc, grabbing the laminated plastic card hanging by the lanyard around his neck to show Rigor. "It's for identifying who and what we are around here," as Rigor eyed the badge with a photo of the croc laminated on its plastic face along with Roy's name.

"I have no need of such a thing to identify who I am," Rigor answered. "I have the amulet. The power of the amulet is infinite," as the amulet glowed around Rigor's neck; the croc, noticing the glowing amulet, looked at it intently before responding.

"Well, to be here at this convention, you still need a badge, for security purposes at the hotel as well as the convention so we know who and what you are," the croc replied.

"I am Cardinal Rigor Mortis, a Phyorethorian Hawk. Ruler of the kingdoms of Yarrow and Tyral," answered Rigor as his tone became agitated, the amulet pulsating a red glow simultaneously. "Soon to be ruler of the world!"

Roy was beginning to think that the guy in this fursuit must be some nutcase wanting to start trouble at the convention and hotel. Thinking of the safety of other fursuiters, he began warning the feathered creature of his advances on those attending the convention.

"Look, buddy, you still need a badge to attend the convention," answered the croc in a firm voice, "so you'd better go over to the front desk there so security can get you set up with one," ordered the croc, pointing to the front desk.

"And what if I don't?" defied Rigor.

"Then I'm gonna call security or I'll throw you out of this hotel myself," threatened the croc, bearing his banks of teeth inside the large jaws of his snout.

"Oh, really?" Rigor sneered back with a scowl across his beak. "I take it you wish to challenge me?"

"Challenge you? Ha!" roared the croc. "In my day, I've taken on larger avians than you," as the croc cracked his knuckles.

"Indeed!" an angered Rigor returned back in defiance. "Then we'll see who throws who out!"

The amulet began to glow a deep red color, pulsating faster while growing brighter the angrier Rigor got. The croc moved a few steps forward towards the Cardinal. As Rigor backed away, he caught notice of words on an event board poster in the wall case. The event announcing an upcoming fashion convention at the hotel. Returning to eye his target, Rigor stopped in his tracks, opening his wings to spread them outward, then flapped them together hard in front of himself quickly, speaking a loud incantation as he did so.

"Make dragon fly, nigh dragon high, by fur and by feather, acceleratum thy crocodile leather!!" yelled the Cardinal, as a blast of energy emitted from the amulet, striking the croc fursuiter in the torso area.

The croc had barely said "Wha-?" as his body went flying into the wall, leaving a large gaping hole where the croc made contact in its place. Clouds of dust, debris, plaster and broken wall trim dispersing everywhere. The commotion drew the attention of several people and fursuiters around the lobby with all focusing on Rigor standing alone in the aftermath of a fursuiter rumble.

"Security!!!" the hotel desk concierge yelled over the phone, "Get over to the lobby immediately, Hurry!! There's a fursuiter causing trouble here!! He's gotten in a fight with another fursuiter, putting a hole in the lobby wall, destroying the hotel and scaring the patrons!! I'm calling the police!!! Quick!! Get up front here NOW!!!" as the concierge hit the silent alarm button behind the counter.

In a less than a minute, three convention security personnel arrived running from the convention hall.

"Hold it!! Don't move!!" yelled one of the security guards at Rigor, reaching for his two-way communicator. "Don't move, you...uh...feathered, monk thing...bird!" as Rigor drew an angry sneer at both of them, the amulet pulsing a red glow.

A minute later, a police car screeched to a halt in front of the hotel with two policeman storming through the revolving door followed by two other officers, all quickly observing and assessing the debacle.

"Don't move, birdie boy!! Stay where you are!! Hands and feathers in the air!!" yelled one of the officers at Rigor, their guns clicking as they drew them, pointing directly at Rigor. Rigor turned to sneer at the officers with their weapons drawn. "Hands and feathers in the air!!! That's an order!!!" yelled the officer again at Rigor, "I'm not telling you again!!"

"As you wish," Rigor replied, his beak grinning an evil sneer as he did, the amulet still glowing a deep red. Spreading his wings outward then flapping them together hard in front of himself once more while yelling, "Acceleratum all!!!" as several blasts of energy hit his assailants. The energy blasts hurling the officers smashing into and through the large plate front glass windows out onto the sidewalk. Two of the security guards landing on tops of tables and chairs collapsing them. The third went flying into a full coat rack a porter was bringing into the lobby area, knocking it and the porter over.

As all this was happening, a few fursuiters had returned from the buffet breakfast in the hotel's convention hall entering the lobby, stopping short to survey the chaos that had occurred moments before. Rigor was the only one left standing while others were unconscious or had run for cover. The guard on the floor next to the coat rack had regained consciousness, looking up to see the fursuiters

coming into the lobby.

"Get that robed pigeon! That monk looking bird thing!!" yelled the security guard to the fursuiters, pointing at Rigor, "He caused all this!!"

Rigor could see a turtle, several foxes, a wolf, a lion and a bear approaching him quickly, at first thinking some animal allies had come to his aid to assist him until he heard one of them say to the others, "I'll go get reinforcements," as a fox bolted from the group back in the direction of the convention hall.

It was at that point Rigor turned tail feathers, bolting outside into the cold weather through the revolving door into the busy street. Cars began applying their brakes, sliding as several fursuiters came through the door. Some heading out through the already busted out plate glass hotel windows and began chasing after Rigor. The fursuiters ran across the street, along the snow cleared sidewalk in front of the convention center building. It was quite a sight to see a hundred or more fursuiters chasing Rigor down the streets and sidewalks of Fenlow City's business district. Even ordinary people seeing this began engaging in on the chase.

"What's going on?" asked one pedestrian to another.

"That bird fursuiter in the robes caused a disturbance at the Camelot! He's running away! Let's go get him!" motioned the other as they started running with the pack of animal fursuiters.

chasing feathers

Shortly thereafter, ambulances, rescue and other police cars arrived at the post chaotic scene just as Chuck's car came from around the corner from the hotel, stopping at the red signal.

"Wow!" Chuck exclaimed, seeing all the commotion going on. "A bunch of mascots gone apocalyptic!"

"And it looks like they're chasing someone or something, like a large bird of sorts," Mandy added.

"Maybe it's that avian creature you and your landlady mentioned. Cool! Let's follow the party!" Chuck replied as he drove towards the direction of the running throng.

A minute later, Jeff and Berwyck arrived in Jeff's vehicle, pulling his car into a parking spot that was being vacated directly across the street from the hotel. Jeff looked around to see if Chuck's car was parked nearby.

"Something wrong?" Berwyck asked, seeing concern on Jeff's face.

"I was supposed to meet my friends here but I don't see them," Jeff spoke, looking around. "They were gonna call me but I forgot to recharge my phone."

"We need to start looking for my brother soon," Berwyck mentioned. "How about we start inside that castle?" as Berwyck pointed to the hotel.

"Castle?" Jeff questioned. "Oh, you mean the hotel? Looks like something is going on there, but, yeah, maybe we can ask someone there if they've seen my friends and your brother."

"Let's go then," Berwyck added as they got out of the car.

Walking across the street, Jeff and Berwyck slowed their approach taking notice of the emergency vehicles, the police cars and the hotel's smashed out front windows.

"Wow! What happened here?" replied Jeff.

"The work of my brother perhaps?" Berwyck returned as both continued through the hotel's revolving door.

Once inside, both headed towards the front desk of the lobby. Walking around the chaos and disarray strung about the hotel lobby area, Jeff and Berwyck had made their way past the emergency personnel to the front desk when a fox fursuiter came around the corner from one of the aisles leading to the hotel rooms. Seeing Berwyck wearing a cape similar to the Cardinal's robe, the fox panicked.

"Hey! Here's another one!" the fox yelled back to another fursuiter, pointing at Berwyck. Hearing the fox, a gryphon costumed fursuiter dressed in medieval warrior garb appeared from around the corner.

Seeing the fox and gryphon, Berwyck said to Jeff, "I'll take care of these two! They have already sieged the castle!" Berwyck grabbed his spear from its scabbard, ran over to where both were standing, aiming the spear's tip at the fox and gryphon.

"No!" yelled Jeff running over to Berwyck, halting him, "They're not what you think!"

"Maybe they know where your friends are and where my brother is!" Berwyck replied. Berwyck approached the two, his spear pointing at them. The gryphon and fox began backing away from Berwyck's spear out of fear of being impaled, pinning them both up against the wall.

"Hey, that looks real!" the fox spoke.

"It is!" Berwyck replied.

"Wait!! Please, don't hurt us! We thought you were the 'robed one!'" exclaimed the fox. "You look like him!"

"Robed one?" Berwyck asked, lowering his spear. "My brother was here?"

"He's your brother?!" the fox exclaimed. "He nearly killed Roy the Crocodile! Threw him through the wall over there! Took him away in an ambulance! Your brother is dangerous!" continued the fox, pointing at the gaping hole in the lobby wall.

"Yes, that is why I must find him before he harms anyone else. Where is my brother now?" Berwyck asked.

"Most of the fursuiters went after him across the street to the convention center!" the fox replied, the gryphon nodding in agreement.

"By the way, you haven't seen a guy with neon red hair wearing a leather jacket along with a woman?" Jeff interrupted.

"No. just us fursuiters," the fox responded. "I think almost everyone from the convention here went chasing after your brother. We were going to the buffet breakfast in the convention hall when it happened."

"Well, thank you for all your help. Sorry for any trouble," apologized Jeff to the fox and gryphon.

"That's a great costume, friend," the fox commented to Berwyck. "Can't even see the seams."

"This isn't a costume," Berwyck returned firmly. "It's my Elite Guard uniform."

"Oh," the fox returned, a bit confused at Berwyck's response.

"Thank you. We have to go," Jeff nodded at the fox, then turning to Berwyck. "Come on, Berwyck. We've got to find Rigor."

"Rigor! That's his name!" the fox related. "He called himself Rigor Mortis. Cardinal Rigor Mortis. Another fursuiter who saw it happen told me before he took off with the others after your brother."

"That's him. Got it. Thanks," waved Jeff in thanks to the fox as Berwyck and Jeff left the hotel.

Once across the street to the sidewalk in front of the convention center, Berwyck and Jeff looked to see a crowd of people along with fursuiters a couple blocks away running down the street along the length of the convention center.

"There they are," Jeff noted to Berwyck as they began trotting down the street following in the direction of the crowd.

"We'll have to be careful when we catch up with my brother. With the amulet's power, who knows what he would do next," Berwyck mentioned to Jeff as they trotted along.

"With what we've seen so far, I'm sure we can think of something to prevent him from using it," Jeff added. "If you'll pardon my asking, does your brother have a weakness?"

"Actually, you may have something there," Berwyck replied. "Many seasons ago, when both of us were much younger, Rigor had a raccoon friend named Lespar."

"A raccoon?" Jeff questioned.

"Yes," Berwyck remarked. "Their relationship was closer than mine and Rigor's. Lespar never left Rigor's thoughts as a friend and a brother. Both of them used to get into trouble with the villagers for pilfering wares. But that all changed when Lespar went missing for several days."

"Sounds interesting," Jeff noted when Berwyck paused a moment.

Berwyck continued. "Eventually, the villagers found Lespar impaled on a lance in Gryth Wood. They said he fell from a large tree branch onto the lance. From that day on, Lespar's death affected my brother. So much so that Rigor and I became more distant as brothers after that happened. We very rarely spoke to one another once Rigor entered into monasterial life and became Cardinal of Yarrow."

"Have you told anyone else about this?" Jeff inquired.

"No, except for Lord Cellus on the Consul of Aviatyre. Cellus has been like a brother to me as well as a good friend not long after Rigor and I became distant," Berwyck related.

Jeff paused a moment. "If you don't mind me saying, we could use this knowledge of Lespar against your brother somehow, before he harms anyone else."

"Making Lespar a martyr is one thing. I'm sure bringing Lespar back from the dead would most certainly shock my brother," Berwyck acknowledged to Jeff.

"Well, it's information worth knowing to help stop him," Jeff concluded as they were beginning to catch up with the crowd, having ran a couple blocks.

CHAPTER XIV

regroup to destination

The distance between Rigor and the angry crowd of people and fursuiters was narrowing to an arms length. Rigor could feel the reach of flailing hands and fursuit paws grasping his robes and feathers as he tried to run faster. In a moment of panic, Rigor spoke the words of an incantation out loud making him disappear.

"Invanishus expedium!"

A quick flash emitted from the amulet as Rigor disappeared into thin air. Blinded by the sudden flash of light, the crowd became disorientated as to who and what they were chasing a moment ago had suddenly disappeared. Chuck slowed his car to a stop seeing the crowd disperse in random directions.

"What happened? Why did everybody stop?" Chuck spoke to Mandy.

Mandy looked around for a moment and turned to look at Chuck. "I feel he is not here any longer," Mandy replied.

"Not here? Well, where did he go?" Chuck asked.

"I...I don't know," Mandy continued, "It seems like he transported himself somewhere else."

"Did he take wing and fly? I don't see anything up above," Chuck noted, looking up.

"No, I felt something familiar happen," Mandy halted. "You might say there was an energy force involved here very similar to when that flash of light appeared at the hotel."

"A portal?" Chuck questioned.

"Sure feels like it, but we need to find out where it went to," Mandy spoke.

"Radically cool! This is getting to be like a sci-adventure of the awesome kind!" returned Chuck, smiling at Mandy.

Just then Jeff and Berwyck caught up to Chuck and Mandy approaching the open driver's window of Chuck's car. Jeff leaned on the open window.

"J.P! Where've you been?" Chuck exclaimed, seeing Jeff at his window. "I've been calling you but you didn't answer your phone!"

"Sorry dude," Jeff admitted. "Forgot to charge my phone battery. But I did get us help."

Chuck and Mandy stared at Berwyck, their mouths slightly open at seeing Berwyck dressed in his Elite Guard uniform.

"Whoa! It's the avian thing! Radical!" Chuck remarked.

"Actually, part *Nombrus albatross*, part *Phyrorcthorian hawk*," Berwyck replied back.

"And he can talk!!" Chuck exclaimed.

"Of course," Berwyck acknowledged. "So can you," Berwyck returned to Chuck as Jeff smiled back at Berwyck.

Chuck's smile quickly turned to a frown seeing Berwyck's spear in its scabbard.

"Whoa. Are you the good dude or the bad dude?" Chuck questioned.

Berwyck and Jeff looked at each other before Jeff responded. "I think I can safely say I wouldn't be standing here if he was."

"Oh, right. Yeah, right," Chuck spoke in a low tone.

Suddenly, a rabbit fursuiter took notice of Berwyck. "There he is!" the rabbit yelled. "Get him!"

"Uh, oh," Jeff spoke, seeing the angry crowd head towards the car. "Chuck, get us outta here! Now!"

"Hop in, quick!" Chuck replied as Jeff and Berwyck got in the back of Chuck's car. Chuck floored the gas pedal, tires screeching as his car took off in a nick of time, the crowd reaching the spot where Chuck's car was stopped at a moment ago.

"Whoa, that was close," Jeff noted to all in the car. "Too close!"

"They must have thought you were the bad dude," Chuck referred to Berwyck.

"I don't look like my brother," Berwyck replied, "but my cape does look similar to his."

"Uh, guys? This is Lieutenant Berwyck. Berwyck, these are my friends Chuck and Mandy," Jeff interrupted.

"Yo, Lieutenant!" Chuck chimed as he slowed his car down. "Chuck Ravick at your service, sir," as Chuck gave a quick hand salute in return.

"Hello Lieutenant," Mandy seconded as she turned to extend her hand in friendship, "or do you prefer being called Berwyck?"

"Um, Berwyck, if you please," Berwyck cordially replied as he extended a feather to Mandy. "Thank you all for helping me to find my brother. This has certainly been interesting meeting all of you."

"So you met Jeff outside his home, yes?" Mandy asked Berwyck.

"He actually kinda fell out of the sky and landed on top of me," Jeff added.

"I do appreciate you breaking my fall," Berwyck replied.

"Anytime," Jeff smiled. "But if there's something softer to land on like a snowbank, try to aim for it."

"I'll try," acknowledged Berwyck.

"So you came through a portal as well," Mandy inquired at Berwyck. "We were following whatever everyone was chasing after back there at the hotel."

"Portal," Jeff chided in thought out loud. "There's that word again."

"Portal?" Berwyck slowly questioned out loud to all as he gathered his thoughts. "My brother knows of the power of the amulet. That must have been him. He has control of the amulet. I remember Lord Cellus telling me that the amulet can be controlled using certain incantations. I do believe the amulet brought us both here but for what reasons I do not know yet of or why. The last thing I remember was a flash of light hitting me, a white flash of light, as I was running back to the castle after Lord Cellus, Belnapp and I created a distraction to draw the gargoyles and gryphons away from Yarrow's castle walls. And then I arrived here."

"Berwyck," Mandy interrupted, "I may know why you were brought here."

"Yes?" Berwyck inquired.

"For us to help you to stop your brother from using the power of the amulet to rule the world," Mandy noted in a monotone voice while in a semi-trance-like state looking directly at Berwyck, "to return the amulet to clear you and another of any wrongdoing within your kingdom." Berwyck paused a moment before replying.

"I don't know why this thought popped in my mind but I feel you can predict events that happen," Berwyck noted to Mandy. "Interesting. An ability like that could turn the tide of battle."

"Berwyck, Mandy mentioned another whose name should also be cleared. Who is that?" Jeff added.

"That would be Belnapp, the Elite Guard Scout and Squire of the Royal Stables of Yarrow, Berwyck responded. "Belnapp and I were ordered to guard the royal treasury containing the amulet. General Daellon and Lieutenant Kaeleos had sojourned out to sea to search for one of Yarrow's missing Elite Guards who vanished off the island of Ornathys." Berwyck paused another moment. "Before I arrived here, I had found out that the same Elite Guard was my father. Seasons earlier he was banished from the island of Ornathys by my brother and King Aegolth of the kingdom of Tyral."

"Yes," Mandy interrupted, "your father, Larco, is also the spirit guardian of the amulet."

"Larco?!" came from both Berwyck and Jeff at the same time. Jeff remembered the parchment his grandfather had given him.

Berwyck continued, astonished by Mandy's words and Jeff's expression, "but how did you know that? How did you know his name was Larco?"

"I felt a very close relationship in the energies from the portals that brought you and your brother here to our world and our time. Much like a parental guide watching over his own children. He is not of the living any longer, but that of spirit," Mandy continued.

"My father. It is true," Berwyck whispered, for a moment his eyes distant and oblivious to anyone around.

"Wait a second here," Jeff started in, "Let me get this straight. Your father's name is Larco? Larco, the spirit guardian is controlling the power of the amulet, yes?"

"That is correct," Berwyck said, coming out of his semi-trance.

"But your brother, the Cardinal, who banished your father from Ornathys, has possession of the amulet?"

"Yes," Berwyck answered. "Unfortunately, I'm unable to prove that my brother stole the amulet from the royal treasury, though somehow he was able to obtain it. Belnapp and I now face judgment from King Orachon and the Consul of Aviatyre because of the missing amulet. Much worse, an outbreak of war is imminent as we speak. For my brother, along with Jarduche, the gargoyle king, and Farris, the dark gryphon have gathered their armies of gargoyle and gryphon in order to siege Yarrow. Even without my brother, Jarduche will stop at nothing to return to power and take control of Ornathys. But now, with my brother having sole possession of the amulet, who knows what he will do."

"Well, listen up," remarked Chuck, as everyone grew silent, "we are going to help you find that amulet so that you can return to Yarrow to clear yours and Belnapp's name. Hopefully to stop the gargoyles and gryphons from taking over Ornathys and preventing your brother from taking over our world."

"Amazing deduction, Ravick. Pure genius," Jeff bantered.

"Elementary, Castleberry. Elementary," Chuck smiled in return.

"Now the question that remains is where do we begin to start looking for the amulet? If the Cardinal

has the amulet, we need to find out where he went and if he is still in our time, that is, we don't really have much time to find him," Jeff remarked.

"I can possibly help there," Mandy spoke up. "I seem to be able to sense the energy of the portal when it happens. And now that I've felt that same energy several times, it's become familiar enough that I can pinpoint as to when and where it happens. But as to how far away it happens, I've only sensed it in close proximity to where I can feel the portal's energy field."

"I may also have an idea," Berwyck added. "My brother once told me that he would feel much safer inside a place of worship within a kingdom. A cathedral. Perhaps he would go there."

"A cathedral?" Jeff asked. "Maybe in another country. Fenlow City has large structures but I've never seen a cathedral around here. The only places I know of being that large would be the convention center, the city library or the Camelot Hotel."

"Actually, there's an abandoned ancient monastery in the countryside far away from Fenlow City," Mandy mentioned. "It's about a hundred miles from here, an hour or so drive. It's located literally in' the mountains near Wyndlyre Lake. And, believe it or not, there is also a cathedral of sorts on the monastery grounds. The monastery and cathedral are built into the mountains, hollowed out into a mountainous cavern over the centuries by the monks of the monastery. There's even an underground aqueduct and spring beneath the monastery that flows out into the lake."

"An underground cathedral?" Jeff asked. "That's really unusual. I never knew anything like that existed around here or anywhere else."

"Helga described it to me one time. About sixty years ago, she knew of someone there who also had psychic abilities like herself before they passed on into spirit. They taught Helga how to use her psychic abilities. But around forty years ago, the monastery mysteriously closed and the monks disappeared."

"So, should we flip a coin?" Chuck bantered. "Or should we all split up in four different directions? I don't mind driving there even though the monastery is quite a haul. Time's is running out. So what's it gonna be people? Berwyck?"

The interior of the car was silent for a few moments as they all looked at each other before one by one cast their vote.

"Monastery," Mandy spoke first.

"I'll second," Berwyck noted.

"I'll third," Jeff voted.

"You've got me curious. Game on. Let's haul," as Chuck cast the deciding vote, he began driving in the direction of the highway leading out of town to the monastery.

the voice within

"I am Razantrope. Who wishes to seek me?" came a voice from their minds, as Kaeleos, Orachon,

Daellon, Cellus, Belnapp, Draemer and Trelayne could hear Razantrope speak to all of them at the same time. The tone of the voice felt powerful like a thunder god, but it was gentle as it surrounded the group. Trelayne was amazed.

"I can't believe what I'm hearing!" Trelayne spoke. "It's like I can hear myself think, only much louder without speaking a word!"

"Razantrope, all of us want to thank you for helping us in our moment of need," Kaeleos spoke first.

"Thank you for saving our kingdom," Orachon added. "All of us owe you our lives."

"You are welcome," Razantrope returned. "Is there something else you need?"

"Yes," Kaeleos replied. "During the battle, there was a large flash of light that appeared when the Cardinal used the amulet against the locket. Once the flash disappeared, the Cardinal and Berwyck were nowhere to be found. We can't find either one of them anywhere. Do you know what happened to them or where they went to?"

A few moments of silence came upon the group as they began looking at each other, waiting for the voice to return a response in their minds. After a long pause, the voice spoke in an ethereal tone that seemed to fade in and out much like an echo reverberating inside a cavern.

"The amulet has traveled with both brothers to another spiritual plane of existence. You have a choice of either rescuing King Aegolth and General Metgare to help save and protect both island kingdoms or to rescue the two missing brothers with the power of the locket. You must choose only one or the other. However, from this moment forward, the choice of one or the other will change the lives of all. I cannot change nor undo what will happen thereafter, for the locket and the amulet are both bonded to the ancient magick of the temple. While you have possession of the locket, the amulet is with the brothers. Until the amulet is retrieved, my powers are limited."

A slight pause came before the voice continued. "Choose only one or the other. The kingdoms or the brothers. There is no turning back once your decision is made. Do you understand?" the voice returned.

The group grew quiet in thought for a moment.

"What do we do now?" Belnapp spoke first, looking at the others.

"Razantrope is correct," Draemer spoke to all. "He has lost part of a source of his power. Nordellan told me from one of his translations of the temple's tablets that the guardian would have very limited power if either the amulet and the locket were ever separated or lost. Lost into what he described as a 'time portal' of another dimension, distant and unlike our own."

"Time portal? Dimension? I don't understand," Kaeleos questioned.

"More like a land and a place we have never encountered before," Draemer continued. "A very far away and distant place that only the power of the amulet or locket could bring one to."

"Yes, Lord Draemer," Orachon added. "Lord Nordellan spoke of such places that are of our dreams when we sleep and of our minds and imaginations when he spoke with a temple guardian. But now, we

must face the difficult choice on what the guardian has given us. To either rescue Berwyck and the Cardinal or to rescue Aegolth and Metgare."

"Your Majesty," Daellon spoke soberly, as he assessed the situation, "It seems we may have lost one soldier yet gained a temple guardian as an ally through what transpired with the Cardinal and King Aegolth. Aye, I lost my own son and mate through the Great Conflict, though I gained an adopted son from it," as Daellon smiled at Kaeleos before continuing. "Not to say Kaeleos and I treat Berwyck as a son as well as a soldier. But with the experience he gained becoming an Elite Guard warrior in Yarrow's service, I'm confident and sure he can handle his own when it comes to his own survival wherever he may be. If it were possible for him to return, I would make that choice. But with the shadow of war hanging over the kingdoms, my choice would be up to the kingdom to decide."

"Your Majesty," as Kaeleos spoke slowly, "It is true of what my father has told you. We are both proud of Berwyck's accomplishments in his service to Yarrow and as my own adopted son. Though the Cardinal has caused much strife between the kingdoms, and myself having helped raise him through Xucca, he is also my adopted son as well. I agree with the General. But the ones who will suffer the loss of both missing sons will be my father, myself and, most especially, Xucca. Our hearts heavy, the pain of loss we feel for both is great. As a soldier, I can only speak for helping to hold the peace between the kingdoms. My hope will always be there for Berwyck and the Cardinal to return back to Ornathys, with or without the amulet. But Berwyck's and the Cardinal's sacrifice must not go unfinished nor unchallenged. I say we go rescue King Aegolth and General Metgare. For the kings and the kingdoms of Ornathys!"

"Aye," replied Daellon, "Well spoken, Lieutenant. For Ornathys!"

A cheer of 'For Ornathys!' came from the group as King Orachon looked on, silently, before speaking.

"It seems the decision has already been made," Orachon noted to all. "Then we head for Haebrugg to put an end to this conflict. For peace and for Ornathys."

"But what if the gargoyles and gryphons return when we are not here?" Belnapp asked the group.

"Remember?" Kaeleos answered, "The beams from the locket encased them in that bubble. It rolled off into Gryth Wood."

"Bubble?" Draemer asked. "Then we should not fear that they would escape from that so easily if the locket and Razantrope's magic is involved. I do remember Nordellan telling me of an incantation that traps whatever is inside its containment. A magickal force holds it there, making it impenetrable to escape. Hopefully with what limited magick Razantrope has right now, it will give us enough of a chance to rescue King Aegolth and General Metgare."

"General," Orachon ordered, "make do the fastest ship that can sail to Haebrugg. We have two kingdoms that are in need of mending their differences."

"Aye, Your Majesty," the General returning a hurried salute as Daellon motioned Kaeleos to follow him to the gate house.

As Kaeleos was about to follow Daellon, he halted a moment, motioning back to Daellon that he

would follow in a moment. Approaching Orachon, Kaeleos stopped in front of him.

"Your Majesty," Kaeleos spoke, "Jarduche may still be there on the island with Aegolth and Metgare. Or he may have already returned back to Ornathys to regroup his minions. I will inform our guard to be on high alert. Before we leave, I will call on Razantrope to protect the walls of Yarrow from the gargoyles and gryphons in case they return."

"Lieutenant," Orachon replied, "Once we rescue Aegolth and Metgare, upon their return, I will ask Nordellan and Consul to reconsider their decisions on Lieutenant Berwyck and the Elite Guard Scout Belnapp regarding the missing amulet. My hope is that the armada Nordellan will send here to help us arrives before another outbreak of war on our defenses occurs."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Kaeleos answered.

"My father, King Orax, would have done the same, Lieutenant," Orachon added. "Sometimes being a king has its times of gratification. Knowing one's accomplishment of peaceful alliances working together in harmony far outweighs the distrust and chaos of war. Even without the amulet, Yarrow and Tyral still have a chance at a peaceful resolution. Rescuing both should make our alliances stronger. Come. We need to prepare for the journey."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Kaeleos replied as he motioned for Belnapp and Trelayne to follow him towards the gate house.

As they were leaving, Kaeleos began his thoughts to Razantrope asking the temple guardian to help protect the kingdom's walls from the gargoyles and gryphons. A transparent blueish-orange light emitting from the locket began to encompass the inner and outer ward walls with its aura until it completely surrounded Yarrow's perimeter. Running from the top of the towers to the berm along the outer walls with a continuous glow. Seeing the aura of magick protecting Yarrow's defense, Orachon knew the power of the guardian would not fail the kingdom. Turning to Cellus and Draemer, Orachon motioned to both as he spoke.

"I understand Nordellan and Consul have not yet returned with the armada to Ornathys. But you are welcome to come with us to Haebriegg to rescue Aegolth and General Metgare or stay and help defend the walls of Yarrow until our return."

"Your Majesty, since Nordellan left us in charge of Grimoire, the gargoyles made an advance on Grimoire in our absence as well as Tyral. We won't let that happen with Yarrow, Your Majesty," Cellus acknowledged. "We will stay and protect Yarrow's walls."

"Good. Then I am leaving both of you in charge of Yarrow until I return. The power of the guardian of the temple will help you protect the kingdom," Orachon stated. "Serve Yarrow well while I'm gone."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," came the reply from Cellus and Draemer.

Once Orachon finished talking, he walked off in the direction of the gate house, leaving Cellus and Draemer standing alone.

"Draemer," Cellus spoke.

"Yes?" answered Draemer.

"I haven't had the chance to tell you until now," Cellus soberly admitted to Draemer. "I should have tried to rescue you back there at the Eclection before the gargoyles captured you. I want to apologize for my actions, but my mind was intent on escape."

"Cellus, you were the one in possession of the locket. You did the right thing on escaping with the locket. If the Cardinal had found that in my possession, who knows what he would have done with the powers of both the locket and the amulet. We are fortunate the locket is still ours and that I am alive."

"He didn't get any information from you about your knowledge of the amulet, did he?" Cellus questioned.

"Unfortunately, the Cardinal found the parchment pertaining to Nordellan's and our discovery into the few incantations Nordellan had translated. I think I may know how he got the parchment from Orachon's study in his solar. The only ones who know of the parchment's location would be Orachon, Nordellan, myself and Chancellor Gareruff. Gareruff is in charge of the parchments in Orachon's study."

"That's a serious accusation," Cellus noted. "But it makes sense that the Chancellor is also behind all that has happened as well, being the Cardinal's understudy and in charge of the parchments in both the Cardinal's study and Orachon's study. Berwyck related to me how Gareruff impressed the Cardinal and Orachon with his scribing and mathematical proficiency. With those traits, he was able to obtain the royal assignment of Chancellor to both the Cardinal and Orachon."

"When I was imprisoned in the tower dungeon at Tyral, the Cardinal admitted to me that Gareruff found the parchment," Draemer related.

"Orachon should know about this," Cellus panicked. "His own chancellor, a spy. He's the Cardinal's weakness!"

"Not according to what Nordellan told me privately, Cellus," Draemer stated.

"What do you mean?"

"I remember Nordellan telling me 'a brother' is the Cardinal's weakness."

"Berwyck?"

"I think so. But he also told me that Jarduche plans to overthrow the kingdoms would involve help from a 'certain someone'..."

"A 'certain someone'?" Cellus questioned, slightly annoyed at Draemer's response. "Who is this 'certain someone', Draemer? Gareruff? Jarduche? Or maybe Berwyck? Or me, for that matter? or...or...oh!...oh my!...oh my! that's it!," Cellus answered himself in thought as the solution hit him like a bolt of lightning. He stood stone faced looking in the distance.

"What? Cellus, what is it?" Draemer asked concerned as Cellus had a wide eyed expression pouring over his features.

"Lespar! It all makes sense now! Nordellan is a genius!" Cellus exclaimed as an 'epiphany' of thought overcame him.

"What?! Lespar?! Who is Lespar?! Please tell me?! Who is it?!" Draemer pleaded.

"This is amazing! Draemer, you're amazing!" Cellus explained, nearly hyperventilating with the realization. "The Cardinal's weakness is someone whom the Cardinal 'feels' was and still is 'his brother'! Lespar was the Cardinal's friend when he was much younger! Berwyck told me of the story of them growing up together. How their relationships was strained to the point that the Cardinal treated Lespar more like a brother than Berwyck. The Cardinal made Lespar a martyr not long after Lespar died from falling on a lance. And he's been that way ever since. It makes sense! We have to let Orachon know about this."

Immediately, Cellus and Draemer headed towards the gate house to catch King Orachon and the group before they left for Haebrugg.

near miss

An hour went by quickly as the group in Chuck's car rolled down the highway into the mountains, far from Fenlow City. Around mid morning, Jeff phoned ahead to his parents that he was staying overnight at Chuck's to work on his term paper. It seemed a good ploy, though they were expecting him home the following afternoon. As the car traveled along sleepy grades with no other cars in sight, the chilled mountain air made Chuck throw on the car's heater. Jeff and Berwyck had dozed off in the back seat, both nodding off halfway from the drive. Chuck's cd of Thrushfire was playing at low volume as they drove on.

"I'm in my element," Mandy noted to Chuck as she took in the scenery along the highway, breaking the silence in the car except for the metal music playing on the cd player.

"Huh?" Chuck asked, half asleep from the driving at least 100 miles from the city. "Did you say something?"

"Element," repeated Mandy, smiling back at Chuck. "This is where my psychic abilities recharge. It's beautiful out here in the mountains."

"Yeah, I hope there is a gas station somewhere around here. I've got half a tank left," Chuck worried.

"We should be okay," Mandy returned. "I feel the monastery is close by. The turn off to the monastery from the highway is not far from where we are right now. Helga told me the road to the lake by the monastery is long."

"Mandy, can I ask you something?" Chuck asked.

"Yeah, sure," Mandy replied.

"Uh, I just want to tell you that you've been amazing so far," Chuck remarked. "I've never met anyone quite like you and if we don't make it, I want to thank you for being here with me."

Mandy was overcome with surprise from Chuck's statement.

"Chuck," Mandy spoke, "I appreciate you as well. You are very kind. But we are here to stop something from changing the world as we know it."

"Sorry if it came out like that," admitted Chuck, "I just wanted to say that I've been feeling very close to you late-"

"Turn right!! Turn here!!" yelled Mandy, interrupting Chuck after seeing the small old wooden Lake Wyndlyre sign with the arrow next to the road. Below the same sign, another small wooden sign, barely legible, read 'Satyrecloure'.

Stunned, Chuck spun the wheel hard to the right as the car's rear end whip lashed like a bronco bull into a sharp turn off the highway onto the dirt road leading to the lake. Jeff and Berwyck immediately awoke from their slumber once they heard Mandy and felt the car lurch them from their seat. Some of Berwyck's feathers became loose and started floating about the interior of the car.

"What just happened?!" Jeff asked.

"We almost got killed!" Chuck yelled back, regaining control of the car.

"We almost missed the turn," Mandy returned. "Sorry if I startled everyone."

"I hope we get there in one piece!" Chuck added. "I didn't see any sign."

"It was a very small sign. I just barely caught a glimpse of it," Mandy replied.

"Well, you're our GPS. How much further do we have to go?" Chuck added.

"Stay on this road. It should take us to the lake," Mandy advised.

"Please, no more sharp turns for me today, or we'll wind up wrapped around a tree," Chuck noted, as he drove along the heavily wooded, tall tree lined, dirt road through the dense forest.

fooled by a decoy

The afternoon grew dark quickly as Chuck drove on for another half hour up and down over steeper grades rather than the smaller, gradual grades he traversed over along the highway mountain pass. The further in they drove, the narrower and rougher the road became that made for having a four wheel drive vehicle instead. At one part, a sheer drop thousands of feet on one side and a sheer wall of tree lined mountain on the other side challenged Chuck's driving skills as the headlights of his vehicle slowly progressed his direction along the narrow chasm of road. Once past the chasm, moonlight reflected off a very large silver, dark blue swath ahead on the left as the road widened slightly on the right to reveal a valley surrounded by old vineyards of fruit trees and vines. At the far edge of the valley stood what appeared to be an ancient monastery carved literally into the rock of the mountainside. Pulling up to the large wooden gates of the monastery, the car's headlights shone on an old weathered sign that read 'Duchantel Monastery'.

Berwyck recognized the name immediately for he thought they had arrived at the monastery where

Lord Draemer had visited.

"I know this place," Berwyck noted slowly in a serious tone.

"What?" Jeff replied. "How could you? How is that possible? You just got here."

"I've never been here, but I've heard about it. Lord Draemer came here to Duchantel Monastery to visit an old friend, Count LeMay. There was a suzerain attempt on the monastery, and the cleric, Count LeMay, wrote to Draemer for him to come to the monastery at Satyrecloe to prevent LeMay's expulsion," Berwyck continued. "I don't understand why Duchantel Monastery is here in your land and not in Satyreclore."

"May I ask you something, Berwyck?" Mandy asked, her voice sounding ethereal.

"Yes?" Berwyck answered.

"When Lord Draemer arrived at the monastery, what did he find in the monastery's great hall?" Mandy questioned, her voice changing as though she was in a trance-like state.

"He found Count LeMay there," Berwyck replied, yet hesitant.

"And? Go on," Mandy prodded as Berwyck delayed speaking for a moment.

"Count LeMay died over a century ago before Draemer visited there. His bones were entombed within the great hall of the monastery," Berwyck spoke cautiously. "How did you know?"

"The spirit of Count LeMay has been communicating with me through clairaudience since we arrived here," Mandy related to the others as she still was in a trance-like state. "He is telling me something about the monastery. He is telling me 'what is even stranger is that this monastery should not be here. It was sent from your dimension in time, Berwyck, from the island of Satyreclore to here through the power of the amulet'."

"Whoa! This is creepin' me out already! And we haven't even gone inside yet!" Chuck exclaimed.

Mandy came out of her trance as her voice returned to normal.

"Guys, we've got to go inside. We need to look for the cathedral. The Cardinal is here. LeMay is telling me the amulet is here as well," Mandy spoke.

"My brother doesn't like visitors," Berwyck added.

"Well, Berwyck, if what you said is true, this is where he feels safe. C'mon. Let's let ourselves in," Mandy encouraged.

"Okay then," Chuck halted. "But what do we do when we encounter him? He has the amulet."

"We need a distraction to draw him away from the amulet," Mandy thought. "We need to know the Cardinal's weakness."

"Uh, I think I can help there," Jeff spoke up. "Berwyck, earlier you were telling me about when your brother was young, who was his closest companion? The other 'brother'?"

"Lespar the raccoon," Berwyck noted somberly. "He treated him like a god, more than a brother."

"That's it!" Mandy exclaimed. "I have an idea. Chuck, I need your help. You are the best artist I know around after seeing your work at Tressler's. Can you create a paper mache life size raccoon standing upright on its hind legs? Around five feet tall as well? The same height as Berwyck. And we need it as quick as you can make it," Mandy inquired.

"Uh, I usually draw and paint but I guess I could. I just need some materials and some paint and stuff to work with," Chuck agreed. "I think I've still got some of my paints in the trunk. And maybe some tape, old newspapers and throw tarps to cover the areas when I paint."

"Great. We just need to gather some branches, twigs and leaves on the ground and whatever else we can find close by to bundle with what you have to make the raccoon sculpture look somewhat real," Mandy elaborated.

"What's the plan once we build this thing?" Jeff asked curiously.

"To try and make the Cardinal think he's seeing the image of Lespar. Then we can use it as a decoy to make him give the amulet to us," Mandy hinted as she began gathering objects on the ground.

"A distraction? Cool!" Chuck thought out loud.

"Precisely," Mandy answered. "Let's get this done as quick as we can before we lose what little light of day there is left."

"This sounds crazy enough to work," Jeff finished. "Can I help with anything?"

"Sure, man!" Chuck replied. "This is gonna be your final exam in Monster Art and Sculpture 101, heh heh!" laughed Chuck.

Quickly, all four worked together gathering up what they could find on the forest ground, wrapping the materials in the newspaper sheets. Then taping them together to form the profile of the life size raccoon. Once the tarps were in place covering the wrapped and taped newspaper sheet rolls, Chuck and Jeff added the final touches of painting the stripes and fur lines of the Lespar raccoon look-a-like. Going by Berwyck's description of what he remembered of Lespar, the decoy was nearly good enough to be real from a distance.

"Not bad," Mandy commented. "It looks good enough to be a decoy. Nice job, guys."

"When I was younger, I remember seeing Lespar a few times with Rigor. It kind of looks like him. I hope it fools him." Berwyck noted.

"I agree. We rock!" Chuck noted.

"Now that we have a decoy, we need to figure out what to do next," Jeff spoke.

"Go inside and find the cathedral. We can set up the decoy there and then figure out how to lure him to it," Mandy concurred.

"That must mean me," Berwyck noted. "The 'other' decoy."

"What?!" Jeff and Chuck said together.

"I'm the one he wants. He aimed the amulet at me when I was running back to the castle with Belnapp and Cellus. Most likely to stop us in our tracks from the distraction we created from preventing the gargoyles and gryphons to siege Yarrow. But the amulet somehow brought us both here to your world," Berwyck related. "He probably wants to imprison me as part of his plan in order to siege as many places he can without me interfering."

"That's very noble of you, Berwyck," Mandy replied. "But we can't let you be taken prisoner freely."

Berwyck interrupted, "Not if we can get our hands on the amulet first. Now gather close. Let me tell you of my idea of how we use the decoy and myself to get possession of the amulet..." as Berwyck related his idea to all three.

Once Berwyck finished explaining his plan, they wrapped the raccoon decoy in the remaining tarps as all four entered through the monastery's large wooden gates and proceeded to the cathedral within the mountain.

CHAPTER XV

brotherly ruse

As they arrived inside the semi-underground mausoleum / cathedral, the carvings and architecture along the columns and arches seemed somewhat Gothic, yet otherworldly, as though another culture had expressed its symbolism of messages throughout the great knaves and walls of the structure.

Several large flat plate sconce torches, hanging by chains along the walls filled with fire, lighting the great hall with a subdued and eerie shadow light making the ancient structure seem darker than what light was present. The atmosphere of the hall seemed to hold clouds of stagnant smoke from rising. Sconce torches lingered midway below the massive knaves supporting the dark ceiling of rock and earth. A great, tall altar bench chair sat against the far wall of the chancel. Surrounding the chair, the cathedral's walls contained carvings of possible Syorthian and Phyorethorian cultures that existed on the archipelago of Satyreclore many eons ago.

"He's not here," Mandy warranted. "But he's not far. I believe he'll be here soon."

"Whoa! Cool stuff!" Chuck whispered to the group as he admired the architecture inside the structure. "I never wouldn't have dreamed up something like this in my drawings. Kinda getting mixed ideas about it. It looks evil and uncertain. Like it's waiting for something to jump out. It's all about the intrigue!"

"Shh, quiet Chuck!" Jeff added. "We're probably walking into a trap just being here."

"Just what my brother would want us to do," Berwyck added. "C'mon, we'll set up the decoy here,"

as Berwyck strode over to a transept leading to a large curtained area off of the main well of the cathedral.

Once they set the decoy in place, Berwyck went over to one of the large curtains in the transept area. As he pulled the curtain back slightly, it revealed a spiral staircase. Possibly a tower stairwell to one of the arched vaulted lofts above the chancel and the nave facing into the great hall.

"Secret passage?" Chuck asked, noticing the stairwell. "Cool!"

"In case I need a way to escape if something goes wrong," Berwyck answered. "We should get into our positions now before he arrives here. One thing I did find out about my brother back in Yarrow. He either sits in the cathedral throne when he's in deep thought or is looking out his tower window at his private courtyard gardens."

"I'd be amazed if we find anything growing in the gardens around here in this monastery. It's deserted. No one's here," Jeff added.

"I'd be amazed if my brother falls for the decoy," Berwyck noted. "Okay, everyone get into your positions," as they all broke group to leave for their respective positions in hiding within the great hall.

The wait in the cathedral for the Cardinal seemed like an eternity as the group started to become restless. Jeff began to nod off in the deafening silence of the large chamber at times. The sporadic crackling noise of the flames in the wall at times alerting his conscious of the Cardinal's possible arrival. After what seemed like an hour passed, a shuffling sound was heard coming from the side of the chancel area where the great chair sat. Everyone remained still and silent as they felt his presence. The Cardinal slowly walked out from one of the vestibules leading from another room off to the altar. His pace was slow as he began looking around the great hall, scanning everything in sight. The amulet around his neck glowed a dull blue color, pulsing in and out of intensity. Under his wing, he was carrying what appeared to be a large book. Approaching the great chair, he stopped for a moment. Looking towards the back of the cathedral, he cautiously sat down then began flipping hurriedly through the pages of the book as if he were looking for something in particular.

"Ah ha!" came a cry from the altar moments later as the Cardinal found what he was looking for in the large book.

As he tore a page from the book, he held the page between his wings; laughing as an evil grin began to appear on his beak. Arising from the chair, he held the paper high, waving it haphazardly around.

"It's now mine! All mine!!" retorted the Cardinal, dancing along the marble altar floor in a fit of glee, holding in his wings the parchment he tore from the book. He spun and twirled about overjoyed at his find.

Jeff was peering over the top edge of one of the backs of the pews at the Cardinal seeing what all the commotion was about.

"He's really gone absolutely mad crackers, he has," lolled Jeff quietly to Chuck hiding in the pew across from him.

Suddenly the Cardinal stopped dancing, pausing a moment in front of the great throne after hearing

sounds coming from the pews. Walking down the central space with the torn page in his wing, he began to check the pews on either side. Chuck looked across the aisle at Jeff placing his index finger over his parted lips as he motioned to Chuck to remain quiet and still. As the Cardinal approached the row of pews where Chuck and Jeff were hiding, a noise came from the back of the hall near the transept. Curious at the source of this noise, the Cardinal looked ahead to the transept area, having stopped at that row of pews, not noticing Chuck or Jeff.

The decoy of Lespar stood in the subdued light in back next to a large curtain. Attached to the decoy were two long strings that Mandy had tied to the decoy in a last minute thought to retract the decoy in case Rigor got too close to see the fake raccoon sculpture. Hiding behind the large curtain, Berwyck held the length of both strings of the decoy as he tried to remember how Lespar's voice sounded when he was younger. As Rigor approached the third to the last row of pews, a voice called out.

"Stop right there!" came from the decoy as Berwyck threw his voice using a different pitch trying to sound like Lespar. It seemed to work, for Rigor stopped in his tracks, trying to see who the shadowy outline was in the subdued light.

"Who are you?! What are you doing here?!" Rigor announced to the figure in the shadows.

"I am your friend of late. Lespar," replied the figure to Rigor in his best voice impersonation of Lespar Berwyck could fake.

"Lespar?!" Rigor nervously twitched as he could not see the profile of the figure's face, yet understood who it was. "What do you want with me again?!"

"I have returned to ask you for the amulet, my bro-...uh...friend," as Berwyck nearly slipped on his tongue for a dead giveaway to the decoy and himself.

"What do you want with the amulet?" Rigor asked suspiciously, Berwyck hearing the voice's timbre change slightly. "You sound like someone I know. Someone familiar-"

"Silence!!" ordered the voice, interrupting Rigor's sentence. Rigor cringed in return from Berwyck's impression of Lespar echoing throughout the cathedral. "Do not question the dead!" the voice added.

Remembering what happened last time, Rigor quickly humbled himself as he emphatically replied in return. "My sincere apologies to you my old friend. Don't be angry at me."

"I am here because I only ask to take possession of the amulet. For I have a need to use its power," returned the voice.

"I can show you what it can do," Rigor replied. "I can give you the incantations to work the amulet if you need them."

"I want to use the amulet for myself, alone, my old friend," the voice of Lespar continued, "Bring the amulet to the aqueduct and leave it there for me," as Berwyck remembered Mandy mentioning the aqueduct.

Rigor seemed curious how his old friend knew of the aqueduct beneath the cathedral for he was certain Lespar had never been to Satyreclore.

"Have you been here before, my brother?" Rigor asked cautiously.

"I'm dead, aren't I?" the voice reprimanded. "Of course, I have. I've talked to the spirits entombed here. Why are you delaying?"

"Please, be merciful, my friend. I do not mean any ill will between us," Rigor implored. "I will go now to the aqueduct and leave the amulet there for you."

"Good," the voice returned, "I will be there waiting."

Rigor began to run back towards the great chair in order to exit through another vestibule off to the side. As Rigor was halfway down the aisle, Berwyck gave a hard yank at the strings attached to the decoy. The yank was strong enough to make the decoy explode into a swirl of branches, leaves and paint tarps all scattering across the floor. Turning his head back at the moment to see the decoy explode into nothing, Rigor began to run faster, thinking Lespar was already at the aqueduct. Once Rigor had left the great hall, everyone came out of their hiding places.

"The decoy worked," replied Jeff as the group assembled, "Your Lespar impersonation worked, Berwyck."

"Yeah, but we lost a great piece of artwork," Chuck admitted.

"I almost got caught," Berwyck admitted, "but I'm glad he didn't get too close to the decoy or it would've exploded in his beak."

"Since we no longer have a decoy, we'd better find out where this aqueduct is," Mandy urged. "He may get suspicious if Lespar doesn't show up there."

"You're right," Berwyck added. "We should head in the direction he left in."

"I'm sure we can find where the aqueduct is," Mandy spoke, as she ran back to the already exploded decoy to grab a branch shaped like a Y, returning while holding it to show the others. "I also used to teach people how to use a divining rod. We can find the aqueduct using this," as Mandy demonstrated the divining technique.

"Can it find a cheeseburger? I'm hungry," Chuck mentioned; his stomach growling, "Maybe we should have brought some food with us."

"Look, I know it's late and we all agreed to come here as a group," Mandy recommended. "Just hang in there a while longer. Hopefully, if your brother knows the ins and outs of this place, there must be a kitchen with some food here."

"Birdseed, probably," Jeff remarked.

"Funny," Berwyck retorted. "Let's get going before that's all we're left with."

As the group entered through the same vestibule the Cardinal had left through, they discovered several archways leading in different directions. Using the divining rod, Mandy led the group through

chambers leading down several stairways lit by only few torches, if any, at times. Once they reached the last staircase leading to a damp, darkened chamber of ancient origins containing glyph figures embossed on the columns and walls, a body of water laid near the edge of a large slab similar to a dock.

"I think I see something," Mandy pointed in the direction along the dock's edge.

A dim glow reflected off an object several feet away from the entrance they came out of. As the group approached it, they could see it what it was clearly.

"The amulet!" Berwyck spoke first, recognizing it.

"That is correct!!" yelled a voice from behind the group, making them jump as they turned around to see him step out from the shadows. "Welcome, dear brother. I've been watching all of you since you arrived here. You thought you could fool me. Just like my decoy amulet there on the ground," chanted the Cardinal, stepping into view with the real amulet glowing around his neck as he pointed to the fake amulet.

The group turned to see the amulet laying on the ground disappear, as it was a reflection created as a ruse.

"I knew your voice. I knew it was you. It was good of you to also bring your friends along with you to watch me take over this world," the Cardinal injected to the group. "You tried to fool me with that decoy back there, but I knew better. You also tried to trick me at Yarrow."

"Yes," Berwyck spoke, "but you were trying to take Yarrow by force. You and your army of minions."

"Yes, I want it all, my brother," Rigor returned. "To take what is rightfully mine. I've learned much from good friends. Friends like Lespar. I also knew he never left Ornathys. He never visited Satyreclore."

"I thought Lespar was your 'brother'," as Berwyck led into discussion.

"He is," chanted Rigor.

"You mean 'was'," Berwyck reminded. "He died from falling on a lance. Both of you went off jousting in Gryth Wood. I've heard the story from others about what happened then!"

"They lie!!! I did not leave him there to die!!!" Rigor angrily snorted; the flashback in his mind hitting him. "If that is what you're trying to imply!" as Rigor panicked; his voice sounding with a psychotic tone.

"I did not say you left him there to die!" Berwyck retorted, inquisitive of Rigor's response. "I said he fell on a lance!"

"I went looking for him and got my foot caught between the boulders at one of Yarrow's defense posts along the shoreline!" Rigor announcing his alibi as the amulet began to glow red, pulsating slowly.

"Why are you telling me this now?" Berwyck demanded. "Is there something you are not telling me?"

"Why should I tell you?" Rigor replied in a riddle.

"Because I'm your brother!" Berwyck shouted.

"Brother?! Brother??!" Rigor shouted back. "Just like Kaeleos is our father?! I used to think Larco was our father! 'was'! Until he abandoned us just like our mother told me!"

"Larco is our father!" Berwyck returned. "You sent Larco to his death!!"

"Silence!!! That is not up for discussion, my one time brother!!" the Cardinal roared.

"When you write up a Writ of Banishment on our true blooded father, it is!!" Berwyck raged back. "Murderer!!"

"He was caught spying on King Aegolth's defenses!" trumpeted Rigor in a lie, "Aegolth did what he had to. And don't forget, my brother, for you are to blame as well! You are responsible for the amulet!" charged the Cardinal, pointing his wing at Berwyck.

"What?!!!" relayed Berwyck. "You stole the amulet!"

"I did not steal the amulet!!! I merely borrowed it..." quipped Rigor in another psychotic tone, shouting at first, then lowering his tone of voice.

"You are going to return us back to Yarrow with the amulet, my brother or I-" Berwyck demanded.

"Or you will do what, brother?" interrupted Rigor. "You forget. I have the amulet. I am the one in charge right now. With the amulet, I can control the world."

"You forget, my brother!" Berwyck retaliated. "Kaeleos has the locket! He will seek you and the amulet out and stop your plan of conquest!"

"Silence!!!" ordered Rigor. "Enough talk!! I did not come here to argue with you about what was, my ex-brother. For that is in the past. Today is the dawn of a new rule of Ornathys and the world. With the power of the amulet, I've brought Duchantel Monastery here using a transference incantation the Dark Gryphon gave me. And now I've found something else more interesting."

From under his wing, the Cardinal took the page he had torn out of the mysterious book he had brought out with him to the altar and read what was on the torn page to the group.

"I have here the mystery of the amulet's power," the Cardinal waving the parchment as he spoke. "Something Lord Nordellan and Lord Draemer forgot existed. Within the walls of this monastery lies the connection between the Temple of Haebrugg and the source of the amulet's power - the archipelagos of Haebrugg and Satyreclore. The monastery was built using stone and crystals from both Haebrugg and Satyreclore," the Cardinal continued. "Some of the stones and crystals came from Haebrugg, brought by the worshipers of the temple to trade for food and wares to honor the temple from afar. This parchment came from the ancient records of those on Satyreclore who worshiped and

knew of the amulet's power," as the Cardinal held up the important doctrine.

"But you are not on Ornathys now, brother. So how can you rule Ornathys when we are both here in their world, their land?" Berwyck responded, looking at Chuck, Jeff and Mandy.

"On the contrary," the Cardinal quipped in thought, "My minions have already taken Yarrow as well as Grimoire and Tyral. Jarduche and Farris will secure Ornathys for me. Once I secure this land, using the amulet, I will bring my minions here to serve my rule as well. As for this book," Rigor held up along with the parchment, "With the help of the amulet, I found this book laying within the monastery's great hall's tomb since the monastery was built. There are several incantations to use the amulet's power within that book. But I am still missing two important pieces - the locket and one certain incantation that will make me the guardian of the temple. So, in regards to Kaeleos, let our one time father come join us, if he does make it here, for I will be waiting. And once I do find that particular incantation and have possession and control of the locket, I will rule all, my brother," Rigor ended sarcastically.

The Cardinal slowly turned to walk away but stopped halfway through the turn.

"Oh. How inconsiderate of me not to accommodate all of you for your stay here at Satyreclore," spoke Rigor, turning to look at them.

The Cardinal whispered a magickal incantation right before a large metal cage appeared out of nowhere and surrounded Berwyck, Chuck, Jeff and Mandy. The Cardinal then approached them; an evil leer on his beak.

"I do hope all of you, including you, dear brother, enjoy your visit here at the monastery. I know I will," the Cardinal chuckling a mad laugh as he walked into the shadows and out of sight, leaving the group trapped within their metal prison.

winds of change

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty, wait!" yelled Cellus and Draemer as both of them were running towards Orachon.

"Yes? What is it?" Orachon answered as Cellus and Draemer approached Orachon just as he was leaving the gate house to head for the ship.

"We've...discovered...what may be...the Cardinal's...weakness, Your Majesty," relayed Cellus, catching his breath from running.

"Really?" Orachon asked. "What is it?"

"It's whom, Your Majesty. Lespar," Cellus responded.

"Lespar?" Orachon questioned.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Cellus answered. "According to what Berwyck told me, Lespar was a friend of the Cardinal when he was younger. His brother, Rigor, treated Lespar more like a brother than Berwyck when the Cardinal and Berwyck were younger. Lespar became a martyr to Rigor after Lespar's passing. The Cardinal's weakness may be someone whom the Cardinal feels was and still is his

brother. I have to thank Lord Draemer here, Your Majesty. Without his help, we never would have discovered what the Cardinal's weakness was."

"Is this true, Lord Draemer?" Orachon asked.

"If it wasn't for Lord Nordellan letting me know in private of his thoughts on the Cardinal, Your Majesty, Lord Cellus and I would not be telling you this. I did promise Lord Nordellan to keep what he told me in confidence about Jarduche receiving help from a 'certain someone', but I did not understand whom that was at the time," Draemer related, hedging slightly to speak. "Unfortunately, I broke that vow of silence with Lord Nordellan on what he confided in me with. I should be punished for my actions by whatever Consul deems so, especially at this time of another potential conflict," as Draemer began to hang his head in shame.

"Not if it helps to save the kingdoms on Ornathys, Lord Draemer," Orachon answered with a smile. "I believe Nordellan wanted you and Cellus to figure this out for yourselves on what you've both told me. I will see you clear from any admonishment the Consul decides on. Knowing Nordellan, what he told you in confidence was not meant to harm you in any way, Lord Draemer. In fact, he told me you are far too important to Consul to dismiss your work with him and the Consul. Yes, Lord Nordellan is very wise and very spiritual in his service to all, not just with Consul. I am confident he would've wanted you to let me know of your findings."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," remarked Draemer. "By Consul, I'm honored to be in your service,"

"Well, I must go and board ship to set sail for Haebrugg," Orachon spoke. "Until my return, serve Yarrow well both of you," as Orachon turned and headed to the ship docked at Yarrow's ocean defense post not far from the kingdom.

"Safe voyage, Your Majesty," Cellus and Draemer replied together as Orachon turned and walked away.

Once Orachon was out of view, Draemer turned to Cellus.

"Cellus, I can't help thinking if Berwyck or the Cardinal will find a way to return to Oranthys with the amulet. Do you think there's a chance that Berwyck and the Cardinal would return?" asked Draemer.

Cellus gave a heavy sigh before he spoke.

"Draemer, if there is a chance, right now I hope once Orachon returns with Aegolth and Metgare so that peace between the kingdoms comes to fruition and the conflict ends. Yes, I still worry about where they are right now, but it is out of our hands at the moment. Even if we used the locket's power and all the incantations to return them here along with the amulet, the Cardinal's or whomever the amulet's possession may have fallen into upsets the balance to do just that. But I still hold out hope for both to return."

"I agree as well," Draemer added. "I hope Nordellan returns with the armada as well."

"Agreed," Cellus added. "He would know what to do next. Until then, we must help secure Yarrow's battlements for night will be here soon enough."

The clear afternoon skies over Yarrow gave way to colder temperatures surrounding Oranathys as darkness began to fall. From one of Yarrow's turret towers, Cellus and Draemer could see the silhouette of Orachon's ship far off in the distance, sailing off into the horizon under a crescent moon as evening's blanket slowly cast its shadow over the ocean's plane.

A day had passed as Orachon's ship finally arrived mid morning at Haebrugg. Once the ship docked at the village of Chalynn, Orachon, Kaeleos, Belnapp, Trelayne and Daellon set out for the Temple of Chalynn while the cargo ship's crew unloaded supplies to the village. It had begun to snow lightly as the five left the village on the path to the temple. The snow cover on Haebrugg wasn't as deep as the snow pack on Ornathys making it less difficult to reach their destination through the forest to the temple. Arriving at the temple just as the sun was at its highest point in the sky, they spread out around the temple's perimeter proceeding to look for a way inside, a door or entry, though, there was none to be found.

"There has to be a way in," Kaeleos spoke, running his talons along the walls of the structure, looking for a opening. "Nothing here but solid wall. Belnapp, how did you get inside the temple?"

"I don't remember this being here. My surroundings were different. I feel I was somewhere else, further up the mountain. I remember going inside a cave which led me into the temple," Belnapp answered.

"Belnapp is correct, Lieutenant," Orachon spoke. "Nordellan explored a cave entrance that led inside the mountain into the temple. This isn't the actual temple, but carved from stone to appear to look like the temple. Nordellan told me that this was carved for the rituals held at the temple by the inhabitants of Haebrugg."

"I remember the cave entrance," Belnapp added, "I remember there were twin boulders as to where I was left at before I found the cave at night. But I wouldn't know where the cave entrance is located at from here."

"On the remote side of the island," Orachon concluded. "You were on the remote side of Haebrugg. Nordellan told me of its location on the remote part of the island, high up on the mountainside. We will have to journey there if we are to find Aegolth and General Metgare. To get there, we need to head through the mountain pass which should be directly from where we are right now," Orachon noted as he pointed to another path leading up to the summit of the mountain where the temple stood. "We should head for the summit before nightfall. We should also be on alert for Jarduche and any other gargoyles that may be holding Aegolth and Metgare prisoner. Actually, it's been too quiet since our arrival here on Haebrugg."

"I agree, Your Majesty," Daellon replied. "If they knew we were coming, they would have provoked an attack on us by now."

"True, but we have the locket to protect us in case we come across Jarduche," Kaeleos noted.

"We should all be on alert in case they've set a trap for us while luck is still in our favor," Orachon finished, "Let's get going."

As soon as they finished their conversation, it was already early afternoon when the group left the

temple and proceeded onto the mountainside path towards the summit on the remote side of Haebrugg. The trek to the cave seemed endless as the conditions on the path changed from snow to an icy mix glaze with each level they ascended. Reaching the summit took much longer than anticipated as nightfall made its presence known over the snowy landscape.

"See anything?" Kaeleos cautiously noted to the group.

"No sign of any gargoyles. All clear," Belnapp relayed back, as the group stepped onto level ground since their climb up the mountain.

"Now we just have to find the cave entrance to the temple chambers," Orachon spoke as he eyed the surroundings. "It looks too quiet here. Everyone be on guard," as Orachon drew his sword from his sheath, the others did so as well.

"We need torches," Daellon replied, "and a good warm fire to keep us protected and alert."

"Maybe Razantrope can help us with that," Kaeleos returned, sheathing his sword. Taking out the locket from his around his neck, Kaeleos spoke to the object. "Razantrope. We need your help."

"Yes?" came a response in everyone's mind as Razantrope's voice echoed slowly.

"Razantrope, we're on Haebrugg and need your help in finding the cave entrance to the temple," Kaeleos answered.

Before Kaeleos could finish asking the temple guardian for assistance, the gentle wind on the mountain top where the group was standing quickly picked up in intensity. The next moment, they all began struggling against the sudden fierce wind, grabbing onto the tree trunks to prevent themselves from being blown off the mountain. Turning his head to see the others, it was then Kaeleos saw the imposing figure of Jarduche along with two other gargoyle approaching him. Jarduche was eyeing the locket around Kaeleos's neck right before a very strong gust of wind came and held Jarduche back, stopping him in his tracks. The wind began whipping the freshly fallen snow from the ground into a frenetic wall of white, blinding Kaeleos, making it difficult for him to see where Jarduche was at.

"I can't hold on!" yelled Daellon, his voice barely audible to the group over the wind as his grip on the tree broke loose. A strong torrent of wind hurled him up into the sky above them. One by one, the rest of them, each one losing their grip from what they were holding onto and were cast high into the air into a swirl of snow and icy wind. Next was Trelayne, then Kaeleos, then Orachon and then Belnapp as they spun helplessly into a maelstrom of icy chaos...

a word of caution

Belnapp opened his eyes, his vision blurry, trying to focus and adjust to the light. He was lying flat on a surface that seemed familiar to him. Turning his head to the side, he began to see Daellon, Orachon, Trelayne and Kaeleos, each one lying on individual stone altars covered in white corporal sheets. 'We're inside the temple!' he thought to himself. Able to move, Belnapp sat up, got down off the altar and began walking over to the others.

"Is everyone okay?" Belnapp asked, seeing movement from the others as they got down from their altar obelisks.

"Where are we?" spoke Trelayne, gathering his bearings, being the first to ask. "The last thing I remember was that sudden burst of wind that came out of nowhere and took us up high into the air."

"You are safe," came the calm voice again through everyone's mind. "I am sorry I had to bring you all here in that windstorm. But the gargoyles had seen you arrive and were about to capture you where you stood. I created that windstorm to keep them away from all of you so I could bring you here to the safety of the temple. My apologies for the manner of which I brought you all here."

Everyone looked around at their surroundings as a thin veil of white smoke slowly approached the group, taking form as it drew closer to where they stood. Razantrope appeared before them, dressed in a flowing white robe covering an indigo and yellow robe containing the same glyph symbols that were on the walls and floors of the chamber they were standing in. Bowing to Orachon, Razantrope spoke directly to him.

"I am Razantrope, Your Majesty, I am at your services as you wish," as the figure of Razantrope bowed at Orachon.

"I was told you were one of my Elite soldiers named Larco," Orachon questioned.

"Yes, Your Majesty. I was once Larco, one of your Elite Guards. I was falsely accused of spying on Tyral by King Aegolth, held prisoner there for many seasons. Eventually banished from Ornathys by the Cardinal and forced to sail aboard a cargo ship that was heading for Satyreclore. Unfortunately, the crew and I never made it alive to Satyreclore as the ship sank in a violent ocean storm and my body washed up on the shores of Haebrugg. There, my spirit was transformed into Razantrope, the spirit guardian of this temple you see before you," Razantrope explained. "I am here to serve you."

Kaeleos started feeling uncomfortable with Larco's submissive attitude towards King Orachon at the moment. Kaeleos began to wonder whose allegiance Razantrope was on.

"Razantrope," announced Kaeleos, "I have something I want to know first."

"Yes?" Razantrope returned.

"If you control the magic of the amulet and the locket, why did you let the amulet's power take the Cardinal and Berwyck somewhere else? And how do we know we can trust you if one of us controls the locket and the Cardinal controls the amulet?"

"Then let me prove to you that you can trust me," replied Razantrope as he waved his hand.

Suddenly a puff of smoke appeared and there standing in front of the group was King Aegolth and General Metgare. Metgare and Daellon locked eyes as they held cold facial expressions at one another.

"Where are we? What is this place?" Aegolth asked, still dazed from apparating out of nowhere. "The last I remember is that the gargoyles held us both prisoner in a cave somewhere. Orachon, what are you doing here?" Aegolth questioned, looking at Orachon directly. "Am I dreaming?"

"No, Aegolth. The temple guardian brought you here," Orachon returned.

"Temple guardian? What do you mean?" Aegolth inquired.

"Look for yourself," Orachon spoke as he pointed at Razantrope. Aegolth and Metgare turned to see the robed figure of Razantrope.

"Your Majesty and General" Razantrope replied to Aegolth and Metgare as he bowed slightly, both looking in surprise at Razantrope.

"You look familiar," Aegolth spoke, eyeing Razantrope.

"Yes," Razantrope answered, "I should be. You both held me prisoner for many seasons."

A moment of shock came over Aegolth and Metgare.

"You're Larco!" Aegolth answered.

"Yes, I was Larco. That is until the Cardinal banished me off Ornathys with the writ and your help," Razantrope calmly replied. "Now I am Razantrope, guardian of the Temple of Haebrugg. Being a temple guardian, my magick is all powerful."

A touch of fear came out of Aegolth's voice as Metgare slowly backed up a step.

"What are you going to do with us?" Aegolth shakily asked.

"Nothing. For you both have already met up with the gargoyles and gryphons. Unless you want me to send you back to them now?" Razantrope grinned.

"Please, no!" Aegolth pleaded.

"They will torture us!" Metgare pleaded also. Daellon remained quiet but relaxed any resentment he had towards Metgare once he heard a tone of fear in Metgare's voice.

Razantrope chuckled slightly, "Not to worry."

"And what of the gargoyles?" asked Kaeleos then.

"They have been transfigured back into stone by the magic within that windstorm you were all in," Razantrope detailed. "They will not bother you any longer, see?" as Razantrope turned away, waving his hand as a large tablet began to float from the wall in midair. Its surface showing images of several gargoyle frozen in snow and rock. The most visible was the image of Jarduche standing out clearly to all as he was poised to strike. Now encased in a permanent bond of rock. "They will remain here as a sign to those who misuse the powers of the amulet and the locket," as Razantrope waved his hand, the tablet returned to its position on the wall as he turned around facing the group.

"Now do you believe me?" Razantrope asked the group.

"The Cardinal and Lieutenant Berwyck are still missing," reminded Kaeleos.

"Yes," Razantrope admitted. "Now, which one of you wishes to retrieve them both?"

The announcement by Razantrope surprised Kaeleos and Orachon.

"You're saying that it is possible to bring them both back here?" Kaeleos questioned.

"Yes, with the locket," Razantrope replied.

"But, isn't your magic limited right now? The Cardinal has the amulet. Without the amulet, doesn't that affect your magick?" inquired Kaeleos.

"Of course, outside the walls of the temple," Razantrope answered. "But inside, I still have most, if not all, my powers. It is still possible to return them through the locket. I wanted you all to figure it out for yourselves by making certain choices. Choices that would benefit all at the risk of a few. I wanted to see the allegiance of each one of yourselves towards your kingdoms. And, eventually, all of you together becoming one island again. All of you who live on an island that are in need of mending themselves. Healing from the hardships and strife caused by wars that need not have been fought over land. Land that can be useful to both kingdoms working as one rather than as a divided land. A land that was once whole before the Great Conflict. You all need one another to live as one."

"But the Great Conflict changed many things," Aegolth spoke up. "The gargoyles and gryphons tried to take our lands as well."

"Yes," Razantrope reiterated, "but that doesn't mean both your kingdoms can't work as one to defend against them. Besides, I feel they won't bother you much right now back on Ornathys."

"The bubble?" Kaeleos thought out loud as Razantrope smiled back.

"Well done," Razantrope replied. "So, have you all decided who wishes to retrieve the amulet for me as well as to bring back Berwyck and the Cardinal?"

"The Cardinal?" exclaimed Aegolth, "He ruined the Eclection while his gargoyles and gryphons destroyed my castle! He is leading the gargoyles and gryphons against us! He is a traitor to the crown! He should be drawn and quartered once he returns!" Aegolth defiantly spoke.

"I believe the decision on the Cardinal's actions should be left with Consul once they return, Aegolth," Orachon replied calmly, "I agree, he has caused great distress within both our kingdoms by using the amulet's power for conquest along with the gargoyles and gryphons as his followers."

"Then I have a question to ask of you, Orachon, of Lieutenant Kaeleos and of the spirit guardian," Aegolth returned back, looking at both, "Why have you been given possession of the amulet and the locket when I and Metgare have not? Why not Daellon?" Daellon held back a response, his feathers ruffling at Aegolth's question.

"I can answer that, Your Majesties," Razantrope replied. "The amulet and the locket have always remained within this temple. Long before the Great Conflict, the gargoyles had found the entrance to this temple as you are here now. Over there, behind you, is where the amulet and the locket remained on that pillar until the gargoyles removed them," as Razantrope pointed to an empty pillar in a corner of the chamber. "That was very long ago. The ancient guardians once trusted the gargoyles and gryphons until they had taken both objects. Once the gryphons found out the gargoyles had control of both

objects, the amulet and locket became lost during an intense battle over several archipelagos. The amulet eventually came into possession of Lord Nordellan before the Great Conflict came to Ornathys and other lands. The locket, I believe, was held by a temple worshiper who found it here on Haebrugg. I believe Lord Nordellan found the amulet on Satyreclore, for the gargoyles once ruled Satyreclore as their own."

"As to your question, Your Majesty," Razantrope turned to Aegolth, "Lord Nordellan knew of the existence of the locket as well as the amulet. He was to entrust the amulet to Orachon and to you, Aegolth, the locket. With the gargoyles and gryphons still looking for both objects to claim as theirs, just having the amulet or locket within their grasp meant power. However, Lord Nordellan had foreseen something else. Someone who had made an agreement with the gargoyles to help resolve their conflict with the gryphons by joining forces to rule the archipelagos."

"The Cardinal," as Aegolth and Orachon spoke together.

Metgare mouthed quietly, "He lied to all of us."

Hearing him, Daellon returned to Metgare, "Aye, he did."

"Yes, for Nordellan had a plan to find out who that was," Razantrope continued, "That is why, after the Great Conflict, he left possession of the amulet to Orachon and to Lord Draemer to study the amulet's origins; to see if his assumptions were correct. This was not against you, Aegolth, nor your kingdom."

Aegolth was silent for a few moments before he spoke.

"I did not realize the extent of my actions against you, Orachon, Lord Nordellan and Consul for the fiefs of Gryth Wood. I now know through all that has happened," Aegolth somberly admitted. "I offer my sincere pardons to you, Orachon, to Yarrow and to all of Tyral for my actions. We've all been a part of the Cardinal's deception."

"The gargoyles and gryphons along with His Eminence as well," Orachon spoke. "Aegolth, I too, offer my sincere pardons to you and Tyral from my own actions and decisions that have caused mistrust between our kingdoms on Ornathys. Our fathers, Orax and Adrid, would have wanted peace between us. However, I feel with what has happened so far, this is not an end, but a beginning for both of us to work together with one another for the benefits of both kingdoms and Ornathys."

Both Aegolth and Metgare quickly gazed at each other, then faced Orachon.

"I agree, Orachon, that we need to join forces to stop the Cardinal and whomever his followers may be to conquer Ornathys and the surrounding archipelagos," Aegolth stated.

"Agreed," Metgare added.

"Yes, with Nordellan and Consul's blessings, along with the armada, I'm sure we can hold our ground together for whatever the Cardinal and his minions lash out with against our kingdoms on Ornathys," Orachon followed.

"Nordellan and the armada should have arrived on Ornathys by now," Aegolth noted.

"We've been wondering as well why they haven't arrived sooner," Orachon added.

"Perhaps Nordellan and I know something both kings of Ornathys already know the answer to," Razantrope injected as he smiled back. Both Aegolth and Orachon gave a curious look at Razantrope. A thought popped in Orachon's mind.

"Armada? Us?" Orachon questioned, slightly hesitant.

"Correct," Razantrope responded. "For the Cardinal is harnessing the amulet's power in another land the portal has taken him to as we speak. He has taken the ancient writings of Satyreclore's past to use in his conquest of that land. He has also claimed Duchantel Monastery for his sanctuary of the amulet's power source. Now it will be much more difficult to retrieve the amulet once he finds the incantations to lock the portal to never return here. He must be stopped before that happens. For once the amulet cannot be returned back to the temple within the next full moon, the magick within the locket will fade, the temple will fade and so shall I."

"So we should sail to Satyreclore to the monastery?" Aegolth answered.

"No," Razantrope halted. "He has used an incantation to transport Duchantel to this other land. Duchantel is no longer on Satyreclore."

"Not on Satyreclore? Then we have no choice. We will have to go to where Berwyck and the Cardinal are," Orachon spoke.

"Through the portal you shall go to the land called America. There you will find Lieutenant Berwyck with those who are helping him to find the amulet as well," Razantrope detailed. "I have enough magick to send all of you there, but I do not know how much I will have to return all of you back," Razantrope warned. "For those of you who do not wish to go, I can return you back to Ornathys."

Orachon and Aegolth looked at the group before Orachon spoke.

"Then we have a decision to make. Are all of you willing to take the risk of retrieving the amulet, Lieutenant Berwyck and the Cardinal and the possibility of not be able to return back to Ornathys? If there are those of you who do not wish to go, you can remain here for Razantrope to return you back to Ornathys," Orachon instructed.

The group looked at one another for a few moments before they all decided in agreement to go.

"For Ornathys!" Belnapp replied.

"For Ornathys!" Metgare also replied.

One by one each of the others replied the same words. As the last one responded, they all replied in unison:

"For Ornathys!"

"Then we are all in agreement and ready, Razantrope," as Orachon turned to Razantrope to inform

him of the group's decision.

"You all have much courage to defend the temple. I honor your wisdom and kindness in doing so. Your spirits are bright. Thank you," Razantrope related. "Now I will send you all there at once. Be brave and much light to you all, for you are the future of what will be from now on."

Almost immediately, steady streams of swirling light flashed around the group, as their forms grew into an intense white light that disappeared in a flash almost as quickly as it began.

Back at Yarrow, Cellus and Draemer stood guard along Yarrow's parapet wall as a crescent moon faded in and out of the clouds. The cold night settled in as the landscape remained unchanged from the prior events of the last several days. Strange cloud formations caught Draemer's attention as they floated by the moon's outline in the night sky.

"Cellus, do you ever think we will ever see them again?" Draemer asked as he eyed the sky.

"What do you mean? What kind of question is that? Of course we will," Cellus responded.

"I just wondered what we would do if the Cardinal returned and we were the only one's defending Yarrow?" Draemer asked as Cellus paused a moment before replying.

"We would have to do our best, Draemer," Cellus replied. "Orachon, Nordellan and the others would have wanted us to."

"I know. I just hope we get through this conflict without losing anyone else," Draemer finished as a cloud overhead appeared to look very much like the Cardinal's profile. His beak casting an evil leer as streaks of dark cloud formations encircled the crescent moon's shape, causing the sky to grow even darker.

The Great Conflict

The Age of The Great Conflict involved many archipelagos including Ornathys. For several generations of Phyorcthorian and Syorthian hawk suffered as well as several other cultures on islands far and wide. Many the life of a warrior, peasant and native from every known culture was taken needlessly and unnecessarily by The Great Conflict. The conflict made longstanding internal conflicts such as fief disputes between monarchies and inhabitants seem small in comparison. For ages before and since then, the ancient tribes of gargoyle and gryphon had not been recognized by those inhabitants on other lands. This lack of recognition came from ignorance, arrogance and pride amongst the other cultures as well as the enmities of the gargoyles and gryphons themselves. As a result, these two particular cultures were disappearing faster while other cultures were flourishing. The unjust travesty of other cultures not willing to share lands or fiefs with either gargoyle or gryphon cultures created struggles, wars and chaos instead of peace and compromise. Yes, 'The Great Conflict' was slowly destroying their entire world, one archipelago at a time...

Eruptive quarrels of smoke, stone and haze filled the air as the breach on Castle Grimoire raged on for many a fortnight. Jarduche, Farris and their minions of gargoyle and gryphon warriors continued pummeling the stone sanctuary's inner and outer ward walls. Several shadowy, winged warriors from the sky above in flight dropping and hurling large boulders; the heavy projectiles occasionally scattering or crushing those below who got in the way. Carrying a large mass of stone required little

effort to gargoyles and gryphons alike. For within their genetic muscle and bone structures, both species possessed great strength along with their oversized wingspan.

Along Grimoire's parapets, flaming arrows shot from arrow loops soaring high into the air from the Elite Guard, striking their airborne targets, yet having little or no effect on their combatants. On the inner bailey and forebuilding areas, catapults returning fire with boulders and other projectiles fired back at the enemy. In the sky above, Elite Guard warriors fought against the gargoyles and gryphons in direct claw-to-talon combat as the lines of defensive and offensive lines played out along the castle's periphery, eventually leading to heavy losses on all sides.

Flying above, Farris was wearing an ancient dark talisman he always carried around his neck. The 'war talisman', a product of dark magick; the magick of dark sorcery that still existed on certain distant archipelagos, not unlike the magick that could be found on Haebrugg or Satyreclore. Farris knew of the existence of these islands and the dark magick hidden within their ancient landscapes were an ocean away from Haebrugg, Satyreclore or Oranthys. But as powerful as the talisman was, it could not defeat the stronger magick from either the amulet or locket.

Working his dark magic sorcery in midflight, Farris began waving his talons as he spoke incantations that produced blue-green orbs of fire while at other times firing bolts of light. While conjuring several of the fiery orbs, he directed them at the Elite Guard's sky warriors, incinerating them instantly, feathers and all; each falling from the sky to the ground as the orbs made contact.

“General,” as an Elite Guard Lieutenant approached, saluted and spoke to General Daellon, “I wish to report we've suffered losses on most of our defenses from this last insurgence. We've lost several of our sky warriors to Jarduche's and Farris's warriors. Some of our warriors are badly injured while others still have fight left in them. We are now regrouping with the armament and archers to reform the line of defense.”

“Is King Orax still safe in the lower chancery at Yarrow?” Daellon asked the soldier.

“Yes, General. I have two soldiers guarding the chamber door. He is being attended to his wounds by Nordellan and Draemer. That bolt of light from that Dark Gryphon nearly took his life.”

“He is safer there than here right now. The armada from Haebrugg and Satyreclore has not arrived in our hour of need to support us. We need General Orachon more than ever right now. The battle here has shifted and so has the plan. We've risked enough lives already. We must secure Yarrow as our final defense. On your return to Yarrow, be sure the waterway under Grimoire is clear to the edge of Gryth Wood by Celdoom Rock. We don't want the enemy to know when we are starting to fall back.”

“Falling back, General?”

“Yes, Lieutenant. Unless you would like to be crushed to a pulp or torched into ash as most of my soldiers lives have so far? Order the furthest lines of Guard from the portcullis first to fall back now. Have them enter the tunnels next to the armament and donjon heading to the underground waterway and hurry. We will regroup at Yarrow. That is an order, Lieutenant Kaeleos, my son. Protect your mother until I arrive,” as Daellon gave a stern look at Kaeleos.

“I will, father,” as Daellon's son saluted, turned and began to order the soldiers to fall back to the tunnels.

Most of the Elite Guard had left Grimoire to the gargoyles and gryphons that Jarduche and Farris finally laid claim to the castle. It wasn't until the last few Elite Guard warriors had expired in the process of battle that Jarduche noticed something odd.

“Where is Daellon and the rest of his warriors? Where did they go to?” Jarduche noted to Farris. “They should be here fighting us.”

“I don't know, My Lord. It's like they vanished somewhere within the castle hold. Wait! I do remember underground tunnels beneath the castle. They must have used the aqueduct tunnel that leads from the castle to Celdoom Rock. They must be heading back to Yarrow!”

“Leave a few gryphons here to guard Grimoire in case they return. Gather the rest of our forces. We fly to Yarrow to end this battle!” Jarduche spoke in defiance.

Dark clouds hung low in the murky skies over Tyral as night moved in. A misty rain began as Tyral's king, King Adrid the Intrepid, lay dying in his bedroom chamber with his son, Aegolth at his side. Adrid had been mortally wounded from a warhammer blow to the chest by a gargoyle during battle with the gargoyles and gryphons. Candles surrounded the room as Prince Aegolth, in full battle armor, stood next to his father's bedside, his head bowed in grief. General Metgare entered the room from the battle outside, stopping momentarily as he was taken back by the sight of King Adrid. Pausing only a moment, he continued approaching Aegolth until he was standing next to him to whisper.

“Prince Aegolth, there is no sign of the gargoyles or gryphons anywhere to be seen around the kingdom,” Metgare whispered to Aegolth. “We've lost many guard from the battle. I cannot understand why they left so suddenly. They nearly had Tyral but flew away when your father was taken down as the sun's light faded. How is he doing?”

An elderly looking Syorthian aide stood across the bed where Adrid lay nodded his head at Aegolth and spoke. He was holding cloths in one talon and an incense chamber in the other talon. An assistant next to the elderly aide held a tray with bloodied cloths along with a handled vase containing a blue liquid. A white sheet with symbolic markings surrounding its borders lay on top of the bedsheets covering Adrid's body, the blue liquid covering the portion of the sheet where Adrid's chest and shoulders lay.

“His life is nearly over, Prince Aegolth. His breathing is stammered and very shallow. His chest and both shoulders were crushed from the gargoyle's warhammer. There is nothing more I or anyone else can do for him. You will be king by sunset.”

Aegolth's look remained stoic. The sound of flickering candles were only heard as a couple moments of silence came and went before Aegolth spoke. “Tell me something, General. What's it like being alone without a father?”

Metgare paused a moment as he turned to look at Aegolth. He knew Metgare had grown up without a father and joined Tyral's Elite Guard when he was young, learning the hard way on becoming a warrior for the kingdom of Tyral. “...uh, My Liege...I felt denied a father when I was young. Yet I helped your father by serving the kingdom of Tyral. Your father became the father I never had. The first words he told me when he made me General, 'The most important thing he wanted was hope for Syorthians; here and on the other archipelagos'. The hope of Syorthians to prosper and to serve here

and abroad.”

Aegolth paused another moment before speaking. “Yes, General, I will follow in my father's wishes for Tyral. I'll have my aides send word to his followers in Haebrygg and to the other archipelagos of his passing. I need you to support me, Metgare. For I believe the gargoyles and gryphons will return back to Tyral once they know I've become king. They may be trying to siege Grimoire and Yarrow by now while looking for what they took from the temple.”

“Looking for what, My Liege?” Metgare questioned.

“The amulet from the Temple of Chalynn on Haebrygg,” as Aegolth turned to look at Metgare face to face, not breaking his stoic look, “That is what this conflict is all about. They need that amulet to rule Ornathys and all the archipelagos my father's followers have inhabited. King Orax and Nordellan know of its power from the temple on Haebrygg. Nordellan's a well known alchemist throughout the archipelagos and good friends with Orax. He's visited Haebrygg many times. My father's followers had seen him there on the island at the temple inquiring several others about the amulet's history and location. Maybe Orax or Nordellan has it? The power within the amulet could save my father's life right now and would have stopped the gargoyles and gryphons from attacking Tyral. That amulet is my only hope of saving Tyral right now.”

“Should I gather the guard and head for Yarrow, My Liege?”

“No. Only when the time comes for us to do so, but not now. The trust I have left of King Orax and General Orachon is still in check for the moment. Still, send two guard to Grimoire and Yarrow to observe only. I want no confrontation with Phyrcs, gargoyles or gryphons in finding out. Return here to me with a report. I want to know if the amulet is in Orax's or Nordellan's possession. And if it's not either of them, find out who else would have it. Understood? That is an order, General.”

“Yes, My Liege,” Metgare snapped to attention, turned and headed out the chamber doorway as Aegolth returned to lower his head at his father's bedside.

Back at Yarrow, Nordellan and Draemer were attending to King Orax in the lower chancery. Much like the chancery above, the lower chancery was a good sized room, yet underneath the castle's great hall where the king would head to remain safe during an attack. Orax was still alive but weak as he lay on the large chancery bed. Well known as a master alchemist throughout the archipelagos far and wide, Nordellan amassed much knowledge of alchemy from his sojourns to several archipelagos during his lifetime. Holding a mortar and pestal filled with a blue-greenish liquid, Nordellan had mixed a combination of several rare plants found growing in Gryth Wood within close range of Yarrow. The potion infused auroric healing within King Orax's neural antibodies to remove the immediate toxic effects of the gryphon's light blast. Unfortunately, the potion could not completely cure the neural damage done to Orax's lower body, leaving his legs useless for the rest of his life.

“How do you feel, Your Majesty?” Nordellan spoke, as he applied the potion-soaked gauze to the burned area below the knees of Orax's legs.

“Where am I?”

“You are back at Yarrow, Your Majesty, in the lower chancery. The Guard carried you here from Grimoire. Metgare is still at Grimoire but we are hoping he will return before the gargoyles and

gryphons do. Seros and Anisalsa are keeping watch along the parapet walls of Yarrow with the our warriors.”

“I can't feel or move my legs, Nordellan,” Orax noted in return, “No pain nor feeling whatsoever.”

“I know, Your Majesty,” Nordellan replied, “You are lucky to be alive for that matter. The blast threw you off the portcullis into the tower curtain wall at Grimoire. Farris used a powerful spell to produce such a charge and directed it at you. You avoided most of it with your shield saving you, but unfortunately your legs took part of the blast. I've done what I can with this potion to heal your body. I wish I could do more if I knew what incantation the gryphon used for such a deadly charge. His spell of dark magick turned armored guard to ashen remains.”

“I've always trusted your wisdom greatly, Nordellan. I know you've done what you could for me and I will always be appreciative and grateful to you in trying to save my life. Once Orachon returns with the armada, I will turn some of my duties with Yarrow over to him for now I feel I can no longer do. I just wish he was here right now with the amulet,” as Orax's taloned claw clasped Nordellan's.

“Don't worry yourself, Your Majesty. I'm sure he will return soon with the amulet and armada so we can put an end to the conflict. Now get some rest,” Nordellan comforted Orax in thought.

“Yes,” Orax spoke, “the amulet will save us all from the chaos this conflict has created. My son will protect Yarrow with the amulet when he returns,” as a yawn overcame Orax. “You may leave now, Nordellan. I am very tired.”

“If you need us for anything, Your Majesty, send one of the guard to the Great Celestial Hold. We will be there for awhile looking through parchments.”

“I will. Thank you, my friend.”

Orax drifted off into sleep as Nordellan motioned to Draemer, who was standing quiet near the king's wardrobe, to leave the chancery chamber. Once in the hallway, Nordellan motioned his talon to Draemer to walk with him back to their chambers.

“Draemer, King Orax must never know for what I'm about to tell you.”

“Yes?”

“It's not good. I don't feel he will last only but a few seasons after receiving that dark magick spell. I did not want to upset him at this time, but I believe the spell has affected his blood as well. The spell - actually, its essence - of what it left behind in his bloodstream, is still quite poisonous to him. Eventually, over time, it will take his mind as well as the rest of his body. The potion only slowed down the effects of the blast, but it did not stop or eliminate it completely. I will have to let Prince Orachon know of what I've just told you once he returns.”

“Then King Orax is lucky he's still alive.”

“Yes, but once Orachon arrives with the amulet, we must figure out a counterspell using the amulet to prevent Farris's dark magick from ever doing this again. Prince Orachon would be Farris's next target with that same spellwork. I noticed Farris was wearing an unusual talisman around his neck as he was

directing his spellcasting on the guard. And I'm quite sure that talisman did not come from Haebrugg nor Satyreclore. A product of dark sorcery for certain. For us to protect Yarrow from its dark magick, we will need to break out the parchments that contain the incantations that we found work with the amulet. Once we do that and Prince Orachon returns with the amulet, we can protect Yarrow from those spells. Now we have much to attend to before the invaders return, my friend," Nordellan acknowledged as the two walked up the keep's spiral staircase to the great hall of the castle.

By mid afternoon, Orachon and the armada finally arrived back at the Port of Ornathys carrying warriors from Haebrugg and Satyreclore. They had defeated the gargoyles and gryphons with the power of the amulet, chasing them off the archipelagos in haste as their numbers from both opposing sides dwindled from the loss of battle.

"King Segwyrn," as Orachon spoke directly to the tall Haebrugg hawk warrior astride him, "We need to be alert in case the gargoyles and gryphons are heading for Yarrow, Grimoire or Tyral at any moment. We will first need to send warriors along both coastlines within Gryth Wood leading to Yarrow. Watching above to the sky, yet keeping low to the ground so as not to be seen from above. You lead one group and I'll lead the other. We'll meet at the edge of the clearing on either side wall of Yarrow, yes?"

Segwyrn nodded and began motioning his hawk warriors to split up into two groups. Orachon leading one group began following along the immediate coastline towards Yarrow staying within Gryth Wood's dense cover. Segwyrn, leading the other group, began heading through Gryth Wood to the coastline on the opposite side of the island then began following the coastline, also staying within Gryth Wood's dense cover, heading towards Yarrow.

It was at that moment the gargoyles and gryphons were flying over the part of Gryth Wood approaching the clearing of the edge where Yarrow lay in sight.

"Ready your arms!" Seros yelled to the Elite Guard on the parapet of the outer wall noticing the large dark swath of wings approaching the castle. Marksman with crossbow and arrow lined up along the arrow loops in the wall awaiting the command to fire at the airborne enemy. Winged warriors on the ground ready to take flight with lances, maces, axes and other impliments of destruction awaited word when to attack. Guards readied the catapults loaded with boulders to launch at the signal.

Not far from Yarrow, Orachon's and Segwyrn's warrior groups were about to merge at the clearing when Orachon spotted Daellon and some of the Elite Guard just ahead of them. Out of the corner of his eye, Daellon had stopped to turn to look behind at his group, catching sight of Orachon as well as the approaching gargoyles and gryphons above.

"General Orachon! Up above you!" hailed Daellon to Orachon as Jarduche's warriors grew closer to Yarrow's perimeter. Orachon immediately turned to the sky seeing Jarduche and Farris about to lead an air assault on the castle. Segwyrn noticing Orachon's reaction looked up and ordered his group to arm themselves for an attack.

Above in flight, Farris, noticing movement below at the edge of the clearing looked to Jarduche, pointing to the three groups of warriors below within the clearing of Gryth Wood surrounding Yarrow.

"We have them now! Move our warriors into battle!" Jarduche yelled to Farris, as Jarduche and Farris motioned their minions to attack.

As the gargoyles and gryphons flight above began to dive towards Daellon, Segwyrn's and Orachon's groups, Orachon reached for the amulet tucked inside the neck of his tunic; the amulet beginning to glow an amber color. Orachon began to speak an incantation Nordellan had given him to defend against an attack just as the gargoyles and gryphons began their offensive on the parapet wall.

At the same time, Farris began to aim his talisman at the group, invoking an incantation as he eyed the warriors below, moving into position to capture them all with one energy blast.

It was at this moment that beams of energy from the ground and from the air emerged between Orachon and Farris, as the amulet's red beam collided with the blue-green energy blast from Farris' talisman. The light began blinding most of the warriors above and below in flight and on the ground. The battle seemed to stop entirely as every warrior had difficulty focusing their eyes to the brilliant specter of clashing energy beams. Strain was showing on Farris and Orachon as both fought hard against the force of the clashing of the other's amulet's and talisman's beams against them. The red beam from the amulet beginning to gain an edge on the blue-green energy from the talisman. As it soon overtook the blue-green ray completely, an explosive white flash along with dark smoke, dust and fire with the talisman disintegrating around Farris's neck. Farris went flying backward into Gryth Wood from the flash burst, taking out several tree limbs and branches with him along the way until he finally hit the ground. The gargoyle and gryphon warriors also went flying from the blast into Gryth Wood, knocking most of them unconscious from flight to the ground.

The blast startled, blinding Jarduche for a few moments, but did not bring him down from flight. Once Jarduche's eyes began to refocus from the blast, he saw his warriors laying on the ground from the explosion. He looked around for Farris but did not see him anywhere, fearing the explosion took his life. Infuriated at what just transpired, Jarduche made a beeline towards Orachon and the amulet. Bearing fangs and claws while emitting a loud roar of defiance, Jarduche was quickly flying towards the very General who had just taken out his warriors along with his second-in-command.

His eyes starting to return to normal from the flash, Orachon heard Jarduche's roar and aimed the amulet in the direction Jarduche's roar was coming from as he spoke another incantation. This time, an amber-yellowish light emerged from the amulet. The light striking Jarduche in the abdomen in mid-flight, dropping him like a rock to the ground only feet from where Orachon stood. Jarduche laid there immobilized, unable to move. The three groups of warriors began to surround Jarduche, aiming their spears at him in case he tried to attack.

“Bind the prisoner and take him to the dungeon,” Orachon ordered to a few of the warriors standing around the massive body of Jarduche.

“This is not over, Orachon!” Jarduche moaned loudly in pain as he struggled against the immobilization spell from the amulet “You've taken out my warriors and my second-in-command with that amulet! Just like what you did to him, I will snuff the light from your candle one day, Orachon, I promise!”

“This conflict is over, Jarduche,” Orachon replied, “Your conflict with us stops here and now. Much like a burning candle melting down, the magick's over when the flame goes out.”

“Next time, we will return stronger to defeat you and rule all of the archipelagos! Arrgh!” Jarduche replied, gasping from exhaustion trying to break free from the spell, entering into an unconscious state

as he lay on the ground.

With several guard carrying the seemingly large lifeless hulk of Jarduche to the drawbridge, Orachon signaled to the gatekeeper to lower the transit. Once the bridge was lowered, the three groups entered inside to be met by Nordellan and Draemer returning from the Celestial Hall from hearing the commotion outside.

“You have returned, My Commander-General,” Nordellan spoke to Orachon.

“Yes. I have returned with King Segwyrn and the armada from Haebrugg,” as Nordellan viewed the amulet around Orachon's neck, “With the help of the amulet, we were able to fend off Jarduche and his minions off the island. I feel Satyreclore will need our help as well. King Segwyrn informed me that some of his followers had returned from there just as Jarduche's warriors invaded the monastery.”

“The guardian of our temple has saved us more than once,” Segwyrn spoke. “It has been a blessing in keeping us safe as well as to bring our cultures closer together.”

“You used the immobilization incantation I see,” as Nordellan spoke to Orachon while looking at an unconscious Jarduche. “I feel he must be taken to the dungeon at Grimoire, for Adrid and Orax currently share the fiefs surrounding the castle. I know of an incantation to use with the amulet to hold him there without immobilizing him. I think it would be best for him and us to know where he is kept at hold at all times.” Nordellan said.

“How is father?” Orachon asked. “Is he here? I thought he would be here to see me return with the armada.”

“He is in the lower chancery. He was struck by an energy beam from the talisman the sorceror gryphon Farris was carrying. We brought him there to keep him safe. He is alive but he suffered an injury, I fear. He cannot move his legs. But I am sure he will be happy to see you, My General.”

“I will go to him at once,” Orachon said. “Segwyrn will accompany me and the rest of the guard will remain on alert throughtout the perimeter of Yarrow in case the enemy returns,” as Orachon motioned for the groups to stake positions around Yarrow's defense.

Not far from Yarrow's clearing, within Gryth Wood, an injured Farris awoke from his unconscious state only to find charred remains of the talisman barely hanging on the lanyard around his neck. His back in pain from the harsh landing, he strained to get back up on his taloned feet. Seeing Jarduche nowhere in sight, Farris looked around to see other unconscious warriors beginning to awake from their tramatic defeat, stumbling one by one as they got up from the ground.

“Warriors!” Farris cried out to gargoyle and gryphon alike, “Follow me! We will fall back to Satyreclore.”

“But what of our King? Where is our King? Jarduche?” one gargoyle replied.

“We will find him later. We must regroup to Satyreclore. Jarduche would have told us that in case we were outnumbered. Follow me!”

The winged warriors began to follow the dark sorceror gryphon back to Satyreclore as a full moon

rose high, casting their shadowy presence in the sky and on the ground below.

(END OF BOOK ONE. CONTINUED IN BOOK TWO)