

CHAPTER ONE

The Khaz'Radan Prophecy

Chapter 1 - "The Beginning of the End"

The bright light shining ahead was the only thing keeping him going at this point. The Phoenix's cry rang out repeatedly as its glow pierced the darkness of night all around and was a clear beacon as the runner pushed on and on and on towards any sanctuary he could find. Of course the trail was easy for the enemy to follow as well. And follow they did.

As fast as he went they went faster. As far as he'd run they'd come just as far. And they were gaining. The howls of the Shadowfowl behind him sent chills down into his gut. But what he carried was too important to let fear stop him. It was just a small tarnished coin clutched tightly in his palm but Aurelion and the others had discovered that it was one of the ten artifacts needed to save, well, everything. He must succeed. For himself and the other Anarchs who were working tirelessly to usurp the evil Emperor. Indeed he must succeed for all Orlandia.

But they were close now, too close. The runner thought it almost humorous for a moment that he was going to die and when so many people, an entire kingdom, were counting on him. That couldn't happen could it? Light always defeated the dark...right? More cries from the mystical bird ahead and the maniacal beasts behind shook him from his introspection. It was useless to dream anyway. He had just emerged from the forest and into a wide clear plain. Nothing lay ahead for miles save for an odd rock formation. Two giant rocks actually, standing tall like a gateway with nothing but a small gap between. Not even big enough for a child to squeeze through. Two smooth obelisks, one small gap and nowhere to hide. He was dead and he knew it.

Or was he? The arrows that began to rain down on his position didn't allow him to ponder an answer. He fought for every breath now but what he saw ahead filled him with a new hope. The Phoenix had been encircling the strange rocks ever since he had come into the clearing as if signaling him. 'Silly bird' he thought to himself, 'where else would I have to run too?' But even as this thought passed he began to see the swirling fiery vortex created by the ever tightening course the Phoenix flew. And as it flew faster and faster the twin rocks began to tremble...and move! The runner was no more the 50 paces from the gap and that gap he now saw was widening. Big enough even for him to jump through arm's wide if he chose to do so...except that the gap had now filled with fire!

Fire! Nothing a Phoenix would balk at but for an ordinary human it seemed the bird had done no more than make his escape even more impossible...or had it? The Phoenix now flew back to the runner who was mere moments from the gap and began to cry out as it flew next to him in a parallel pace. The runner glanced over making eye contact with the beautiful creature and for a moment timed seemed to pause. And as he gazed into its otherworldly visage he grew calm and knew what he must do. With not a second to spare

and with his pursuers at arms length behind he leaped into the flaming breach. And disappeared! The Phoenix shot skyward as the Shadowfowl stood dumbfounded even as one of their pack attempted to follow and was immediately destroyed. A last cry rang out as the Phoenix returned diving at the stunned throng and passed into the gap and disappeared as well. The flaming gateway behind it erupting in an explosion as it did so.

When the resulting flames died down and the smoke drifted away on the wind the Shadowfowl were shocked to see that the rocks themselves had been etched by the scorching blast. Words were now clearly visible, one sentence on each side of the now silent and cooling gap. "Two Kingdoms join and stand to Fight, a Darkened Prince reborn by Light" on one rock face and "A King will rise and claim the Crown when the one Pure Heart strikes Evil down" on the other. Dawn was coming and the Fowl must flee, and flee they did, bringing the twin messages back to the Emperor whom appeared more than unsettled by the findings. Elsewhere, well hidden, Auereion held the returned coin aloft for all those gathered to see. A cheer went up as he spoke "My friends, with this one of the sacred 10 in our hands we are one step closer to salvation. One step closer to freedom. One step closer...to Kahz'radan!"

Chapter 2 - "Lost and Found"

The word was out...or more specifically words. The text fire branded on the Prophecy Stones, as many were now calling them, spread from town to town far and wide and back again.

*Two Kingdoms join and stand to Fight,
A Darkened Prince reborn by Light.
A King will rise and claim the Crown
When the one Pure Heart strikes Evil down!*

Both child and elder alike would whisper them and smile. No one knew for sure what they meant but for now they meant maybe, just maybe life in Orlandia might one day be bright again. Ever since the Emperor had risen to power the land had become a dismal, dank and nearly dead place. Those left after the scattering had barely been able to eek out the meekest of existences and as many returned over the course of the year it only meant more mouths to feed. So many had returned seeking justice and revenge only to find their homes destroyed, their crops ruined and their loved ones gone. With nothing left their spirits broke easily and they fell in line complacent and malleable sitting silent at the Emperor's feet. Even the Fae folk had not escaped the cruelty. Rivers had run dry, the breeze blew rancid, whole forests died. Orlandia's very heart had been pierced and each day bled out a bit more. The wounds were clear to see. But no one looked, with heads bowed they went about their seemingly endless days serving the tyrant seated on a stolen throne.

The rightful heir to that throne, under the powerful influence of the Emperor's dark magiks and his own youth-filled pride, remained oblivious to the plight of his people. No one since the dawn of history had ever turned such a blind eye as he. So it was then that this day seemed like any other day to the young prince Validus as he rode out of the city and into the countryside. He rode away from prying eyes and needy hands. What had happened to him? He used to care about these people, about Orlandia. But ever since the Emperor came and changed everything he just didn't. He had power, or at least all the power the Emperor allowed him. And he had fame. Yes, he had become quite famous for his new callous demeanor. In short he often wished to be anywhere but Orlandia and all of Orlandia wished the same. These rides always presented him a means of escape however brief. Perhaps he took after his father in more ways than one as the fallen, risen and now banished former Prince, Hesperus had often sought the solace of solitude himself.

Validus was deep into a darkened forest that, if he was honest with himself, he certainly

didn't recognize. His mind had wandered but it was nothing. His orienteering was second to none, the twin suns of Orlandia rose above and to his right laying just over the Bastian Mountains. He might not know exactly where he was but he knew he was 3 or 4 leagues southeast of the capital and that was all he needed to know. "Nothing is new under the sun!" he cried out. Nothing is foreign, unfamiliar or unknown to me, he thought. A dry, dead wind blew past him carrying a handful of sad brown leaves. He felt a pang in his chest, he almost teared up...and that triggered a deep unsettling rage in the young prince. He screamed "Nothing! Nothing is hidden, nothing is sacred, I own and know all!!!" He paused and drew several labored breaths and was about to turn and head North when he heard laughter. Laughter?!

"What a child you truly are! HAHAHAHAHAAAA!" spoke a voice as if on the wind. He looked all round and truly he was alone and yet the words continued, chiding and mocking him. "Who's there?" he spat, visibly frustrated. "The woods" came the reply "And the hills and dales, the mountains and valleys. And most importantly the truth is here young one."

"Nonsense" cried Validus, "I'm to take advice from the winds now am I?"

"Better that than from he who sits on a throne of lies!" came the response. "Listen now to my words. Truly hear and heed them. An entire world is dying all around you and yet you do not feel a thing. Face your fears child and confront the darkness without...and within!"

Validus snapped back "Feh, what darkness? Perhaps it is you who is blind or frightened. Too scared to even show yourself to me!"

"Scared am I?" a deep voice thundered from right behind Validus who turned slowly to behold one of the most imposing figures he'd ever laid eyes on. Fully two heads taller than the Prince even on horseback with hands like boulders and shoulders that could have lifted an ox, or two, quite easily. Deep set eyes stared down at Validus from underneath two twisted horns, dark eyes full of purpose and intensity but also kindness. "My name is Auereion, and I wish nothing more than to help you."

Validus sat stunned, staring at the goat-like legs of the satyr as he continued, "Our two worlds are suffering like never before but you have a chance to save them both. Kahz'radan is closer than ever. Kahz'radan is coming soon. Kahz'radan will pull back the veil and bring light to us all if we are but brave enough." Aureion paused then and stood back allowing room for his words to work in the Prince's mind. As rage welled up behind the Prince's visage and as his eyes traced upward to meet Aureion's gaze his lips formed one single word as he drew his sword, "Monster!"

"No!" Aurelion snapped as he straightened and seemed to grow ever taller before batting the weapon away as if nothing. The shocked Prince sat terrified and was doing little to conceal that fact. His patience fleeting and his intent oh so clear Aurelion glared down at the boy and bellowed, "The real monster sits back in your capital with your father's crown upon his head and works tirelessly day after day to destroy everything that so many have given so much to procure. He is the monster, he is the greatest of the foul, he is the damnation of both our worlds and you are a damn fool!" And in that instant he was gone leaving a much disturbed young man perched precariously upon his mount. Validus had never felt so unsure of himself in his life. He had shared just a few words with Aurelion but those words had changed things. One word in particular stood out in his mind. Khaz'radan. That word he knew would change things forever.

Chapter 3 - "One for Many"

She paused for a moment at the intersection of two great hallways and thought to herself being an elf makes this far too easy. Of course elf or not she had always had an inclination for moving effortlessly and without detection which is precisely why she had been chosen for this mission. The most important mission thus far and critical to any success the Anarchs dreamed for. It had been only a week ago that Aurelion had asked her to sneak inside the very walls of Orlandia's central keep and steal a wooden staff. "A stick" she had questioned to which Aurelion replied "Oh, much more than that dear girl" and explained that the very staff that the Emperor had carried while disguised as the Sage now stood enshrined in the town's central courtyard as a mocking reminder to all of who now ruled their lives. That alone was painful enough for many citizens to bear but had they known the entire truth it would have driven them mad. For you see that unassuming accessory was also in fact one of the Sacred Ten artifacts needed to summon Khaz'radan though not one of the masses suspected this. That he could display it out in the open was a secret satisfaction to the Emperor as the rod that could lead them all to freedom was one he used daily to symbolically beat submission into them.

A passing guard shook her from her memories and her eyes focused once more on the prize not ten paces from where she stood hidden in the shadows. The time was now. She bolted and back flipped over the low barrier surrounding the staff and just that fast it was in her hands. Of course as soon as her fingers gripped it an alarm went up as if by magic. Stupid she thought to herself, of course there would be enchantments to protect something so valuable. As the din continued royal guardsmen flooded in from every corridor making escape seem nigh impossible. Still the young girl didn't panic. This was going to be fun she thought as she flung herself with reckless abandon at the throng of men between her and her escape route. Leaping a flitting about, over and under, around and over again. Nothing stood in her way and nothing made her feel more alive than celebrating her wildness in the face of such crushing oppression. Guards cried out and steel blades brandished in angry hands struck at her from every angle and yet, still as graceful as a doe, she dodged every blow. And kept moving the staff closer to the hands of the rebellion with each fairy footfall.

One last courtyard and one last gate stood between her and victory. She drew quick but even breaths as she continued to evade all attempts at capture easily sliding tweek the legs of one particularly sluggish brute. And with a delicate roll she was on her feet again and now turned to bid her would be captors adieu with a coy wink.

A wink and a smile which very slowly and strangely left her face as she tried to make sense of the odd sensation she now felt in her chest. A horde of guardsmen panting heavily from the pursuit came into the courtyard but made no attempts to apprehend her. The reason why became painfully apparent when she moved to speak and nothing but a

croak came from her lips. And she looked down at where all those around her were looking and saw what they saw, the tip of a jagged arrow protruding from her bosom, a small vibrant band of blood just now beginning to flow from the wound. She looked skyward and marveled that it was an unusually clear and beautiful day. The suns shone even brighter and moved even faster than normal. It now began to hurt, to throb as awareness rushed in and cradled her like a vice. What hurt more she thought was that she had failed and with her failure she had doomed her beloved Orlandia. No dear child, you have made the greatest difference this day said a voice in her head. Oh, I'm certainly near death now as even the heavens appear to be dancing and my mind plays tricks on me she thought. But it wasn't the suns moving at all and it was certainly no trick. The bright light that so entranced her began to take the shape of a bird and soon everyone saw it and realised it was the Phoenix that had been sighted so often as of late. The fiery creature let out a cry as several bowmen released a barrage of arrows that all found their mark. The young girl crumpled to her knees pierced by the multitude. Tears now welled in her eyes as the Phoenix drew down on the courtyard and swept in low on the end farthest from where she had fallen. Strength child she heard as she met the birds gaze and trembling stood upright once more lifting the staff with great effort above her head. It was everything she had to give and it was just enough. The Phoenix grasped the staff in it's claws as it swept past and fled sharply skyward though it spared one final glance back. Just in time to see the young girl fall for the last time.

When news of the days events reached the Emperor he grew enraged to a degree none had ever seen. A piece of the puzzle had fallen into place. The Anarchs knew the secret and were now closer than ever to releasing it. He spat and cursed and screamed the name "Khaz'radan!"

Chapter 4 "Murder Most Foul"

Times for dissent, and those who would commit it, were never tougher. If you dared raise your voice in opposition to Corvidious, the foul king and Emperor of all Orlandia, you would quickly and brutally be silenced. Well, what is that you ask? Why yes...the Emperor had indeed revealed his name to all the land. He'd decided that so many secrets had fallen over the preceding months he did not want to remain a figure of imposing mystery, but one who had a name. And that name made all who uttered, or even thought of it, tremble. Corvidious had secluded himself for days following the theft of his iconic staff. This moral defeat weighed heavily upon him and the pressure of the loss forced anger heretofore unseen from every pore on his blackened face. The scuttlebutt amongst the people was that he was embarrassed. Songs were sung to celebrate this fact but the mounting pile of bodies with slit throats did much to keep those songs few and far between.

Another new fact of life in Orlandia was the daily appearances of the Emperor to announce his omnipotence and make an example of whomever had been forced into confession the night before. Corvidious would emerge and address the assembled throngs of townfolk and remind them of the pain of death they were all subject to if any should act or even dare speak against his administration. Today a decrepit and frightened man was thrown harshly at his feet. "Unfaithful!" the Emperor hissed and pointed a long talon like finger at the man's quivering forehead. "No, no, no Sire! No, no, no..." and his voice trailed off as Corvidious bellowed "Then you deny having a scroll hanging in your tavern with the very words from those damnable rocks? You would display those lies? You would show support for the Anarchs?" The old man sat in terrified silence. A few cloaked figures in the crowd held their tongues, and swords, in check even as the pitiful citizen had the life choked from his frail body. As he crumpled at the Emperor's feet Corvidious bellowed "This...is your reminder! I let you live only as long as it pleases me and never long once I am displeased!" As harsh as this was the worst was still to come...

Shadowfowl, under direct order of the Emperor, took flight from site to site destroying anyone who even thought about going against the establishment. Those who dared stand against the might of the unholy Emperor even in jest were subject to death or at best the branding, henceforth relegated to "Anarch" status with a crimson "A" carved or scorched into their flesh of their left palm. The Fae folk were not immune to the whims of Corvidious, either, as they too were slaughtered; mayhap treated worse than the humans. All citizens cowered. Every creature trembled. Feared was the law of the land. And the law was terrifying.

Yet in this darkness the glint of hope still grew. The Anarchs, moving largely unseen, were steadily gathering the Sacred Ten. Their scarred palms a sign of freedom. Corvidious so loved his "reminders" and what he had felt would be a step towards

ultimate subjugation, the eternal marking of any who opposed him, was now worn as a badge of honor by hundreds...maybe thousands. Orlandia was vast, as were Her secrets. No one knew for sure how many Anarchs there really were as day by day scores grew tired of living on their knees. Orlandia was awakening...but was it too late?

Aurelion stood at the parapet of a small sanctuary deep in the Evershyde Forest and his brow furrowed as the scouting party returned. Returned with far fewer members than it had left with. He stared out past watery eyes into his beloved countryside. The Monster still breaths and with every breath more poison into the hearts and lives of us all. Are we too far gone? He mused it seemed the weight of every lost life was bearing down with such weight that even his great shoulders quivered.

"Sire?" came a ragged voice from behind. Commander Verk came to stand at his side. Thick blood stuck to his hairline like a grim crown and his left arm hung oddly at his waist as he spoke with determined effort. "Nitesdown, Merrytook, Quarthmar, Pillsher and Bolkenfirth are all gone." "Survivors?" inquired Aurelion though he already knew the answer. "Sire, all the men, all the women and children and every beast in the field and...everything...it's just gone. Ash is all that remains." With this Verk's voice cracked and he fell silent, overcome with emotion both anger and despair. Despite a few small victories here and there Aurelion and his forces had suffered much more than they had gained. And yet still they fought. Aurelion placed a reassuring hand upon his commander's back, "Freedom, the promise of an unfettered life, demands no less a sacrifice. And to the last man we are willing to pay that price." "Indeed Sire," replied Verk as his composure returned "and tonight that bravery has brought us one step closer to victory." And with that he pulled a simple stein from his cloak. Aurelion's eyes widened and he bellowed "General Sigmund's Tankard!" It seemed unreal but there it was in their possession. Another of the Sacred 10 had been claimed by the Anarchs. The news quickly spread through the camp and over the coming days a sense of impending destiny began looming in everyone's eyes. Everyone saw it. So close now to having the 10, so close now to saving everything, so close now to a hope that knew no fear...indeed the coming of Kahz'radan drew nigh!

Chapter 5 - Effort

*Two Kingdoms join and stand to Fight,
A Darkened Prince reborn by Light.
A King will rise and claim the Crown
When the one Pure Heart strikes Evil down!*

Just a few sing song words whose rhyme had sung a tune of hope that echoed throughout the known world and unified a realm for the first time in a millennium. Aurelion knew they were close to Whylmere's clearing and knew also that without those few words none of them would have made it this far. The human and the fae each had their own shortcomings. But together they found a grand and inspiring strength.

"Not long now, sire" called a husky lieutenant who walked just ahead of Aurelion along the path only those familiar with the secrets of the wilderness would have been able to see. A rather large contingent moved this day, larger than normal for a search and recovery mission but this was no ordinary search and recovery. The Fang of the Earth Dragon lay ahead and once claimed the Anarchs would have reunited all of the Sacred Ten and at last have the power needed to call forth their saving grace...Khaz'Radan.

Yes, the Fang lay ahead, or more precisely a signpost of sorts that would point the way to it's last resting place and they were very close now. Despite their numbers, what amounted to a small army, they moved efficiently and fluidly through the thick landscape and had been doing so all day with no prolonged breaks save for a quick dawn repast. However as the day drew on Aurelion and many of the more sensitive in the party couldn't help but feel...disturbed. The shadows all around them seem darker than they should have been and the forest was strangely quiet and still. The twin suns were nearly overhead and hung close together in the cerulean sky. The air was thick with heat and anticipation. At that instant the forward guard hastily signaled for an 'all stop'. The tension grew and when the guard gave the 'all clear' moments later more than one sigh of relief could be heard in the ranks.

The statue of Whylmere and the clearing it occupied now stood just ahead. The party would have to leave the security of the forest in order to track down the last of the artifacts they needed. Aurelion assured his troops that they had nothing to fear, that they had been careful. He thought to himself silently but have we been careful enough? With nerves steeled against whatever might lie ahead he and his stalwarts moved reverently forward and approached the magnificent sculpture. And magnificent it was. Carved by those nearly as ancient as Whylmere himself and, if the legend held true, even the gods had a hand in it's creation for so favored was Whylmere by both the heavens and the earth. It was said Whylmere though sometimes persnickety to a fault was nonetheless the

most honest person you could ever hope to meet. And he had the gift to sense truth in others as well. And so stood his monument with one armed raised skyward and one held at his waist, the hint of a knowing smile upon his face.

Aurelion moved through the crowd gathered around and read the inscription carved at Whylmere's feet. "A question asked with sincerity will always be answered in truth." With this Aurelion knelt and placed both hands on the rough hewn base. He was silent for a moment then spoke. "Orlandia is in great need. Her people suffer yet stand strong as you can see. We have journeyed for the Fang and, as you were close to it's original owner, I felt sure you would know where it lay hidden. If ever there was a time for it to reveal itself and allow us the use of it's terrible power one last time it is surely now. Will you show us the way?"

No sooner had the words crossed Aurelion's lips then did the upturned arm above him, the stone arm of the very statue itself begin to move. Those who watched closely may even have noticed that old Whylmere's smiled grew a bit wider as well. The arm traced a gentle downward arc as the open palm closed save for the index finger as if to point. And point it did! Once Whylmere's wizened limb finally rested parallel to the ground a bright and beautiful beam shot forth across the clearing and into the woods. Aurelion stood and knew his petition had been heard, his request granted. For the legends also held that the Fang had come to rest deep in the forests of Orlandia hidden in a humble shrine called Hegadon's Hollow. So well hidden in fact that no one without proper reason too would ever find it. They had done it, the Anarchs would claim the last piece and the puzzle that was Khaz'Radan would at long last be revealed. They had only to follow the illuminated trail and victory would be theirs.

Aurelion was so lost in his thoughts that it took him a moment to notice the horn blaring dis-concertedly from beyond the treeline. It stopped and a rustling began. And the rustling grew into a thrumming, the thrumming into a tumultuous pounding as the ground began to shudder. With a revelation that landed like a bludgeon cross his brow Aurelion expelled heavily "gods below we've led them right to it!"

A legion of Shadowfowl burst out into the daylight and ran full bore towards them and more importantly towards the Fang. "Go!" shouted Aurelion. His entire compliment turned and ran for the far side of the clearing where the light disappeared into the twists and tangles of a hundred elder oaks. The Fowl were upon them with frightening speed and many of the slower soldiers were cut down before they even reached the edge of the clearing. Aurelion spared a quick glance as did many others and saw the dark tide that was about to come crashing down on them all. "Haste! Haste and fury!!!" bellowed the satyr just as a rather sizable enemy pounced up onto his back. Aurelion snatched at his assailant's nape, tore him from his perch and cast him aside with a grace you might not expect from one as hulking as he. The Fowl fell to the ground with a thud and a broken

neck. On and on, over and under and through the thickets, roots and rocks Aurelion and his heroes raced keeping one eye on the beam guiding their way and the other on the feathered flurry all around them. Knives and swords found their mark but so did claw and beak. Scores of bodies lay in the wake of this grim procession as it kept up the stampede. Still the Shadowfowl easily outnumbered Aurelion's forces by 10 to 1, they could not keep this up and hope to win their lives this day much less the Fang.

A wind began to blow, a wild wind from an unknown direction that went largely unnoticed, for the moment, amidst the carnage. Aurelion now commanded less than two dozen fighters but those brave few kept up the pace until just over a small ridge and there for all to see Whylmere's trusty beam alighted upon a small portico that formed the entrance into what appeared to be a most shallow and unassuming cave nestled comfortably in the side of a small rolling hill. And inside...the Fang!

All eyes fell upon it simultaneously and legs reacted almost without thought. The Fowl pounced and as the final leg of this race to end all races was run even more of the valiant fell. A small band broke free of the rush with Aurelion in the lead but even he, just feet from the threshold, was taken hard to the ground as several Shadowfowl attacked him at once in one concerted and vile effort. The wind grew stronger now, and more directed. It was as if a gail was bearing right down on them all. Aurelion couldn't allow himself to be distracted. He dug his hands into the ground and fought for every inch as wound upon wound was inflicted upon him. With one last and mighty effort he stood lifting himself and all the Fowl that had attacked him. Then he charged the last few steps up into and right through the entrance, this mighty shambling mountain crashing through the columns pulling their support which in turn brought the pediment down on all their heads.

Then there was silence. Whylmere's light receded and then disappeared completely. The remnants of both armies sat heaving breaths of anticipation. Seconds passed like hours until the mound of rubble began to tremble, quake and dislodge until one lone figure rose above the cloud of dust and debris. And there before them all stood Aurelion...with the Fang of the Earth Dragon clutched firmly in his thick hand. The remaining fowl immediately moved to confront him but he raised his Fang filled fist and screamed! After the exertion of the preceding moments it wasn't as loud or as long as he would have liked but it seemed to work, they had stopped advancing and stood frozen in terror.

The wind picked back up, even stronger than before. Aurelion now noticed an enormous shadow cast directly in front of him from something enormous rising directly behind him. And then Smoake, last dragon of Orlandia, roared! The shockwave felled most of the Fowl upon impact and sent the rest into hasty retreat. Aurelion had seen many things in his many days but never did he expect to see one of the great beasts long since vanished from this land. "I am but a spirit great satyr, but I see that is still potent enough.

I am bound to that which you now hold and will soon leave this plane forever. For now though you must go...and quickly. Khaz'radan can wait no longer"

And with that he faded away. The satyr stood solemnly for a moment taking in all that had just happened. He felt hope grow stronger in his breast than ever before and turned back to his men many of whom sat dumbfounded at what they had just seen. And though stymied, in their eyes the same ember of hope sat sparking. Aurelion stared at the Fang and then addressed those who remained "The others will undoubtedly be on their way to Verdethena already. We must join them with all due haste."

Chapter 6 - Khaz'Radan

Standing a short distance from the moon bathed clearing Aurelion could plainly hear the low chanting emanating from those encircling the great and timeless oak Verdethena. It sounded ominous and powerful to the point he chuckled and felt sure it would shake the feathers off of any invading fowl that stumbled upon them this night. And what a night this was destined to be. The Sacred Ten had all been reclaimed through much blood and sweat from both human and wyder and tonight would ensure that not a drop of either was spilled in vain. The salvation of Orlandia was at hand. In fact nine of the artifacts had already been placed with reverence upon one of the stone pedestals spaced evenly around Vedethena.

Aurelion breathed in slowly and held the sweet, thick air in his lungs for a moment as if this was the last breath he may ever take. His hand gripped tight around the handle that swung heavily off the side of Sigmund's Tankard. In a moment he would walk down into the clearing and place it upon the last available stand. And then the world would change forever. The world he loved so much. In a moment Orlandia would cry out for heroes. Would cry out for them to rise and be brave and to fight and to perhaps to die. He prayed to the gods for one thing only. Courage. And with that he exhaled and began a slow walk towards the others.

As he drew close the chanting became clear. Everyone in attendance was joined by the same words, the same hope, and spoke them now in defiant unison.

Two Kingdoms join and stand to Fight,
 A Darkened Prince reborn by Light.
 A King will rise and claim the Crown
 When the one Pure Heart strikes Evil down!

As Aurelion approached many grew silent. Then more and more til at last only one young elven boy still recited the verse even as the satyr came to pause directly in front of him. Aurelion then joined the child in one last procession and saw the tears well in his eyes when they had finished. Aurelion placed an assuring hand on his shoulder saying "Oren, brave brother of Ariadnesse! We shall always remember your sister and all those who have fallen in the name of Orlandia. Be strong." He gave a small nod which the boy quickly reciprocated and then he turned back to the rest of the assembly. The satyr spared a long and solemn glance at the ragtag crowd and then approached the last remaining stone stand that sat empty for only a moment longer. Without a word he raised Sigmund's storied tankard high above his head and then grasping it firmly with both mighty hands he placed it with purpose. He stepped back and looked up into the boughs of Verdethena. This beautiful tree had stood longer than anyone dared remember and now as a gentle

wind ran it's way through her green fingers Aurelion thought of the secrets she must hold. From a wayward traveler lost in a stormy night huddling against her sturdy trunk to young lovers stealing a moment together underneath her spacious, shady limbs it was staggering to think of all she had seen or heard over the centuries. What do you know old girl, and what will you reveal to us now, he thought to himself.

Verdethena shook and at the same time a glow was spotted climbing over the peak of nearby Mount Shimeon. The glow was quickly descending towards them leaving a fiery wake as it did so. Diving now into the surrounding woods the glow could still be seen approaching as eerie fingers of light shot forth here and there through the forest ceiling. Verdethena began to sway. Aurelion and his faithful took notice that the Sacred Ten had begun to burn a bright, ethereal blue casting the entire meadow in their otherworldly light. They grew brighter and brighter still and a few of the less bold even fell back a pace or two out of fear of the unknown they were now witness to. Wide eyed Aurelion called out "Fear not children, Orlandia has been brave for us, we must all be brave for her. Now look!" and he pointed as the strange glow came bursting out from the treetops, an explosion of orange light that shot with tremendous force upwards towards the stars. The light climbed higher and faster and then spread it's wings for all to see. The Phoenix! Every face brightened and cheers went up into the night sky.

The Phoenix reached the pinnacle of it's climb directly above Verdethena and stalled there for the briefest of moments wings akimbo. Then it fell with terrifying speed. It cried out loud and long and then slammed deep into the oak driving itself from the crest down deep into the very roots. The fury of the impact caused Verdethena to burst into flames. And burn she did! The cry of the Phoenix rang out one last time as the inferno overtook every inch of the venerable tree. The flames grew intense and the wood was being consumed at a furious pace now to the point that only the vaguest outline of the old oak was visible and even that was being lost to the flames. It was at this very point when many notice something else in deep in those raging fires. Some other form was taking shape and quickly all eyes were drawn to it. It was vaguely human shaped, no, it was human! But how?

More than a few jaws fell solidly to the floor as out of the flames walked Queen Raine! And she held in her hands perhaps the most wicked and wonderful weapon ever forged by magick or man. She stepped out past the fires and stood there for all to see unharmed and in fact very much alive. A mighty and familiar voice then bellowed "Behold, Khaz'Radan, the Veil Cleaver!" Aurelion tore his eyes from the reanimate Queen to behold the spirit of Smoake resting calmly near the pillar that bore his fang. Then other voices rang out "Khaz'Radan" as the ghosts of Orlandia's past all manifested

themselves. There was Gundhern Fairstern right next to his hammer and Naj'Palalby his scepter. There stood Hazzrabi and Diarmuid and Sigmund and all the heroes of times long gone. The Sacred Ten had called back through the ages and used their strength to bring forth that which might save their beloved land.

"We have returned and given all we had remaining to reveal Khaz'Radan and place it in your able hands" Smoake said as he addressed the amazed assembly. "Van and Nifl are so very powerful but not without check. Khaz'Radan has the greater power and needs only a pure hand to wield and unleash that power!"

The spirits slowly began to fade one by one and as they did so their prized possessions, spent at long last, turned to stone forever to remain there in that hallowed place. Smoake spoke one final time "We were the courage of yesterday, you are the courage of tomorrow. Orlandia has need of the brave, be so and save her now and forever." With that he too faded away. And the smoldering fires that had reduced Verdethena to ash faded as well. Much of this seemed like a dream even to one such as Aurelion who had traveled far and wide in this dimension and many others. It was Raine's voice that became an anchor for he and many others still unwilling to believe in all they had just seen. "Mighty Aurelion, there is no need to doubt. Orlandia has brought me back." He stood amazed but assured as did all his troops. This was no dream, in fact the nightmare was about to end.

"Me and mine with all heart and soul are yours to the last fair Queen." he said.

Raine smiled kindly, then her gaze focused on the West towards the capitol as she stepped past the throng and said without turning back "Orlandia brought me back for a purpose and it's one we all share. Khaz'Radan demands we wait not a second longer. Orlandia saved me, saved us all...now we must save her!" A great cry went up from the crowd and they began to march without a moments pause.

CHAPTER TWO

War of Talons

Prologue - The Wylderfolk

Before time knew measure, and humankind first tread into the light, there existed a race of beings who walked this earth, lost now to the æther. These beings held great power and ruled as gods over the earliest mortal creatures that came into being. The greater race, in their arrogance and greed, waged war with one another, determined to gain dominion over all things, as they felt it their place to do so. Much of the blood of these beings was shed in their conflict, and the blood mixed with the water in the rivers, and sank into the soil. The mortal creatures drank of the tainted water and ate of the fruit from the tainted soil. From this, the wylderfolk were born. Eventually the Greater race fell into decline, and the wylder grew stronger. Elf and pixie, goblin and troll, all manner of fae and fel sprang forth from the bloodshed of the self-proclaimed gods, and in time the wylder came together as a great force to overthrow the remaining Greater beings, until they had made the Earth their own.

Centuries would pass, and eventually the differences between the fae and fel separated the two races. The wylder became divided. It was then that the age of humankind had begun, the untainted mortals growing in number, and becoming more intelligent. Many wars were waged as the humans staked their claim on the lands of the Earth. Despite the advantages that both fae and fel folk possessed, the determination and cunning of the humans proved them a formidable adversary, and at times, a valuable ally to any wylder willing to work with them. The fel folk were proud and relentless, and continued to hold lands and occasionally challenge human-held domains.

Many of the fae, and even some of the fel, chose a different approach to the situation. An accord was struck with an early king of Orlandia, in which the wylder agreed to avoid conflict with the humans. A vast and enchanted territory east of Orlandia was declared the domain of the wylder. Many of the fae and fel moved to this place and made their homes there, in a hidden kingdom that became known as the Wyldewood. Most of the wylder, aside from tribes that did not agree to the Accord, remained in the Wyldewood, avoiding humankind for generations. Once a year, an elected chieftain would be sent by the Wylder Council to act as an ambassador, and to host an Autumn festival in honor of the accord. In recent years, it was the satyr Aurelion Kelkallen who was chosen, and it was he who stood with his usual procession of revelers and merrymakers, discussing the journey back to the Wyldewood with his companions after another successful festival, when the crackle of dark energies thundered and rolled over the skies above Orlandia. The satyr had suspected a shadow of corruption might have been creeping through the kingdom as the weekend had progressed, but was unprepared for the sorcery that suddenly erupted around the city.

Chapter 1 - The Scattering

The Scattering was unstoppable... a spell cast by a demon as old as the realm itself. The revelers of the Wyldewood, a group of fae and fel beings known in Orlandia and throughout the land as keepers of the accord between humans and the wylder, found themselves in the same whirlwind of confusion and fear as the good people of Orlandia when the spell swept across the kingdom. The revelers were still in the heart of the city the day Corax Corvidious, the once-exiled Yaoguai, declared himself Emperor, taking a cruel hold of dominion over Orlandia, exercising overwhelming power through Prince Validus, his young and naive proxy. Mere moments had passed since the emperor had woven his will into forceful invocation, and the revelers were now picking themselves up from the floor of a dense forest, shaking their heads and blinking as though waking from a terrible and shocking dream. Aurelion Kelkallen, Chieftain of the revelers of the Wyldewood, shook the shadows and dizziness from his horned head as he re-oriented himself. He knew the trees, and the breeze that caressed their branches. The Sea of Oak, as it was known to travelers, was a dense, vast forest that many mortals avoided, as its seemingly infinite sprawl received many a wanderer, yet returned so few. It was within this great body of foliage that the passage to the Wyldewood existed. This was the kingdom of the wylder, hidden deep in the Sea of Oak, beyond the Oakenfold Gate, accessible only to those that knew the way. The satyr breathed a sigh, taking solace in the fact that at least home was nearby. His gaze passed over the area as he took account of those that were with him, assessing their well-being as his eyes found them. Once all were accounted for, and found to be of little injury, the satyr gathered his entourage into its familiar caravan, and commenced an unexpectedly abbreviated journey home.

After most of a day's travel through the Sea of Oak, Aurelion smiled as he spotted a structure well-known to him, that being an immense, high-vaulted corridor among the enormous, seemingly infinite expanse of trees. The walls and ceiling of this corridor were fashioned of living wood, as though the forest here was convinced to bend and shape itself to resemble the work of a master architect. This was the passage to the legendary portal used by the wylder to cross between the Wyldewood and the rest of the realm: the Oakenfold Gate. There it stood, in its foreboding scale and awe-inspiring majesty, glimmering in the rays of sunlight that were allowed into the forest corridor. The gate itself was a union of ancient wood and elven steel unseen in any structure before or since, metal winding and spiraling in a beautiful waltz of design and function, reinforcing intricately hewn oak that looked like it alone could repel the greatest foes. Volumes of runic text ran across its surface, the numerous glyphs bearing the blessings and wards of the most powerful High Mages in the Wyldewood. No creature could pass this gate without a key, and Aurelion possessed one, attached to one of many trinket-laden braids that rested upon his shoulders among his long locks of hair. The key, made of steel and bearing intricacies similar to the doors, grew warm and hummed as the satyr approached the gate. Once close enough, a pulse of energy washed visibly across the surface of the

door like ripples on a pond. Deep within the doors of the gate, metal works shifted and pushed against one another. The Oakenfold gate groaned and clanked as it parted, granting enough of an opening into the Wyldewood as to allow the revelers to pass through. Aurelion and his entourage made their way into the kingdom they called home, the gate slowly and smoothly closing, rather definite and solid noises resonating behind them as the portal was once again secured.

The welcome into the courtyard by the faefolk in the Elven city of Delamarre was of course warm, filled with citizens eager to hear news from the human world, what progress they have made as a race, and to hear the anecdotes of misadventures experienced by the satyr and his companions. Such was commonplace with Aurelion as the Ambassador. He simply smiled, happy with the jubilant reception, but silently dismounted from his horse and began to make way to the council chambers. The elves and goblins that followed him, asked to hear tales of his travel, and Aurelion promised them that he might share his experiences later, after meeting with the council.

The intricate wrought-iron gates to the council chamber creaked open as the Elven guards pulled them open. Aurelion entered and descended the stone steps of the open-air amphitheater that served as a forum and meeting place for any matter that required the council's attention. The wylderfolk were already filtering in through the gate and filing in to take seats on the circles of hewn granite that surrounded the chamber. The satyr stood at the inner circle of marble that lie before the council's stage seating, and awaited his audience with the Wyldewood's statesmen, who were already making their way onto the stage. They were a careful, well-considered collection of wylder, dressed in glimmering robes and laurel crowns of fresh growth about their heads. They each took a seat and awaited the call to order. An older elf, Belthazan, remained standing since he was to speak as the official voice of the council for this session. The theater seats filled and the clamor of the crowd dwindled to whispers as the anticipation grew. Aurelion gazed upward at the canopy of growth created by the weaving branches of the tall oaks that made up the walls and ceiling of the chamber. He took a deep breath as the crowd grew silent, and lowered his vision to look upon Belthazan as the elf called the session to order.

"Greetings, Aurelion Kelkallen, Lord of the Autumn Festival," The elf began in an impressive tone that filled the chamber, "We are honestly surprised, as you are usually late for this discussion after the festival, what with all the tales of merriment you have when you return... yet today you came straight to the council. What concerns you that you come to us with such urgency?"

Aurelion responded with an equal volume, "Good council of the Wyldewood, I do have enjoyable tales to share, but they must wait. Trouble stirs in the world of humans, and I

feel that we must act in order to stop a terrible force from taking hold."

Belthazan tilted his head curiously, but spoke sternly, "I would remind you, satyr, of the accord. We have vowed to remain neutral in all matters involving the humans."

The Satyr stepped forward. "I am well aware of the articles of the accord, councilman. But this matter was not accounted for when the agreement was forged. A demon-lord has taken the kingdom of Orlandia." The crowd murmured furtively as the council members leaned inward to each other and spoke amongst themselves, "This demon intends to spread his domain across the Earth. Human and Wylder alike are in danger!"

Belthazar turned to the council, whispering in the discussion with the others momentarily, then raised a hand to call for silence among the crowd. "The council is aware of the danger to the humans, as well as the wylder who chose not to honor the accord. However, we are confident of the magic protecting the Wyldewood. The demon cannot reach us here. In honor of the accord we must remain neutral, and in the Wyldewood. The humans and others must face this adversary on their own.

Aurelion was shocked by the lack of compassion. "Council, I beseech you! The humans are powerless against this foe. We must relax our adherence to the accord for their sake-"

"The humans have proven their determination and resourcefulness time and again," the elf interrupted. "They will endure and overcome this oppression on their own. Our involvement would be a waste of resources and soldiers."

The satyr's voice grew louder, almost speaking through a growl, it seemed, "The threat this demon-lord poses has a reach beyond Orlandia! His minions will eventually find the Oakenfold gate. It is a matter of time until his conquests will bring him to our doorstep!"

"Impossible!," snapped the elf, pointing in the general direction of legendary gate as he bellowed, "That gate has stood for centuries against foes great and small, including Infernals! We are safe here. Your friends must face this evil alone. I will not endanger the wylder for the sake of the humans!"

"Then it is you who forget the the articles of the accord and what they stand for! When we left the human kingdoms, we did so as friends of the humans. By ignoring their plight, you would turn your back on that friendship!"

Belthazan's rebuttal came as thunder, rattling the chamber, "I will turn my back because I feel it is in the best interests of the Wyldewood, as a member of the council which represents the whole of the Wyldewood, not the individual with outward concerns! Know your place in this chamber and among your people, satyr! This is not my personal decision, borne to spite you, but the consensus of the council, which represents the

people of this kingdom. If you cannot approach this council with respect, then you are in no position to represent the Wylde in external affairs with Orlandia... perhaps another should serve as Lord of the Autumn Festival!"

The satyr closed his eyes and took a calming breath as the elf's gaze bore down upon him, the council also glaring with disapproval. "I apologize, members of the council. My love for the humans has clouded my judgment."

Mangeral, a female troll among the council, stood and spoke, "We share your compassion for humankind, satyr. We have quietly observed them for centuries, and their ability to thrive despite any adversity is most impressive. They are this strong because we have not interfered. We must continue to do so, for their sake. Have faith that they will endure this hardship, and do not worry about the Yaoguai reaching the Wyldewood. The High Mages will protect us from any intrusion,". The troll's tone was more pleasant, reassuring. "Rest now, Aurelion. Your journey was long and you are wracked with worries. Rejoin the good folk in the courtyard, and regail us with your stories,". The satyr nodded, feeling defeated, but somewhat more calm as he bowed his head and turned to leave. The crowd followed him up the steps and out of the chamber with their eyes, abuzz with speculation and curiosity as the council stood and exited the stage. In the upper branches of the canopy, a dark, gnarled bird stirred among the leaves, watching the dispersing audience depart from the chamber.

Aurelion managed to ease into a more jovial mood as he settled into his storytelling. Mead and cherry wine were passed around as he spoke of Orlandia. He did his best to keep the mood light, focusing on the festival, and on the new and wonderful inventions that humankind had produced since the year before. The gathering carried into the night, so deep that the first rays of morning light peered through the trees as the last few interested folk stumbled off to their abodes to sleep. The satyr led his horse home, waving to the stragglers as they parted. He stopped a few times, looking around. Something watched him and followed, careful to obscure itself in the shadows whenever he became suspicious. Eventually he came upon his home, and led his horse to its stable, taking the time to relieve the beast of its burden, taking his bundles and sacks with him as he trudged into his home, tired enough to sleep for three seasons.

Chapter 2 - A Call to Arms

The moon waxed and waned over the course of four months as the satyr made an effort to let the words of the council be the final few spoken in regards to the problem in Orlandia. He met with his fellow revelers to prepare for future gatherings, discussing the music to be played and dances to perform. He helped in the fields and toiled in the breweries, doing his part as expected for his community. Many of his nights were restless, the sounds and visions of suffering waking him from sleep, familiar voices that seemed to be calling him from across the Sea of Oak, and across the realm. Most consistent in his dreams was the image of a great bird swathed in blinding flame. Then, one night, the bright bird clashed violently with darker winged creatures in his mind... sick, twisted pieces of darkness given form and movement. These sinister things clawed and pecked voraciously, mindlessly tearing at the fiery plumage despite its punishing heat. Aurelion knew of the phoenix as an ancient creature, one of many fanciful beasts that roamed the Earth long before the wylder. To see such a bird was usually an omen of renewal, of life rising from ruin... and yet here this creature was in his dreams, fighting for its life. The bird called out in an almost deafening shrill no eagle or hawk could match. The satyr awoke, panting through clenched teeth, his body damp with fevered sweat. He sat upright, calming himself as he tried to breathe in deeper, less desperate breaths. He froze as he heard the phoenix call out again, from what seemed a considerable distance this time, but in the realm of the waking.

The satyr slid from his bedding and dressed quickly, donning enough to maintain modesty and barrelled through his front door, half-running into the street of his village, and looked around. The great bird's protracted shrieks echoed across the night sky, and yet no other hut or hovel stirred. No candles or lanterns were being hastily lit. No murmurs of confusion or clamoring came from the other villagers, no commotion broke the calm of the sleeping neighbors. Aurelion began to question whether he was truly conscious. The sounds continued, pausing for moments, then resuming with the same urgency and volume. The satyr surmised that this creature was in need, and was calling only to him, for reasons beyond his understanding. He jogged back into his home, and quickly threw open an old chest at the foot of his bed. His housemates were awake now, mumbling complaints as he rifled through his stored belongings noisily. He cracked a subtle smile as he happened upon a leather belt he was seeking, as well as a bearded axe that belonged to his father. He applied the belt to his midsection and buckled it, then fastened the axe to his side with a hanging strap. Aurelion strode briskly out of his house, the elves and orcs he shared a flat with blinking in disbelief as he climbed upon his horse and kicked its ribs with purpose. Aurelion bolted away on his steed, following the faraway cries of the phoenix.

Aurelion's mount thundered down the road of flat stones, the impressive hoofbeats of a

healthy draughthorse drumming upon the ground. She galloped with surprising speed as she carried her charge through the forest paths and city roads, seeming to know her master's need and keeping pace without faltering. Aurelion soon found himself in the center of Delamarre, and the night was silent. The satyr slowed his steed to a walk as he swallowed nervously, wondering if he was too late to help. The night was unsettlingly calm again. The satyr ground his teeth in frustration, fearing that he may have been chasing a nightmare or some troublesome phantom. He patted the neck of his heaving steed, trying to calm her. "Easy, Poppet," he said in a soothing tone. "I'll let you rest and we'll head back-". The shocking cry of the phoenix erupted again. Aurelion's horse reared and neighed, almost throwing him. The reality of this creature was undeniable as the horse reacted. This time, the call had more direction, and the satyr knew it had to be one place... the gate! He coerced Poppet into a hasty gallop and rode hard to the source of the shrieks.

As the satyr approached the legendary gates, the awful sounds of the phoenix rattled his skull, his horns vibrating slightly as each terrible wave pierced the otherwise impervious doors. He could see several guards from Delemarre, armed for battle and yet cowering, holding their helmets in pain as they too were audibly assaulted. Then came a great impact, and the gates, though holding fast, moved slightly, as though something of great size had thrown itself against them. Another slam rocked the gates, and the guards took a step back, making their weapons ready. The great thing railed against the door... repeatedly. Aurelion trembled as he watched the doors of oak and elven steel move with each hammering impact. The great bird gave another deafening shriek from the other side, and another strike against the gates followed, punctuated this time by a most unnerving cacophony... thousands of calls and shrieks from things beyond the gates that only played at being birds. These were the shadowfowl, once normal beings, some even human, now corrupted and diseased with a living darkness that escaped from oblivion when the Yaoguai had returned. These were the same things that tormented and assaulted the phoenix in his nightmare, and here they were, in numbers great enough to shake the Oakenfold Gate. The sounds from the other side of the gate were maddening, and two of the guards stepped backward, dropping their weapons, their forms shaken and pale with absolute terror. Suddenly, the gates, and the things behind them, went silent. Nothing came through the passage, save for what sounded like labored breathing. Something remained at the gate, heaving lungfuls of air... waiting, it seemed. The satyr could no longer stand and watch. He had no way of knowing what stood on the other side: the phoenix of his dreams, or some misshapen abomination sent by the Demonlord Corax. The guards simply stood in place, mouths agape despite years of training and defending this portal. Something had crept in past the gate, regardless of its magicks, and forced its way into the minds of the soldiers as they stared wide-eyed into the middle distance. The evil of the shadowfowls was quickly corrupting them. The satyr watched one guard, moving like a frail puppet, producing a copy of the key to the gate and holding it aloft. Aurelion clenched his teeth and took a breath. His right hand tugged at the strap holding

the axe, loosening the knot so he could draw the weapon. He stepped forward, his heart racing as the key began to hum. The doors of the gate began their mechanized process, and the satyr's hands wrung tightly on the handle of his axe as he prepared to fight. He was no soldier, no great warrior, yet he prepared himself to engage his potential foes, be they intruders through the gate or the tainted guards around him. The doors clanked, and gave way.

The satyr found himself awash in brilliant light and a strangely comforting heat, as though he were in a great furnace. He blinked, squinting as he raised a hand to shield his eyes, trying to gaze upon what lay beyond the now open gate. A creature stood in the entrance, breathing heavily and wavering, obviously battle-weary. It was the phoenix of his dreams, burning like a sun as it looked upon him, its impressive head turning to look at him with an unblinking, steady eye. Movement in the sky distracted him, and he looked upward. For a moment it appeared as though the bird and the satyr were in the eye of a great cyclone, swirling above them in a colossal circle of ink black clouds. Aurelion's eyes became more focused, and he muttered an old fel expression as his vision drank in the horror of the details: thousands upon thousands of shadowfowl, oily, vile perversions of crows and ravens, circling and calling in nightmarish tones. The satyr stepped back, the terror starting to seep into the edges of his mind. Then there was a voice, unknown yet familiar, and it called his name with authority, "Aurelion Kelkallen! Son of Morthos Kelkallen, bearer of the blood of the Ancients... be still!". The satyr looked again at the phoenix, astonished. The voice continued, "The fates draw their hands across the strings of time, young satyr, and the resounding song bears your name. This realm has fallen out of balance, and its keepers know you have heard its call for help. The Demonlord grows more powerful each day. Countless mortals shall suffer. More realms than you can comprehend are in danger."

Aurelion stammered, overwhelmed, "B-but I am only a simple satyr! A reveler, not a warrior... certainly not a hero!"

"The blood of heroes pumps through your heart, through your mind, along your veins. Greatness lies within you like so many others."

"But what can I do...", the satyr points skyward, "... against that?!".

"You must gather other heroes and make a stand against the Demonlord. You must prepare the mortals of Orlandia for the return of their lost king. Most importantly, you must seek out that which will undo the Demonlord's magicks. You must find... Khaz'Radan!"

Aurelion puzzled at the great bird, "But what is it! And where can I find-". The massive cyclone of shadowfowl broke, and the multitude of winged things dove. "Time grows

short, satyr," the voice cut in," Go... find those that would stand with you and seek out Khaz'Radan. You shall not be far from my influence, nor my observation." The phoenix spread its large wings, its plumage burning brighter and hotter as the shadowfowl descended and began to surround them. The great bird made eye contact with Aurelion and drew in a deep breath," For now, a gift...". The phoenix emitted another deafening shriek, and blinding light launched forth, striking the satyr. He yelled in surprise as the flames flowed and eddied around him. For a moment there was no pain, then, an intense burning on his right arm stung him as though something were being carved upon him with a hot knife. The satyr faltered, stumbling backward into the Wyldewood side of the gate. He fell to the forest floor, losing consciousness as the doors of the Oakenfold Gate closed, the sounds of a disturbing clash of fire and shadow carrying on, the flames of an inferno lashing at the last sliver of opening in the doors, before they slammed shut, the energies of the high magicks securing them once again. A short distance away, Belthazan and a full compliment of elven guards approached, and paused as they surveyed the area. Aurelion lay motionless on the ground, the smoldering bodies of the gate's guards next to him.

Belthazan shook where he stood, furious.

Chapter 3 - The Gathering Storm

The satyr awoke to the bristling discomfort of an unfamiliar cot. He surveyed his new surroundings, that being a small cell which he quickly came to recognize as part of the dungeons, known to usually contain Delamarre's less reputable citizens. Aurelion sat up and looked at the cool blue stones that made up the walls. The door occasionally crackled with the enchanted air which kept the wrought iron bars dangerously cold...the bane of any wylder criminal hoping to use magick to escape. He considered the last moment before he blacked out- thinking about the phoenix and what it had said to him. He looked at his right arm and stared with befuddlement as the limb was now festooned in elaborate markings, a series of winding spirals as well as runes unfamiliar to him. The satyr traced the lines with a finger and felt a strange warmth within his arm, wondering what purpose this so called 'gift' from the great bird possessed. His musing was cut short by the imposing footfalls of approaching guards. Aurelion stood and approached the door and two of the council's elite soldiers, elves in elaborate yet effective plate armor, came into view and faced him. One of them spoke in a deft and emotionless tone, saying "Aurelion Kellkallen, the council has assembled to inquire about the incident at the Oakenfold Gate. You are under suspicion of murder and treason, and shall come forth to give your account of the incident." The satyr's brow curled into a sharp arch of disbelief as the other guard unlocked the iron door. After securing the satyr's wrists in shackles of chilled iron, the guards escorted him to the council chamber. The trio made their way down the steps to the floor before the stage. The Elder Council was already seated, save for Belthazan, whose gaze was already fixed on the satyr as he was led to his place before the stage. The old elf's face strained into a wicked visage of anger and hatred. The rest of the council remained silent yet eyed their fellow councilman with concern. Almost three centuries of wise and fair leadership had earned him the respect of his peers. To see Belthazan in such a state was unsettling to them. Mangeral stood and raised a hand to hush the anxious crowd that came to bear witness. She then spoke to the old elf in a commanding tone, "Councilman, we wish to proceed with the inquiry. I am presiding this session... please take your seat so we may begin,". He did not move or even break his eye contact with Aurelion. The council members looked at each other, confused and concerned.

Belthazan's baleful glare grew increasingly grotesque as he locked eyes with Aurelion. The satyr's arm began to sting again, a burning sensation that intensified as he stared back at the elder elf. The wizened eyes of the trusted councilman bore ink-like tendrils of blackness in the corners that quickly expanded, blotting out any humanity his gaze once held. The satyr looked at the markings on his arm, which seethed and tingled with pain. The lines and runes glimmered, illuminated like the angry embers of a stoked fire. Councilwoman Tennabrae, One of the High Mages charged with protecting the Wyldewood, stood and exclaimed, "The darkest of shadows is among us!". She raised

her staff and began an incantation, when Belthazan leapt, his form moving in an unnatural arc to dive upon Aurelion. The elder grappled with him on impact, the two slamming into the stone floor. Aurelion found himself pinned by Belthazan, and the elf's corruption became quite obvious as his hands, bearing cruel talons, clawed at his flesh. A single misshapen wing of the blackest feathers imaginable unfolded from his back, tearing through his pristine robe. The crowd erupted in panic, screaming and clamoring to escape the thing that was once a beloved leader. The satyr panted, attempting to swallow his fear as he struggled with the beast. He shoved at the elder's chest with his right hand, and a bright flash flared between them. A horrific shriek came from the corrupted elf as he burst into brilliant flames. All who remained in the chamber stopped, paralyzed as they witnessed the traumatic blaze. A charred figure fell backwards, and Aurelion stood up, the markings on his arm still brightly lit. The shackles meant to restrain him and prevent magick use simply fell to the floor with a weak clattering. He looked down at the remains of Belthazan, hero of the Infernal Incursion, Champion of the Wylder, trusted Councilman for three centuries. He then looked up at the remaining council members, panting from stress, his face frozen in confusion and terror. The council members stared, equally shocked. After awkward moments of silence, High Mage Tennabrae stepped forward and managed a few words, "Aurelion, those markings are from a lost time, and the light they produce is as the first dawn of our twin suns. How came you by such magick?".

"It..," stammered the satyr, "it was a gift of the phoenix, given to me at the gate."

The High Mage glided down in hurried steps off of the stage and approached Aurelion. Tennabrae inspected the markings, a serious yet amazed expression crossing her face as she analyzed the lines. "This", she marveled, "...this is ancient magick! Lore only known by the Greater Ones". She glanced back at her fellow council members and continued to speak, "Aurelion's words ring true with these markings. The phoenix is an avatar of the Ancients, and it has called upon him for a great purpose."

Mangeral stepped forward and replied, "Let it be known that Aurelion Kelkallen is free of the charges brought against him. Fellow council, are we in agreement?".

The remaining statesmen sounded in a unanimous, "Aye."

The troll then looked at Aurelion and continued, "You have quite a burden upon your shoulders, satyr. Go with the blessings of this council and the whole of Wyldewood."

"Many thanks, good council," the satyr said with a nod. "We must act quickly to aid the humans of Orlandia."

"Unfortunately we cannot assist you," Tennebrae interrupted. "We have only now

discovered that the Yaoguai's evil has found a foothold in the Wyldewood. Our priority is to uproot this vile influence before others fall prey to the corruption of the shadows."

"But I have no training, no skills to fight the Emperor on my own. I am also supposed to find something called Khaz'Radan. I haven't the slightest clue of where to begin my search!,". The council members looked at each other again, this time gazing back at Aurelion with amazement.

A few hours had passed, and Aurelion was now in a much more comfortable situation, though no less confused about his quest. He sat at a long table with the rest of the council, in a chamber used by the statesmen to dine and drink together in a less formal manner after dealing with the affairs of the Wyldewood. Food and ale were served, and after all at the table were allowed to enjoy their meal, Tennebrae rounded the table with a service of hot firefanweed tea. The satyr sipped it carefully as the mage set down her tray and began to speak, "Khaz'Radan.. I remember that name... from my earliest years as a student of magick. It was mentioned in scrolls and tomes, yet with little information. It is a secret that seems to have been deliberately veiled for generations. I do remember a passage that told of ten heroes that were gathered at the time of its creation, but no one knows what Khaz'Radan was. Many mages and historians had their theories. The one thing that seems to remain constant in any writings about Khaz'Radan is that it would one day be called upon by the ten heroes to defeat a great evil."

"These ten heroes," the satyr inquired, "where can I find them?"

"The are lost to us, satyr," Mangeral interjected, "the legend Tennebrae speaks of is rather old."

"Not completely, my friend," added the High Mage. "I have also read that there are relics, objects possessed by each of the ten heroes, which bear the essence of their original owners."

Jaddel, another elder elf who served on the council, spoke up, quoting an ancient text, "Yes yes, I remember now too... Gather ye the Sacred Ten under the boughs of Verdethena. There, shall an ancient one appear, and he shall call upon the power that time has forgotten. Go and ye shall summon Khaz'Radan, and he who is pure of heart shall join with the great power and cast out the darkest of evils."

"Verdethena," the troll said, with wonder in her voice, "The First Oak..."

Tennebrae sipped her tea, then continued, "Your path is becoming decidedly clear, satyr. You must find the Sacred Ten and go to the First Oak. Bring forth this Khaz'Radan, and use it to destroy the Demonlord. You have quite a task ahead of you..."

Aurelion blinked at the mage. "Do you have any idea where I should begin my search?"

"Closer than you would think, satyr," she replied, and set down her teacup, before reaching into a pouch at her side. She produced from it a small pendant of silver, with cabachon ovals of emerald and citrine. Tennebrae went on, "Belthazan was one of the keepers of those artifacts. This relic was found on his body after you defeated him, undamaged. You are one step closer to your quest. The blessing which the phoenix has placed upon you is also a source of great power, as well as a link to that ancient creature. The phoenix will help you find the rest of the Sacred Ten. Go now, and begin your search. Destroy the Yaoguai, save your human friends... and free them from tyranny. The power is within you!". She gave Aurelion the item, which he turned in his hand, feeling a warmth emanating from it that seemed to connect with the heat of the markings on his arm. The satyr thanked the statesmen for the food and their wisdom as they gathered in a cluster and began discussing their next course of action. The satyr left the chamber quickly, driven by the urgency of his task.

Aurelion wasted no time in preparing for his journey. He packed enough for fast travel on his horse. As he loaded his burden onto Poppet, a familiar halfling approached him. It was Dandel Quickenbuck, one of the revelers who has performed at many an Autumn Festival. His acrobatic skills rendered him capable of deft feats or amusing pratfalls, whatever the situation demanded of the agile man. "So ya think yer leavin' without yer old friend, Dandel," he chided. Aurelion paused in his work and raised a brow at the halfling. Dandel was not clad in his jovial colors as expected, but rather efficient and trim leather garb, the kind a thief or assassin might favor. The handles of many small blades, mostly throwing knives, could be seen in various places around his body.

"I cannot ask you to fight, Dandel," the satyr said, turning back to fasten a satchel.

"And you haven't, me friend. You should know yer revelers by now, man. We stand with ye, ta celebrate as well as ta fight. 'Tis a pact we have, and always had. Always friends, never to end."

"...never to end," the satyr added offering his arm in friendship. The two clasped arms with a mutual nod as other revelers approached Aurelion's home, battleclad and ready for travel. Seventeen loyal and able comrades gathered, and in a short time, the makeshift caravan began their journey. As the unlikely war party made its way through the villages, and eventually through Delemarre, more joined the march. Townsfolk, farmers, artisans, even veteran soldiers lent their numbers to the parade. By the time they had reached the Oakenfold Gate, Aurelion's company had a count that fell just shy of fifteen hundred. They fell into rank without banners or trumpets. No drums offered cadence for them to keep pace. Yet this gathering of wylder stood behind the satyr, ready to do whatever might be asked of them. Aurelion and his followers were met at the gate by Mangerel

and several guards. The troll approached and spoke, "Aurelion Kellkallen. May the fates protect you, and all who have chosen to march with you. It is with a suffering conscience that I must ask something dire of you... you and your friends". The troll reached out a patient yet expecting hand. The satyr quickly realized what she meant. He looked back at the throng that stood with him. Any wylder that he made eye contact with seemed to know what was being demanded, and did not waver. Aurelion turned back to Mangarel and drew a knife from his belt. He reached for a particular braid among his locks, and cut it free. At its end dangled the only copy of the key to the Oakenfold gate that he possessed. As he surrendered it to the troll, he took a deep breath and let out a heavy sigh, knowing that he and the hundreds who followed him would be unable to return until the Demonlord Corvidious had been slain, his shadows eradicated. Mangeral grasped the key and nodded solemnly. By the will of the troll, the gate clanked and rattled as it began to open. Nobody spoke a word as the gate gave way, and Aurelion and his army passed through the portal.

Chapter 4 - Into the Fray

Aurelion's eyes widened as he made his first steps out of the portal. The natural corridor was in complete ruin. Where once great trees stood and intertwined overhead in a lush, green canopy, was now a column of bare, blackened trunks. As the group made its way further into the Sea of Oak, the wylder found themselves in a sprawling wasteland of scorched wilderness that used to be an expanse of wild growth. The satyr thought of the phoenix, and the flames that rose from it just as the gate was sealed during the attack. He surmised that the forest must have been compromised by the encroaching shadowfowl, and the only way to halt their advance was to purge the Sea of Oak entirely. Some of the wylder that had joined him were visibly overwhelmed as they continued to travel, the reality of the devastation shaking their initial fervor. Aurelion brought the march to a halt and called for a young elf named Gregorra. She was a greenwarden, adept in magicks that enhanced the yield of wylder crops. She came forward after being found among the crowd and approached the satyr. Despite the despair and desolation around them, she had a calm smile as she gave a polite curtsy in greeting him. Aurelion returned the smile and asked, "Is there anything you can do to help this forest, young one?".

Gregorra looked about, almost whimsically, then replied, "All forests have fires sometimes, sir. It is part of a cycle. The spirit of this forest is still here, so the trees and the animals will come back. It just needs time."

"That's nice to know," the satyr said with a pleased chuckle, "but the way to Wyldewood needs to stay hidden. We mustn't let the shadowfowl find their way to the gate again. Do you suppose you could help things along?"

The young elf simply widened her smile, then walked a few steps away. She reached into one of the pouches of her tender's satchel and produced a small handful of various seeds and acorns. The elf hummed to herself innocently and went about the nearby area, drawing a trowel from her satchel and turning the scorched soil in random places, interring a seed or acorn as she saw fit. Those who could see her watched her work, muttering with confusion and speculation. Some even wondered if she might have gone mad. Her humming continued, and Aurelion recognized its pleasing harmony as a song of summoning. He had heard her many times as he worked in the fields of Wyldewood. A calm spring breeze made its way through the dead forest and swirled around the wylder as they stood and watched. Then there was a creature in the distance, hard to see at first, then increasingly tangible as though it had just come into being. It was a tall beast that walked upright... definitely animal in nature, but nothing familiar as a whole, though parts of it were. It was great in size, as tall as the lowest remaining branches of

the burnt trees, with grey fur. It lumbered like a bear on hind legs, with a fox-like face and ears. Its head bore the impressive antlers of a stag. This unknown beast approached Gregorra, who simply stood before it, her warm smile beaming at the thing as it towered over her. Many of the wylder took on a cautious stance, some wanting to pull Gregorra away from the monstrosity, a few grasping the handles of their weapons. Aurelion remained calm and raised a hand for them to be still. The beast looked around, blinking. It took it a deep, protracted breath and opened its large mouth. An unsettling roar erupted from the thing, vibrating through the satyr and his followers, and resonating through the wasteland around them. The wylderfolk as a whole trembled, shaken by the noise. After a moment or two, came the green. The ground around them gave way to sprouts of different plants. Aurelion stared in amazement as Gregorra curtsied before the beast, which curiously enough, responded with a gentle bow before it began to fade from visibility. The satyr marveled to himself as the young elf approached him, still smiling in a way that only children know how. She spoke to him after a nod, "The Sea of Oak will return, my lord. It was burned with the flames of the phoenix, and its power of rebirth is in the soil and the air."

"You are a splendid warden, Gregorra. I can feel the very essence of the new life that springs forth here."

"The plants and animals here will need my attention," she added, "My family and I will need to stay."

Aurelion nodded, "Very well, young one. I leave the Sea of Oak in your capable hands."

The caravan soon regrouped, and continued its trek through the scorched, yet steadily changing landscape. Two days passed as they marched, stopping in the evenings to rest, yet keeping an urgent pace. Once the group was a few hours from Bredldem, the nearest human town, Aurelion sent word through his followers that he needed a couple volunteers on horseback to act as scouts. Before too long, a pair of able riders galloped to the front of the caravan. The satyr directed them to ride on ahead and assess the situation, yet remain careful enough to avoid any shadowfowl that might be about. The riders raced along the path on their mission. A tension began to grow among the group as an hour passed, and then another, as the scouts were away. The satyr and several others in the lead froze in place as they heard the rhythm of desperate hooves approaching them. "Steady..." Aurelion muttered as many wylder drew their weapons. Two horses galloped into view on the path, bearing the scouts, as well as a third person with one of the riders. The scouts approached Aurelion, who stepped forward to look at the additional passenger. He was human, what looked to be a simple, bearded man. He was cut, bruised and dirty, panting with an exhaustion that hinted at impending mortality. The man slumped over as the scout and Aurelion carefully helped him off of the horse. The satyr called for a healer as others came forth to help the injured stranger lay down. An elven woman was close by with water, and dampened a cloth to clean the wounds on his face

and head. The satyr felt a turn in his stomach as he noticed scarred, recently burnt flesh on the stranger's arm. It looked to be a mark, branded into his flesh, in the shape of an old glyph. It belonged to a language that hadn't been used in centuries. The satyr spoke, "What is your name, stranger?"

"Berun," he sputtered.

"You are among friends, Berun," the satyr assured him. A troll in monk's robes stood over them, uttering a prayer. "Tell me, Berun. What happened to you?"

"I...," he began, grunting as the prayers of the troll began to mend his deepest wounds, "I was cast out. Out of my town. The Emperor's creatures... they caught me delivering food to a house that harbors those who fight against the empire.."

"And the branding?," the satyr asked.

"The Demonlord... realized that we were passing messages written in the runes of the ancients. He called those he found to be in the resistance 'anarchs'... said we were destroying the very order he has brought to Orlandia. He ordered us to be branded with an 'A' from the runes... not only to mock us for using the old runes, but so that those loyal to him could identify us. He kept us alive just so we could be beaten and stoned, or driven out of the cities by his subjects. I ran.. thought I had escaped, until the shadowfowl patrol caught up with me. I awoke in a ditch, with your men standing over me,". The beaten man's eyes fluttered as he coughed and continued to breathe with effort. The prayers of the troll were keeping him alive, but barely.

"Rest now, friend," the satyr said calmly, then stood and faced the riders. "Were you able to scout out Bredldem?," he queried.

One of the riders spoke after they both nodded, "We did, sir. The town looks lightly fortified, more than usual. It seems the empire's troops are using it as an outpost, not quite a garrison. I don't think they are expecting us."

"Then we must act quickly...," the satyr replied.

Hedstrum Balan, a sturdy-looking orc clad in ranger's gear, stepped forward and offered advice," My lord, if we can take Bedldem, it would grant us an excellent foothold. From there we could strengthen our resouces..."

"And free those good people," Aurelion added, gripping the orc's pauldron with assurance,"... as well as find resistance fighters and help their cause, and continue our search for the Sacred Ten,". The satyr mounted his horse and turned to his followers,

speaking to them in a confident voice, "People of the Wyldewood, brave souls who have left their home to help Orlandia. The time has come to ask you for more than sentiment or support, more than your resourcefulness, or your craftsmanship, or your friendship. The enemy lies a short march up this road... and they will not grant you mercy. Blood will be shed, some of it our own. Those that follow me to Bredldem must know what we risk, and remember who we risk it for. Not just for ourselves, but anyone beyond who might suffer if we should fail here...". Aurelion raised his right arm, clenching his fist high in the air. The markings glimmered in the air as he commanded his followers, "Those who would fight and die for the freedom of this realm, come forth... come forth and let the shadow know it has a light to fear again!". All within the range of the satyr's voice raised their weapons and cheered into a cacaphony that grew louder as it made its way through the caravan. The throng of travelers was in motion, falling into an assumed, unspoken rank behind Aurelion as he turned his horse and commenced the march.

Chapter 5 - The Assault on Beddem

Before the Scattering, and the subsequent occupation by the Empire, Beddem was a simple, unassuming place. Being the closest human town to the Sea of Oak and the portal to the Wyldewood, it occasionally enjoyed prosperous commerce with traders who knew the way to the wylder's kingdom. It then stood as a potential staging ground for the empire's forces, who would eventually attempt another breach upon the Oakenfold gate. Their recent battle with the phoenix in the Sea of Oak seemed to have culled an impressive number of shadowfowl and human loyalists for the time being. A rather humble detail of guards were stationed along the wooden walls and ramparts that had been built around the perimeter. The purging fires of the phoenix did not reach the forest near Beddem, so Aurelion's army took advantage of its lush cover and lined up silently along the edge of the treeline that acted as a boundary between the wilderness and Beddem. Aurelion and Hedstrum crouched behind a tree and studied the fortifications. They knew a frontal assault, even with their numbers, would be a bloody gambit. This was no time for an honorable advance. Aurelion called into the night, imitating an owl. Figures dashed forward, quickly yet quietly. The first line of Aurelion's troops slinked out into the field like panthers. A solitary guard on one of the ramparts puffed on his pipe as he lit it with a match, anticipating an uneventful night watch, when he paused, curiously staring into the night as he had just noticed movement on the ground. His eyes darted along the perimeter as he saw many forms crawling with startling speed. He gasped to yell and found his mouth stifled by an elven hand as sharp steel found its way under his pauldron, between his ribs and into his heart, in a deft, insidiously graceful action. His anguish was muffled as his killer gingerly laid him down onto the rampart floor. More wylder crawled up and climbed the wood pilings meant to repel them. Other guards disappeared with a mere gargling or whimpering as the limber and lithe wylderfolk made quick work of the outer guards. Two trolls had made their way to the gate and opened it. The town's guards noticed and rushed forward, only to be met by the Aurelion's main forces as they charged into Beddem.

It was then that the shadowfowl appeared, the vile beasts emerging from the darkest shadows near the invaders and lashing out with cruel talons. The main courtyard erupted in conflict as the wylderfolk engaged the beasts for the first time. The fray was a storm of chaos as the undisciplined and inexperienced among Aurelion's army clashed fearfully with the fowl. The satyr's arm blazed with phoenix fire as he lunged and clawed at his foes, which squealed and retreated, some writhing in torment as the flames engulfed them. After many of the creatures fell at Aurelion's touch, his followers rallied as they saw the might of the phoenix's blessing. The battle was swift as more wylderfolk joined in. Beddem was theirs before morning had broken. A single remaining shadowfowl took to the air, so Hedstrum pointed, and several rangers launched a volley of arrows after the winged monstrosity. A few of the missiles hit the evil bird, yet it managed to pull itself higher into the sky. Aurelion watched it fly away, its wings flapping desperately as it

pointed itself toward the heart of Orlandia, where the Emperor sat upon his throne. "Corax will know about this victory," Hedstrum remarked, "We will not have much time..."

"There will be plenty of time for word to spread to the outlying towns... word that there is hope, and that they too can make a stand,". Windows of houses began to open, and the cautious heads of the people peered through doors that were once bolted shut in fear. Bedldem's citizens made their way into the morning light of the suns, cheering and embracing the wylderfolk who had rid the town of the Yaoguai's influence. The battle was not without its price. Dandel Quickenbuck gave a solemn count of thirty-three elves, trolls, and orcs, even a pixie that had met their end that night. Aurelion called his followers together and they paused to honor their fallen friends. "Always friends, never to end," the satyr added, as they stood in silence.

EmperorCorax sat in the great dining hall of Castle Orlandia, which was a cold, dreary, cavernous chamber with his presence at the lonely table. He sulked as he waited for his meal and stared with disdain at the stained glass rose window that faced the eastern exposure of the castle, its reddish hues managing a brightness from the morning rays despite the Emperor's shadowy influence. He muttered a complaint about having the glass painted over when he noticed something moving through the panes... something flying desperately toward the window. The glass shattered with an alarming clatter as a dark projectile barreled through it. The object came down into a brutal, bloody landing on the immense stone table, glass shards flying and tinkling across the chamber. The Demonlord scowled furiously as the dark mass slid towards him, finally halting before his place at the table. Now that it was still he ground his teeth as he identified it... one of his shadowfowl creatures, specifically one he created to act as captain of the guard for the border towns. The Yaoguai seethed as he also noticed a number of elven and orcish arrowshafts protruding from the creature. Corax Corvidious, Demonlord and Emperor of Orlandia, raged for the better part of a day, destroying everything in the dining hall. Someone dared to defy his rule, and he swore at the top of lungs, in between the foulest words he could muster, that he would obliterate the very souls of those responsible.

Chapter 6 - The Sacred Ten

Two weeks had passed since the liberation of Bedldem, and yet the humble town already bore the features of a well-prepared garrison. Its walls were being hastily reinforced by the townsfolk as it prepared for a militant reaction from the Emperor. The wylderfolk and humans labored together to solidify the first anxious foothold which the Anarch forces possessed in defying the Demonlord. Hedstrum wasted no time in helping to prepare Bedldem and its people. Those who were of able body began to train under command of the Orcish veteran. Even Aurelion found himself among the ranks, doing his best to learn more about fighting in what was sure to be a brief opportunity before the next battle. The satyr had proclaimed that Hedstrum was now general of the Anarch forces, and no human nor wylder disputed this, as the orc quickly proved himself to be a fair, yet effective leader. He led several raids and scouting missions, which yielded various assets, including new information, supplies, and even alliances from neighboring towns. Hedgenbury was the next town which held a tactical value, as it was closer to the main city. It was also a crossroads for the kingdom's most vital highways. To control Hedgenbury was to control the most important supply routes in Orlandia. It came as no surprise when the scouts reported heavier guard details and patrols there. The risk was even greater here, but a swift move into this town could cripple the empire's loyalist forces. It was for this advance that Hedstrum prepared the Anarch army. There was also a presence of Anarch resistance within Hedgenbury, and through secretive meetings, Hedstrum had gathered information that made him confident of victory. The time to march was almost at hand.

Aurelion swung a wooden sword at his opponent, gnashing his teeth as the blade met resistance from another weapon. Dandel Quickenbuck grunted as he blocked the satyr's strike and pushed against it to hop back a step. Aurelion reeled and made another swing, followed by another, the halfling a bit frightened as the satyr's blows held a bit more fury with each attack. The small one managed a solid kick to Aurelion's midsection before tumbling backwards into a defensive stance, panting. The satyr stumbled backwards before correcting his footing and holding his weapon at the ready for another advance, and was about to lunge at his friend when a horn sounded from the entrance wall. From the tone and rhythm, it was an alert that someone was approaching... apparently friendly. Aurelion's posture dropped into a relaxed state and he nodded to Dandel, offering his hand in friendship. "Excellent moves, small one," The satyr complimented as they clasped arms, the halfling breathing with relief, "I've learned quite a bit from you today."

"Glad ta be of help to ya, my friend," Dandel replied, smiling. Aurelion turned and made his way to the front gate, the halfling dropping into a cross-legged position, letting out a light 'whew' as he shook his hands out, the wrists and knuckles aching from sparring from the satyr.

A simple black carriage rolled through the entrance, flanked by two armed riders, apparently Anarch fighters that volunteered to escort this important passenger.. It came to a halt as the satyr approached it, the driver climbing down to open the door for the vehicle's occupant. He swung it open and gave a respectful nod. He spoke in a voice of reverence, despite its graveled texture, "The Lady D'vorrah, Seer of Royal Orlandia, Keeper-"

"Enough of that!," a thick, exotic accent cut him off from inside the carriage. A bejeweled and veiled woman stepped out of the vehicle, carefully climbing down the small steps that hung from the carriage door. She stood before Aurelion, who bowed his head slightly yet humbly before addressing her. "We have been told to expect you, D'vorrah. I am hoping you can shine some light on an old legend, and help us defeat the Emperor."

"Greetings, Aurelion," she responded, returning esteem with a nod as she was equally honored to be in his presence, "There is much I must share with you, and quickly. The Demonlord is no doubt seeking the same knowledge. He suspects that I know a way to undo him, and his disgusting things have been hunting me."

"Then let us move to the town hall," Aurelion gestured toward the building, and they walked, the carriage driver pulling a hinged box from the carriage before following them.

Word quickly spread through the town of this important meeting, and by the evening, the town hall was full of humans and wylderfolk gathering to hear the Seer speak. Hedstrum joined them in the main chamber, as did several of the Anarch soldiers who were summoned by the satyr to be present. The noise of the curious crowd quickly dwindled as Aurelion stood at the center table and raised his illustrated arm, calling for silence. "D'vorrah has traveled here, despite many dangers," He began, "and she may be able to help us defeat the Yaoguai Demonlord,". The satyr nodded to D'vorrah, "Please, my Lady. Share with us what you know."

The Seer looked up at Aurelion, her eyes wide from a level of perception that would stagger most beings. She rose from her seat and began to speak, "Despite my vision, my extensive research and my efforts to divine, Khaz'Radan eludes my knowing, in form and shape, even nature... yet I have been able to gather from the muddy water of the obscured past, what must be done to bring forth Khaz'Radan. Long ago, in the earliest days of the kingdom of Orlandia, there was great conflict. In an effort to end the war and the bloodshed, ten heroes gathered to find a solution. These heroes were mentioned in the scrolls of Bhudr, as thus:

a young prince who eventually became one of two kings to rule the kingdom in tandem;
a wise old druid who knew the oldest magic of the ancients;
a thief so skilled in stealth and speed that he was named 'King of Thieves' by his loyal guildmates;
an Orcish Chieftain whose fighting prowess knew no equal among his kind;
a troll greenwarden, who cared dearly for all flora and fauna of the earth;
a Grand Mage from the highest echelons of Wizardry;
a human general of Orlandia, respected even by his sworn enemies for his chivalry and tactical knowledge;
an Elven Councilman of the Wyldewood, whose wisdom and compassion made him a most beloved leader among the wylder;
an oracle known for her gift of foresight, revered as the very voice of the fates;
a Dwarven blacksmith, one of the greatest craftsmen of his time.

The satyr added, "The Wylder Council told me of these heroes, but knew very little... that they have long since passed on, but the essence of each one remains in relics they once possessed."

"Yes," nodded the Seer, "These were items which they bore at the time of Khaz'Radan's creation. The Sacred Ten, as they came to be known, gathered at Verdethena... it was there that Khaz'Radan first came into being. It is said that from that day, the heroes set out into the world and conquered great evils, and united the factions that fought for rule of Orlandia. Two rival kings became as brothers, and with the help of the Sacred Ten, brought forth a golden age of peace to the kingdom. It was after the coronation of the two kings that the ten heroes went their separate ways. Khaz'Radan is no longer mentioned in the histories, save for sparse passages which mention that Khaz'Radan may return one day to defeat a great evil, should the Sacred Ten gather again at the first oak. From what I have been able to divine, gathering the relics of the Sacred Ten at Verdethena will summon Khaz'Radan."

"I am in possession of one such relic," offered the satyr, producing Belthazan's jeweled pendant from a pouch on his belt.

"Ah...," D'vorrah marveled, her eyes brightening, "The pendant of the Elven Lord". She gestured to her carriage driver, who was standing nearby. He quickly and carefully placed a hinged box before the Seer. D'vorrah pulled a key from under a bangle on her wrist, and proceeded to unlock the box. She lifted the lid to reveal two items resting on a velvet cushion: A circlet of silver and gold, with an eerie eye sculpted from an ivory white stone set at its center; a worn and nicked golden coin lay inside the open space of the circlet, its surface bearing the profile of a grinning man. D'vorrah picked up the coin

and held it aloft. "The Coin of the Thief-King," she began, "It belonged to the most cunning, successful rogue in Orlandia's history. His guild became so wealthy, that they actually pressed their own coins. This was the first coin that was pressed, and the rogue kept it with him at all times. It was recently recovered by an anarch who brought it to me despite great peril, a task given to him by the very same phoenix who has charged Aurelion with the quest of saving Orlandia". She set it down and then displayed the headpiece. "The Circlet of the Oracle... it was given to me as a child when my parents learned that I had the sight. The instant I first took hold of this relic, my mind was assaulted with visions of what is now coming to pass." The Seer paused as she looked at it, her face bearing fear and dread as though contact with the relic might be forcing more dreadful premonitions upon her mind's eye. She quickly placed the items back in the box, the lock clicking shut as she blinked, her breath catching in her throat as she suppressed a more extreme reaction. She caught herself staring at Aurelion, to which the satyr tilted his head slightly with curiosity.

"Seven more items," she said, regaining her composure, "must be recovered. The Staff of the Hermit, which is located in the courtyard of Castle Orlandia. It was the staff wielded by Diarmuid the Druid... and used by the Emperor Corax, its magic disguising him while he manipulated Validus into helping him attain power. The Totem of the Chieftain, which belonged to Hazzrabi, an Orcish Chieftain of the Mukkladesh clan, lies with him in his tomb in the Necropolis of the Valiant. The Fang of the Earth Dragon was a token of respect given to Hegadon the Prince by the last dragon to be seen in this realm, after proving his bravery in a fierce battle. Perhaps a visit to the Hegadon Monument on Harrowing Point may prove helpful. The Tankard of the Warlord was a prized drinking stein of General Sigmund, a trusted friend of the Prince who lead Orlandia's army to many victories. The tankard was a coveted item among brewers and tavern owners for generations, as they believed that possessing it brought them prosperity. We must seek out its current owner and attempt to bargain for it. The Runed Hammer of the Master Blacksmith was once wielded by Gundhern Fairstern, who forged many legendary weapons in his day. He disappeared somewhere on Mount Hevelrem in the Bitterwind Mountains. The Scepter of the Grand Mage, the foci of Naj'Palal, was stolen from his tomb a few years ago. By whom, I am not aware, but as we gather the relics, we may be able to divine its whereabouts. The last relic has been something of legend... an item even High Mages believe to be a myth. Supposedly, when Verdethena first matured and all plants and creatures sprang from its branches, it produced a single acorn. This acorn is believed to be the only offspring of the first oak, and must be sown into the earth one day when the old oak dies, the next tree bringing with it new life, possibly even a new world! The greenwardens held this acorn sacred, passing it down through countless generations. Junedel, a young female troll, was its caretaker at the time of Khaz'Radan's creation. Her descendants live by the sea in a village near Lazuli Bay. The acorn, if it exists, may be found there."

Aurelion stroked his goatee as he took a moment to absorb all that the Seer had divulged. He then looked to Hedstrum, who stood nearby and spoke, "My friend, a true test awaits us... all of us. I must continue to seek out these relics, and our campaign to retake the kingdom of Orlandia must move forward. I feel I can count on you to lead the Anarchs while I am away."

"I will do so, Aurelion," the orc replied with a bold grin, "Our march to the main city will not only yield progress, but draw the Emperor's attention away from your actions. By the time you have found this Khaz'Radan that you seek, we shall be ten thousand strong, and at the city gates, ready to challenge the Demonlord!". The crowd cheered exuberantly.

The satyr placed a firm hand on Hedstrum's shoulder, smiling at the orc's confidence. "Very well, General. May the fates bless us. Now we must move swiftly. The staff, of all the relics, may be the most difficult to obtain. Have your scouts found any way into the city proper?"

"Indeed," replied the orc. He jerked his head in a directing gesture toward an elf named Ariadnesse, who stepped forward with an almost conceited smirk. Her form was clad in form-fitting leathers, her fine long hair tamed into a taught braid which rested over one shoulder. She gave a quick nod of salutation and spoke, "Lord Aurelion, I have explored the Dwarven mines deep under Orlandia. They once dug narrow air shafts upward, which terminate in a few spots within the city's walls. There was barely enough width to the shafts, and they have grates to keep out thieves, but I believe I can break through and recover the staff that the Seer mentioned."

"Then you have your mission, young elf. Go now, and be careful."

"Aye, my Lord," she responded, glancing for a moment at the general, who chuckled and nodded with approval. Ariadnesse hastily made her way out of the crowded chamber.

Aurelion turned back to the table and said, "Six more relics call to us, my fellow Anarchs. How shall we go about finding them?". Dandel was nearby with a map of the known realm, and he unfurled the cloth document, straightening it out as the satyr and others poured over it and began to discuss plans when a guard's horn sounded from the front gate. The sequence of tones told them that a scout was returning. They returned after a pause to inspecting the map, when desparate galloping sounded its way up the doors of the Town Hall. The scout, an excitable human who stumbled into the chamber and pushed his way through the onlookers, panted as he made his way to the table. "The Prince!," he shouted as he reached Aurelion, "Validus, the Prince... he is on horseback in the woods North of here... and he is alone!"

The crowd became excited and murmured around the table. Hedstrum spoke, "We have a perfect opportunity! If we capture him, we could gain an upper hand."

"Possibly," Aurelion said, "but he carries the cursed blade that was once Van and Nifl. He could strike us all down with its power... but I do have an idea. I will need assistance from a mage or two. I have learned something about that sword and how we might be able to use it to our advantage, but we need the Prince free in order to do it." Both Hedstrum and D'vorrah looked at the satyr curiously, to which he simply grinned and said, "Trust me. If we do this right, we can weaken the Emperor's power from within, and Khaz'Radan will do the rest."

Chapter 7 - A Line Must Be Drawn

Hedstrum Balan looked down on the open field before him from atop the grassy hill where he and a multitude of battle-ready Anarchs had gathered to prepare for a charge into Hedgenbury. Between themselves and the the high-walled town in the distance, stood the Imperial army, which comprised mostly of loyalist troops. The shadowfowl were present, various abominations skulking among the ranks or flying overhead. The twin suns blazed in the sky, making this the weakest moment for the wicked creatures, but they were poised to defend the Demonlord's domain, nonetheless. The Orcish general raised his sword high, calling to his soldiers. The Anarchs chanted and hollered, many of them eager to engage. Hedstrum paused as a streak of flame came into view in the air. The phoenix flew over the field with something clenched in its talons. The great bird turned toward the Anarch army, which grew even louder as the sight of the phoenix was seen as a blessing upon the imminent battle. The phoenix swooped by and alighted, climbing into the sky again. Hedstrum quickly lowered his sword and raised his other arm to catch the object of which the phoenix seemed to have let go. The general caught the object and inspected it. It was a staff, a simple gnarled thing hewn from an oak branch. He quickly determined it to be the Staff of the Hermit which Ariadnesse agreed to steal. Hedstrum also realized a moment later, that the elf would have delivered this prize herself. Hedstrum passed the staff to another soldier and instructed him to carry it back to Bedldem on the fastest horse he could find. The noise of the Anarch soldiers dulled as they watched the general lower his head and shut his eyes, his face twitching as his teeth clenched. Breath puffed through his nostrils like an angry bull as his mind ventured a brief moment into what could have been. For a moment there was a grim, awkward silence... then the orc's sword bolted into the air as his hand again held it aloft. The general's eyes opened as did his mouth, and a guttural cry lept from him, an atavistic noise known by many to be the furious Orcish call for the blood of enemies. The throng of frenzied humans and wylderfolk spilled down the hill toward the line of Imperial troops. The orc led his loyal soldiers in the charge, roaring again with fury. A vile sound came from the shadowfowl, and the loyalists marched forth, some bearing a look of reluctance as they prepared to face their fellow Orlandians in battle.

The initial clash was brutal. Metal gnashed against metal, flesh rended and bones shattered. Neighbors and once-friends met eyes and weapons with conviction and determination. Hedstrum engaged one of the awful creatures at the center of the fray, literally pulling it from its low place in the air and driving his steel deep into the thing, which emitted a deafening call of anguish. The orc planted a foot upon the dying shadowfowl, freeing his blade and spinging himself upward, over his men, to deliver another deadly blow to an advancing creature as he landed. Elven arrows launched into a focused volley from the back ranks, felling another dark bird. It contorted and careened above the battle before crashing through a group of fighting soldiers, both Imperial and Anarch. More of the vile things came, swooping down to catch random Anarchs and

throw or drop them. A druid among the Anarch army uttered an incantation, and the ground split open. Combatants stepped backward as the earth itself rose and took shape, resembling vaguely human forms. The newly summoned golems towered over the soldiers, at least twice their height. The Loyalist troops closest to them were swatted or crushed as the lumbering monsters of dirt and grass began swinging their huge arms. Gamelon, the Emperor's most powerful necromancer, watched from a distance on a shadowcrafted steed. He waited to join the battle, watching the soldiers on either side fight and fall. Once he was satisfied at the amount of death on the field, he kicked his spurs into the dark horse upon which he sat, and the necromancer charged. He raised an ornate golden scepter as he approached the violence before him, and the jewels on the artifact burned with an eerie light as dark energies swirled around it. The fallen among the combatants began to stir, crawling and pushing themselves up. The dead stood up and armed themselves, the Anarchs watching in horror as the corpses that surrounded them started to advance.

Hedstrum eyed Gamelon as he rode along the outskirts of the battle. With a grunt, the orc, ran across the field to intercept his new target, dismissing the enemies that obstructed him with simple yet devastating strikes. The necromancer noticed the Orcish General coming for him and pointed his scepter. Several of the undead soldiers seemed to respond to the gesture, and turned to meet Hedstrum, standing between the orc and their new master. The orc lept at his mindless foes, and cut down one of the undead, then turned and lashed into another. They clawed and bit at him, swinging weapons clumsily as they shambled toward him. One by one, the zombies fell, only to be replaced by another. The walking dead surrounded Hedstrum, but he kept swinging, still looking at Gamelon, regarding the creatures that blocked him more of an annoyance than a threat. An elven priest approached, flanked by fighters who slashed their way through to escort the elf closer. Gamelon scowled as the elf began her prayer and gestured again commanding more undead to move in and interrupt her. The ground around her became illuminated, and the nearby revenants collapsed. The radius of her spell spread outward across the field, and the undead that did not fall under its power backed away, writhing and screaming. Gamelon cursed to himself and pulled on the reins of his horse, backing away as the light magick drew closer. His steed reared, emitting an unnerving bray while shadow grew from its sides and took shape as immense black wings. Gamelon and his horse took flight, eager to escape the range of the priest's prayer.

The very fever of the battle had broken as the undead fell in great numbers. The remaining shadowfowl took to the air, following Gamelon as he fled. The loyalist soldiers turned and ran back toward the city as their trumpets called the retreat. As they approached the gates of Hedgenbury, they found themselves trapped. Anarch spies had made their move within the walls. The townsfolk supported the resistance movement well before the anticipated clash, and revolted as the battle began. The gates of the fortified town did not open as the loyalist troops approached it in hopes of shelter.

Finding themselves between their own townsfolk and the advancing Anarchs, they quickly began to drop their weapons. The last remaining standard bearer let his banner fall as the enemy came closer. Hedstrum led the Anarchs toward the gate, calling them to halt before the broken ranks. One of the loyalists, Commander Danik, stepped forward to face the Orcish general. He held up his sword, humbly offering it to Hedstrum as a gesture of surrender. The orc looked at him, then beyond him to the enemy troops. He silently looked at their faces which bore the shame of defeat, and the pain of a war they did not want. Hedstrum grinned and looked again at Commander Danik, then spoke in a volume for all to hear, "Keep your sword, brave warrior. You will need it when you march to the city proper of Orlandia...". He raised a hand and gestured toward the Anarch army. "... alongside your brothers and sisters!". Commander Danik lowered his sword as the Anarchs began to cheer, and extended his arm in friendship. The orc clasped Danik's arm gruffly with his own, and both sides erupted in celebration.

The liberation of Hedgenbury was more than a mere victory for the Anarchs... it was a triumph for all Orlandians who still held out hope of being free from the tyranny of the Emperor. Word quickly spread to the other towns, and support for the Anarchs grew. Many towns began to revolt, or did what they could to help by moving supplies or hiding Anarchs that were being chased by the shadowfowl. Emperor Corvidious raged from within Castle Orlandia, and he sent Validus out with his minions across the kingdom with new orders. Branding and casting out those who supported the Anarchs was no longer enough. An example had to be made. The Demonlord decided that those he could not control must be destroyed. The shadowfowl moved over the land, and blanketed the kingdom with suffering and fear. Many Orlandians witnessed Prince Validus as he rode into various towns, the terrible sword that was once Van and Nifl raised high, unleashing its power upon his own people. The people of this realm came to know true evil as the kingdom's young ruler, under the emperor's influence, destroyed that which he loved so dearly. The jubilation of the victorious army at Hedgenbury wilted as word arrived from other regions. The Anarchs still needed to find the Sacred Ten, and Khaz'Radan, or all their efforts would soon be for naught.

Chapter 8 - No Mountain High Enough

The foothills and lower regions of the Bitterwind Mountains were deceptively pleasant. The Evershyde Forest held an outpost, which was a calm, serene riposte in stark contrast to other locales of Orlandia as the brutal storm that was Emperor Corvidious' rage swept across the land. Mere days had passed since meeting with the Seer, yet the war and its combatants moved swiftly. The theft of the Staff of the Hermit, not to mention Aurelion's encounter with Validus, had angered the Demonlord more than the small victories enjoyed by the Anarchs in the outlying towns. The Sacred Ten were being gathered, and the ire of the Yaoguai was roused as the saytr had planned, but so many souls, both brave and innocent, were paying the price. The satyr had passed caravans of refugees and rode through the scorched remains of Quarthmar and Pillsher, humble towns once full of proud people. Nothing was left, except the smoldering shells of buildings and the stench of death. As he sat in his temporary quarters in the outpost, Aurelion wondered how many more would suffer until Khaz'Radan was summoned, and if that could be done before the Demonlord wiped out all life that refused to kneel before him. He also wondered if he even had an impact upon Validus when he spoke to the young prince. The prince may be beyond influence, the Emperor's shadows rooted deeply within Validus' mind. The satyr hoped that the prince still held onto a sliver of humanity, that he might be able to break free of the Demon's hold on him. Aurelion picked up the Tankard of the Warlord, which had been eagerly donated by its owner, a Tavernkeeper from Quarthmar. When he learned that the relic may mean an end to the Emperor, the man surrendered it gladly. The satyr looked over the intricate vessel as he pondered. The markings on his arm became warm, and the familiar voice of the phoenix spoke to him, "Keep your faith, Satyr. The atrocities you see, the suffering you have witnessed, such things were inevitable. Your hope for Orlandia is the naked flame of a candle in the storm. Protect that one light in this dark and violent moment. Should it be extinguished, then the Demonlord truly wins. Burn brightly, Aurelion Kellkallen. Light the way and kindle the flames that can bring the dawn to this darkened realm!"

Aurelion blinked as a knock at the door startled him slightly. The reassuring voice drew silent, and the satyr arose, taking a breath before opening the door. Captain Vert greeted him, and proceeded to introduce a dwarf that stood next to him. Her name was Bluum, and she was to be the satyr's guide through the mountains to the Dwarven town of Hindwalde, where the tomb of the Master Blacksmith and his legendary hammer were located.

Aurelion adjusted the heavy cloak of pelts that hugged him as the harsh climate of the higher elevation lashed at him with abrasive gusts. The dwarf led him up the mountain road to an obscure pass. Here the terrain was more dangerous. It became apparent to the satyr that this trail was not cut into the stone like the roads on which they had started, and

deliberately so. In the past two centuries, the Dwarves, as a people, had become quite reclusive. They made their homes deep within the mountains, and the passages on the surface, like this one, remained difficult to traverse. Outsiders, and especially potential invaders, would be discouraged by the terrain and climate. Bluum managed the rocks and crags with the aptitude of someone indigenousto the environment as Aurelion carefully and awkwardly did his best to keep up. The pair traveled diligently up the path, too focused on climbing to speak to one another, for the better part of a day. Bluum and Aurelion eventually came upon a more beaten path as they entered a chasm that had once cut its way through one of the higher mountains. A brief walk into this new passage came to an abrupt end, and revealed the entrance to Hindwalde, an obvious change in the roughness of the rocks that surrounded the two travelers. A high, fortress-like wall was cut from the stone here, with immense vaulted doors of iron. Cross-shaped murder holes ran across the face of the wall in a simple, efficient pattern. Aurelion noticed cruel points jutting out from the holes, no doubt from bolts knocked in ready crossbows at the hands of watchful marksmen. Bluum approached the large door and Aurelion followed cautiously, looking up to see the steel points that remained aimed at him. A slat opened in the door and a pair of eyes studied the satyr and his guide. The noise of metal shifting against metal broke the tense silence, and the doors parted. Aurelion followed Bluum past the entrance and saw the continuation of the chasm, except that every inch of this place was chiseled and carved masterfully into complex, clean lines and shapes. Steps ran in various directions to various doorways which ran along the walls, several teirs high before the beautiful carvings faded into the natural roughness of the higher chasm walls. The main street of this town was busy with dwarves engaged in various activities, though many of them would stop to stare at the satyr, especially when he loosened the cloak that covered him. He could feel their eyes on him, looking at his horns, the trinkets in his braids. One trader was so forward as take hold of Aurelion's right arm and inspect the markings of the phoenix's blessing. The satyr raised an eyebrow but obliged him, letting the dwarf turn his arm to study the runes that were among the swirls and spirals. Bluum admonished the trader in Dwarven dialect and pulled the satyr away, leading him purposefully through the street.

Aurelion and his guide entered a doorway framed with relief sculptures of skulls and angels into a simple antechamber lit by torches set in wall sconces. A male dwarf stood before them. His long reddish-grey beard was combed and braided more finely than most of the other townsfolk, and a reverent sash embroidered with Dwarven script was draped over his shoulders. The little man nodded his head and spoke softly, "Greetings, Lord Aurelion. D'vorrah the Seer sent word that you would come, and that you seek the Runed Hammer. We haven't much time". He took a torch from the wall and walked toward a dark entrance, the flickering light revealing steps that descended into utter blackness. The satyr followed, carefully watching his footing on the chiseled steps that wound into a sinking spiral. Bluum remained at the antechamber, watching them slowly disappear into the stairway as it made a turn. Their descent took several minutes.

Aurelion listened to himself and the dwarf breathing, the sound echoing unsettlingly through the tunnel. The flickering fire of the torch was the only illumination. The walls seemed to be getting closer to the satyr, who placed a hand against the smooth surface and dragged it along, just to reassure his mind that the passage itself presented no threat. The two finally came to a landing on level ground, and they found themselves before a rather solid-looking wooden door. The dwarf closed his eyes and whispered a spell. The wooden door opened, and the dwarf and the satyr made their way into a round chamber. A multitude of candles circled the room on rows of step-like shelves on the walls, and the wicks calmly ignited themselves through a warm and comforting magick that swirled around the small room. At the center of this chamber laid an impressive sarcophagus of marbled stone, a relief of the legendary blacksmith carved on its lid. It was an incredible likeness of the hero which rested inside this stone vessel, depicting the man in his best years, as though he were sleeping peacefully. The Runed Hammer lay upon his chest, stone hands grasping it tightly, the sculpture itself apparently designed to hold the relic in place. The dwarf stopped at a distance from the sarcophagus and spoke, "I have been the keeper of this tomb since my childhood, Aurelion. My task has been to protect it until an ancient calls for it, and sends an avatar to take the hammer from the hands of the hero."

"How do you know I am the avatar?," the Satyr inquired. The dwarf simply pointed to the sarcophagus. Aurelion paused for a moment with a puzzled look, then stepped closer to the stone coffin. He then noticed pictograms upon the surface along its sides, and one particular image raised the hairs on the back of the satyr's neck. An arm stretched upward in the glyph, reaching for a representation of the hammer. The arm was covered in spirals and runes, markings which were identical to those inscribed on Aurelion's arm. He looked at his own limb again then turned back to the dwarf, who nodded and spoke, "Those who carved this tomb and laid the hero Gundhern Fairstern to rest were made aware that this day would come. You were chosen by the fates long before your birth to be the seeker of the Sacred Ten, and only you can remove the Runed Hammer of the Master Blacksmith from this tomb." Aurelion remained still, dumbfounded as the gravity of recent events, as well as his place within them, impacted upon his psyche.

An odd wind blew into the chamber from the stairwell, and the satyr broke free of his own overwhelming thoughts. The dwarf looked to the entrance, then back to Aurelion. "This was also foretold. The shadowfowl are here. Follow me and I shall take you to a tunnel where you can escape-"

"No," the satyr said, stepping forth and quickly removing the hammer, "Not this time. I will not run away while this town suffers!". Aurelion dashed up the stairs, the dwarf calling to him, pleading him to come back. His cries and his torchlight faded as the satyr climbed the winding steps, feeling the walls as he kept a desperate pace upward. Aurelion could no longer deny his destiny, or afford himself any further doubt, but he

would not simply follow a path supposedly laid by the ancients while countless others died. He was soon in the antechamber, then into the street, looking around to see the townspeople in panic as shadows chased them. His arm ignited with the phoenix blessing, and his rage seemed to pass the flames into the Runed Hammer, and he ran toward a group of shadowfowl that had cornered a particular citizen. He swung with a furious yell, the head of the hammer impacting on one of the creatures. The thing shrieked as it exploded, the others in the group reeling as flames spread upon their twisted bodies. Aurelion helped the frightened victim to his feet and guided him to a doorway, shoving the dwarf in as other creatures charged. The satyr met them with another loud battlecry, wielding the blazing hammer and knocking them down. He fought his way through the street, smiting any vile thing too slow to dodge his fury, which was that of an Orcish berserker as his blows crushed and ignited his foes. "Fool!", the voice of the phoenix shouted in his mind, "This town is lost. Do not risk the relic or yourself against these creatures. Get out of there!". The satyr ignored the warning and made his way to a wider spot in the street, close to the main entrance. There, hovering above the terror and bloodshed of the marauding fowl, was the General. She once commanded Orlandia's armies, loyal to Horus, but now she served the Demonlord, and his power of corruption was evident as she cackled at the satyr, her eyes framed in the same shadow as the creatures around her, immense black wings beating the air. "The void calls out to you, Satyr," she hissed, "It shall devour you and your people. This shall be the age of Shadows!". Aurelion tightened his grip on the Runed Hammer as he looked up her, his eyes wet with the tears of loss, his teeth clenched almost to the point of shattering. His body trembled with an energy that those around him could almost see, and those who could, backed away cautiously. The satyr let loose with a roar no lion could utter, no demon could challenge as he swung the hammer in a drastic arc, slamming it into the ground before him. Blinding light and terrible thunder erupted from the center of the street. The town of Hindwalde shook as the rage of a satyr and the fire of a phoenix called forth a cataclysmic firestorm.

All was smoke and chaos for the first few minutes. The town grew silent after the impact, the front wall had cracked in a few places, and some of the harsh winds that gave the region its name pushed through in frigid gusts. Aurelion stood in the center of the street, the road beneath him appearing scorched. He found himself surrounded by bodies, some Dwarven, some shadowfowl. The General was nowhere in sight. Aurelion went about the street, and began to overlook the fallen. He turned a particular dwarf over, fearing the worst. To the satyr's relief, the little woman groaned as she looked around, dazed and bruised, but otherwise alive. Other dwarves began to stir, standing to brush themselves off and help others. He wasn't sure how, but Aurelion had managed to purge the town of the shadowfowl. The nasty creatures that remained were brittle stone remains, which crumbled to the touch, bits of them falling away in the wind like ash. Some of the townsfolk began to cheer, shouting praise at Aurelion for destroying the invaders. The satyr smiled humbly and waved to them before making his way to the entrance. The

townsfolk watched him as he started his trek down the mountain, driven by the thought of other people that were still in danger.

Chapter 9 - City of the Dead

A frightened minion made his way into the throne room of Castle Orlandia, past the ominous guards who kept watch in the hallways. The minion once had a name before the Scattering. It sometimes would focus its thoughts, reaching into its blackened mind for random memories. An old life would surface in rare moments, and the creature would remember that it was called a name like Frank, or Frederick, or Francis. It would also see a woman and child in these moments, and wonder if it had a family. The shadows would always wash over these thoughts, and it was nothing more than a minion now, one of the fowl that scurried about the main city and carried out the many duties in execution of the Emperor's will. This creature shook with dread as it entered the chamber and saw Emperor Corvidious with the Shadowfowl General and Validus gathered around a large table, studying a map of the kingdom. There were various markers standing on the map, like chess pieces, resembling troop movements. The Emperor looked down at the map with a hideous scowl, displeased at the progress reflected in the positions of the markers. The lowly minion paused as Corvidious barked words of displeasure at the General. It knew that the papers in its gnarled hands meant more bad news for the Emperor. Corvidious noticed the scared thing trembling in the corner of his vision and turned. "What?!", the Demonlord snapped. The minion jumped, and extended a shaky hand full of papers toward the Emperor. Corvidious snatched them from the shivering minion, and inspected the print upon them as the terrified creature tried to speak, "Th-They... They are everywhere, my lord... on every post and every wall of the city,". The Emperor seethed as he found them to be handbills announcing a dance festival, much like the ones hosted by the revelers of the Wyldewood. The text heralded this event as a celebration of the return of Orlandia's people to their beloved city. Corvidious slammed his fist onto the table, upsetting most of the markers. "It's that damnable satyr! He dares to announce a festival in my city... he spits in my face with such arrogance... Enough of this game! Ignore the Anarchs and their pathetic resistance... Find Aurelion and kill him. This ridiculous cause shall die with its champion!". The Emperor continued to rave, his words of hate and anger dissolving into primal, disturbing noises as he beat the table into breaking. The minion ran for the door, muttering hysterically to itself, afraid that it would not escape the room, "Francis!... by the fates, my name is Francis..."

The citizens of Hedgenbury were hard at work as Aurelion rode in through the gates, several days after recovering the hammer. Various humans and wylderfolk greeted him as he entered the courtyard and dismounted. He looked around to see most of the population engaged in preparations. Many of them gathered and stacked provisions. The smiths were crowded into a makeshift foundry, toiling over the crafting and repair of weapons and armor. Elves and trolls were shaving wooden shafts, and cutting feathers into fletching, with neat bundles of fresh arrows around them. The sounds of a hundred men shouting in disciplined outbursts could be heard as Hedstrum conducted a training

drill with new recruits. The satyr continued to watch this trading town that had become a garrison, full of simple folk turned soldiers. The Orcish general noticed his friend and leader observing the townsfolk. He barked at the recruits to continue their maneuvers before leaving them to speak with Aurelion. The orc approached him and they gave each other a solid embrace. The satyr presented the Runed Hammer of the Master Blacksmith and spoke, "We are closer to our goal, friend. I believe the Emperor knows what we seek. The Shadowfowl General was there."

"General Madeira?," asked the orc, "She was a great warrior... to think she succumbed to the corruption of the Emperor..."

"She is quite powerful. I was fortunate to have the blessing of the phoenix or the dwarves of Hindwalde would have been lost, like many other people."

"Indeed, Corvidious has taken this war beyond even the reasoning of a Demonlord. He means to crush the resistance, even if it means wiping all life from this realm. Our people are nearly ready. Soon we shall march to the main city of Orlandia."

"And Emperor Corvidious will be rather vexed when you and the other Anarchs arrive. A couple mages and I managed to pull a rather interesting stunt last night,". The satyr reached into a satchel on Poppet's side and smirked as he produced a handbill announcing the festival to Hedstrum. "Thanks to an old spell or two, these notices are in every direction Corvidious might look in the main city. He will be quite angry by now... hopefully angry enough to make mistakes."

"Quite a gamble, my friend," the orc cautioned, his face a bit grim. "We truly may need this Khaz'Radan you seek, especially once we face the Demonlord."

Aurelion nodded, "We are closer to obtaining it. I will ride on to the Necropolis of the Valiant in the morning. Somewhere among those crypts lies another piece of the puzzle. For now, I must rest,". With a mutual quick nod, Aurelion led his horse to the stables as Hedstrum returned to his recruits.

Aurelion was up before the suns, preparing for his next journey, when a noise at an open window caught his attention. He looked to see a horned owl landing on the sill, with a small burlap pouch clutched in one of its feet. A rather nervous little mouse clung to the feathers on the back of its neck. The satyr arched an eyebrow at the curious pair, smiling as he came to recognize the owl as a friend from the Wyldewood in her native form. He approached the familiar bird and unfastened the twine around the owl's ankle, gently removing the small pouch. The owl launched into the dawn sky, its rodent passenger holding on desperately as they departed. The satyr gently shook the pouch, letting its contents tumble into his hand: a simple brown acorn. He rolled it in his fingers as he

looked at it, eyes wide as a soothing energy washed across his fingers. Aurelion realized that he held the Acorn of the First Oak, a tiny yet potent article believed to be almost as old as Earth itself. For a moment his mind raced with memories that did not belong to him... images and feelings that seemed to be of the world itself, of the countless eons that had come to pass. Aurelion dropped the acorn back into its pouch and took a deep breath, blinking as the bewildering memories faded. "Are ye alright, Aurelion," a voice asked from the doorway. Aurelion looked to see Dandel, loosely shrouded in a traveling cloak, the straps and buckles of his rogueish gear showing slightly.

"I suppose I cannot dissuade you from coming along," the satyr said with a chuckle. "As I see it, ye have nah choice. Me and two others are ready ta go, and know ye can't do this alone, what with the Emperor pressin' harder. 'Asides, mate... it's time ye shared some o' that glory ye beenhoundin'."

"Very well," Aurelion said with a nod. "We should hurry. The ride to the Necropolis will take most of the day,". With that, the two made their way to the stable, where Aurelion's horse had been prepared by able hands, as well as a smaller yet equally capable steed for the halfling. Three Elven rangers waited nearby, already armored and mounted, ready to escort the satyr. The group galloped through the gates and onto the road, riding hard toward their destination.

The twin suns crawled across the sky as Aurelion and his companions traveled South of the main city and east along the Spice Road, named so for the spice traders that would come in from Lazuli Bay to trade with Orlandia and its many towns. Dandel kept a constant eye skyward as they rode, watching for shadowfowl scouts or patrols. Eventually they happened upon a fork in the road, one direction leading into rolling hills covered with tangled old trees. The road there seemed to darken under the canopy of overhanging limbs like a shady tunnel. A faded sign at the intersection labeled this road as the path the the Necropolis of the Valiant. The group paused and looked at the eerie path, one of the elves commenting that it had been some time since he had traveled this way, but that the appearance had changed drastically. Aurelion nudged his steed on, leading his group into the shadowy path, cautious, yet moving with continued urgency. The influence of shadow magick became more apparent as they followed the road. No animals stirred among the trees and yet they all felt the presence of things watching. Aurelion cursed to himself, knowing that the Emperor had somehow pieced the movements of the satyr together and anticipated the next move. He kicked lightly at Poppet's ribs, urging her into a faster gallop. Dandel and the elves noticed the cue and increased their speed as well.

The road widened after a tense hour of fevered riding, and the party looked around as they passed an open gate made of wrought iron, framed in stone. Here they began to see a great deal of memorial stonework among the edges of the receding forest. Aurelion

knew they had made it to the Necropolis as they saw monuments and headstones sprawling into the hills. The tokens of remembrance appeared countless, ranging from simple, iconic markers to towering obelisks and large mausoleums. The satyr and his party galloped down the various paths, their eyes quickly scanning for a resting place worthy of an Orcish chieftain. Dandel glanced upward to see ominous clouds smothering the sky. Arcs of malevolent lightning tore across the clouds. The halfling knew there was more than weather twisting and swirling above them. The phoenix blessing glimmered, the satyr's arm illuminating as it reacted to the dark energies that began to swim through the air around them. One particular mound caught Aurelion's eye. The memorials here bore the elements held sacred by the fel races. At the top of the mound stood a circular crypt, crowned with carvings that resembled tusks and lion skulls. The satyr steered his horse up the small hill and dismounted, looking for an opening. His arm flared with heat as he passed a particular spot and he paused, turning. He slid his hand over the bricks until one of them revealed runic glyphs that resembled the ancient alphabet being used by the Anarchs. He picked at the edges of the brick and it seemed to loosen, so he slid it carefully out of the wall. Aurelion found it to be hollow in the center, and in the cavity lay a small wooden object once carved by careful, loving hands. It vaguely resembled an Orcish child, the strong, stout features of the mighty race cut into the wood, yet bearing an expression of innocence and warmth. The satyr could feel its energy, much like the magick of the other relics.

"I'll take that," a baneful voice hissed at Aurelion from above. He looked up to see the General perched atop the crypt, leering at him. He turned to see his Elven escorts drawing their swords as they found themselves surrounded by shadowfowl. Dandel could not be seen. The satyr returned his eyes to the General as he drew his own sword. Phoenix fire climbed along the steel as he poised himself, ready to strike. Terrible sounds erupted around them as the earth split and crumbled. Decayed hands clawed their way to the surface, one fallen warrior after another climbing out of their graves. The satyr tried to stay focused on the General, despite the edges of his vision catching all the graves in the area as they surrendered their hold on the corpses that were now animated. Gamelon trotted up the path on his shadow-steed, sneering with his scepter held high, his forbidden magicks calling forth the dead. The Shadowfowl General leapt, somersaulting over Aurelion as he swung his blade. She landed behind him and slashed sinister talons across his back. The rigid leather he was wearing caught most of the cutting, but he still felt the nasty claws graze his flesh. He grunted and spun with another swing, the fiery steel barely missing its mark as she dodged. The elves stood back to back, their deft swordsmanship keeping the shadowfowl at a distance with their weapons, the creatures gathered in a threatening circle around them. The General slashed at Aurelion without relenting, dancing around the satyr mockingly as she evaded his persistent strikes. She cackled as her talons nicked and snagged him. He grunted through clenched teeth as his aggravation grew. The phoenix fired flared intensely around him, forcing the General back with singed feathers.

Aurelion looked again to the elves, only to see them fall to the overwhelming mass of undead and shadowfowl despite their skill. Gamelon was nearby, lording over the dead, pointing his focus at the satyr with an insidious grin. There was glint of spinning steel. The necromancer reeled as a throwing dagger dug into his outreached arm. Dandel bounded from behind a tall stone, another dagger ready in his hand. Aurelion watched the scepter tumble out of Gamelon's grip. He sensed at once that this was the Scepter of the Grand Mage and called to the halfling, who moved without hesitation. He rolled under the necromancer's steed and grabbed the scepter before scrambling to his feet. He ran toward Aurelion, the shambling corpses toppling en masse at the disruption of Gamelon's control. The satyr slashed at the General as she approached again, the flames swirling around him. The General hovered as the shadowfowl regrouped in the sky overhead, swirling in the cyclone of darkness that the satyr had seen before. Once Dandel was close enough, Aurelion handed him the totem and spoke, "Take this and the scepter, and ride back to Hedgenbury."

"I canna leave ye here, Lord-"

"Go! Get these relics out of here... I will slow the shadowfowl down!"

The halfling dashed to his mount and climbed on its back, looking back for a moment as the satyr and the General clashed again. Dandel spurred his horse and made for the road out of the Necropolis.

The satyr eyed his opponent as she landed again, her wings dissipating. She said nothing, but stood before him, her hands still bearing ready talons and a sickening smirk. Aurelion stepped forward to charge and felt a vicious blow cut into his back. The satyr yelled and stumbled, turning to see his new attacker. He found himself facing Validus, the young prince holding his cursed sword. The satyr's blood glistened upon its edge. Validus stared at Aurelion, a mixture of madness and confusion on the boy's face. "Validus. The Emperor is making you do this. Fight his influence... I know you have it in you. I know you love the people of Orlandia, and want to do what's right!". Another hideous blow from the General brought the satyr to his knees. "Destroy this fool for the good of the Empire," snarled the General. Validus looked at Aurelion, the internal struggle apparent in his eyes. The prince raised a hesitant hand and began an invocation. Several shadowfowl dove from above and impacted on the ground, their forms shattering and liquidating... coalescing into an ink black pool. Tendrils of shadow rose from the pool and clutched Aurelion, pulling him into the blackness. The satyr struggled, slicing at the shadows that grappled with him. More of the dark shapes gripped him, some smothering the flames of the phoenix blessing. Aurelion gasped as he slid into the unsettling coldness of the pool of shadow despite his efforts. Soon he was under, swallowed by the darkness, his last thought being hope that Dandel would make it back alive. Validus stared at the oozing mire as it settled, a dark voice in his mind assuring him that he had

just protected his kingdom from a terrible enemy... and yet he felt a terrible remorse that twisted in his gut, as though he had betrayed an old friend.

Chapter 10 - The Darkest Hour

There was nothing at first. Aurelion's senses offered no information to orient him. Thoughts and memories flickered in muddy and distorted moments. The satyr never spent much time during his life pondering death, or what lay beyond the pale. His was a charmed and jovial existence, ever living in the moment, the merriment and happiness of others around him his only concern. He found the darkness calming, when he was able to think about it. Here the struggle was done. Nobody to fight, no suffering or sorrow, no joy to be had, but the better memories that flashed, seemed to grant enough solace. For a while, Aurelion felt he could finally rest. Then other thoughts came. Despite the soothing calmness of the darkness, Hedstrum, Dandel, and many other friends came into his mind. These were not memories... more like visions that invaded his peace from a faraway place. He could see images, even feel emotions of Orlandia's people, still suffering, still fighting. A single thought soon consumed his mind: His work was not done. The sound of wind crept into his knowing. It was constant, sounding like the sorrowful howl of a lost wolf. Soon after that came the odors of decay and of things that were burning. After a few moments the satyr could feel his body lying on cold sand, and the slightly abrasive caress of a desert wind. Dim light filled his vision as he blinked. There was a strange numbness about his form, a vague tingling as though there should be more to what he sensed. He managed to rise to his feet. No pain hindered him, despite being wounded by his enemies. Validus entered his thoughts briefly, the satyr's heart breaking as he felt he had failed the boy. Aurelion looked around, seeing a lifeless plain and a dim sky with no suns, no stars or moon, just a faint light from an unknown source. The satyr wasn't sure why, but something urged him into a direction and he began to walk.

The sand was loose and took effort to walk upon as Aurelion trudged through it. He was unsure how far he traveled, as time and any measure of it was lost to him. It felt like hours at one point, sometimes like days, even like minutes. A look back showed no footsteps to mark his progress. He continued nonetheless, driven by a simple thought that he had to keep going. The plain was featureless in all directions, and the wind blew relentlessly. The satyr wondered where he was headed and still had no idea why. Something pulled him across the sands, not allowing him to pause. A structure could be seen on the horizon now. It was a tower, which reached into the dead sky, a solitary spire cutting through the otherwise blank landscape. Aurelion pushed his foot into the sand, commencing his journey to what was apparently his destination. The tower seemed to taunt him, its distance ever increasing as he walked. The satyr persevered, and began to see other objects in the sands before him. As he approached them, the objects took more interesting shapes. They were corpses, some human-like, others far from it, varying in size and appearance. The fallen became increasingly numerous as he came closer to the tower. Their broken forms littered the ground around the structure's base as he neared the doorless vaulted entrance. He could see stairs that began a winding spiral upward as he

stepped into the opening. After a pause, he started his climb. The spiral staircase tormented Aurelion with a seemingly infinite distance similar to his walk across the plain. The mysterious urge tugged at him, and he continued upwards. The satyr became aware of creatures circling the tower as he made his way to the top, their forms visible through its glassless windows. Shadowfowl swirled around the building, shrieking and calling as they flew. Aurelion did not stop, sensing that the apex of this structure was within reach.

The satyr reached a landing, and stood gaping as he looked around. The top of the tower was open, in ruin as though something had torn off its roof long ago. The shadowfowl continued to circle here, but made no deviation from their paths as he stepped into the remains of what appeared to be an old throne room. There were more corpses here which seemed more fresh as kills, with black blood oozing across the stones. Aurelion then noticed that a throne sat at the edge of the disheveled room, and it was occupied. A human slouched in the tall chair, one leg hooked on an arm. The man's head rested on his gloved fist against the other arm. A dull, disillusioned visage stared at the satyr and he became increasingly familiar as Aurelion approached. Here sat Hesperus, still in his armor. His skin bore scars, even the burns of dragon's fire, yet he still looked quite capable. Here he held court alone, his determination and cunning obviously earning him a place to rule, even somewhere as hopeless as the void.

Hesperus' face pulled into a sour smirk. "Come to challenge me for my pointless throne, satyr? Hell, you can have it if you can take me down. No wealth, no power... no women. I'll fight you just on principle, because... well, it's mine!"

The satyr stepped forward and replied, "Good King Hesperus, it is I, Aurelion."

Hesperus gave him a more interested glance. "Oh, hey... sorry, friend. I've gotten used to everyone in this hell trying to prove themselves."

"Even in the void, you have the ambition to rule. Orlandia could actually benefit from your passion."

The king humphed in disgust, "Those people can rot for all I care. They have their ruler now. I tried to help the people... tried to warn them. I ended up here for all my trouble. Even my own son turned against me!"

"Hesperus, I believe your son can be saved. The Demonlord's corruption is powerful, but I still sense the good in him. The people still believe they can defeat the Emperor. As we speak, the people are united as a great army and prepare to march back into the main city". The king looked into the middle distance, not wanting to listen, but the satyr continued. "There is a prophecy that speaks of a king's return, and that king shall defeat the Emperor. I believe you are that king!". Hesperus looked at him again, new interest

igniting in the man's eyes. "My friends are gathering sacred relics that will bring forth something called Khaz'Radan."

"I have heard of Khaz'Radan," the king said, sitting up and leaning forward. "There have been whispers in the wind here... voices that spoke of a weapon which was crafted at the time that Van and Nifl were forged... created from the same magick and steel... made and kept a secret, as a foil to the two swords should they fail the people of Orlandia, or fall into the wrong hands. They also said Khaz'Radan could tear the veil between earth and the void. Oh what I could do with that power..."

"My friends shall find it, good king. Soon you shall be able to return to the realm."

"Yeah," the king frowned, "and return to a realm where my son hates me, and Raine is gone."

Aurelion felt a warmth in his arm and raised it, looking at the markings as the blessing illuminated. A thought sparked within his mind, and he found himself saying something that someone else wanted to say, "Hesperus... not all things are as they seem". The king looked at Aurelion curiously, then with amazement as the light of the markings flared. The satyr quickly found himself engulfed in phoenix flames, their heat being intense yet causing no pain. He managed a smile and said, "Soon, King Hesperus... be ready". With a brilliant flash, the satyr vanished.

A sound of shattering occurred to Aurelion, and he felt himself falling. The satyr tumbled through the frame of a tall standing mirror. He landed on the ground, a deep gasp pulling air into his lungs as though he had been submerged in water and denied the chance to surface. His skin was pale and he shivered, his body feeling as cold as the Bitterwind mountains. He was aware of someone rushing to him as a warm and concerned hand touched his arm. He came to notice lines drawn in the ground around him, forming a summoning circle with burning candles at various stations. Shards of a broken mirror surrounded him. He looked up to see D'vorrah kneeling over him, speaking in a calming tone and urging him to breathe deeply as she pulled a blanket over his form. From what he could tell, they seemed to be in a clearing within a forest. Another presence entered his knowing, and its familiar heat centered his thoughts. The phoenix stood nearby, its plumage blazing as its voice spoke within his mind. "Welcome back, Aurelion Kellkallen. It took much effort, but because of the blessing I placed upon you, the Seer and I were able to bring you back from the void. Unfortunately, you have been touched by the shadow realm. Although you will continue to bear the markings, my power can no longer help you. Take great care, satyr. Your quest is nearly at an end, and the dangers are just as perilous. Good luck to you and your friends". The great bird alighted, its brilliant form climbing into the night sky.

Aurelion spent two days at the Seer's cottage recovering from his time in the void. His energy quickly returned, and he was up and moving when Dandel arrived on his steed,

Poppet in tow along with him. The halfling was relieved to see his friend again. After a hearty breakfast, Aurelion and Dandel departed for Hedgenbury. They arrived to find the Anarch army on the move, ready for their march into the main city. The satyr rode alongside the ranks until he found Hedstrum riding on his mount with a war banner fastened to his back, the waving cloth bearing the "A" glyph that had become the icon of the defiant Anarchs. Aurelion pulled up to the orc's side and nodded as he spoke, "Greetings, General. You have made a fine army of these people." "You have reminded them that Orlandia is worth fighting for, my friend. I heard that we almost lost you."

"I almost lost myself... but I could not rest until this land was free. Death will have to wait." The Orcish general laughed, "Trust me... it will. Now what of your quest?"

"Only the Fang of the Earth Dragon remains. I shall ride to Harrowing Point immediately. I may need a detachment of soldiers for this one."

"By all means, satyr. I shall select a complement of troops". The two clasped arms before the Orcish general began shouting orders.

Aurelion halted his horse and watched the Anarch army march down the road. He was proud to see Orlandia's people rallied, and humbled that so many had gathered to this cause, some paying a serious price. The satyr thought of how far he had come, and these good people along with him. For a moment, his thoughts darkened as it was likely that he would never see the Wyldewood again. To remain in Orlandia for the rest of his days was easily enough of a consolation, but he couldn't help feeling that there were people and good times that he would miss. He took a deep breath and smiled, knowing that it was worth all that he had risked to know Orlandia would be free of the Yaoguai Emperor. Of the Sacred Ten, only one relic still needed to be recovered. He knew that the shadowfowl would most likely be waiting for them when he and his soldiers arrived at Harrowing Point. The satyr also realized that he could no longer rely on the blessing of the phoenix to defeat the vile creatures. As several riders trotted toward his spot on the hill with an impressive group of infantry, he felt he no longer needed the magick of the ancient bird. With hope, and the determination of Orlandia's people, Khaz'Radan and the liberation of this great kingdom was close at hand.

CHAPTER THREE

Seed and Shadow

Chapter 1

Deep in the woods, alongside a great river, a small mouse dared to run across a field. This little mouse had traveled a great distance, through horse-traffic, city noises and perils that even the mighty raccoons would cringe at. Despite all of this she had never been more terrified than she was at this moment.

Poor little Perth, she had been taught all her life that the city was safest for their kind – even if they had to share it with the rats and feline folk. This was because there they could use their cleaver ears and noses to detect their natural enemies, for it was rare indeed that silent death from above would swoop in and darkness would settle.

So when strange creatures started appearing at their home - The great palace of Orlandia - her family fled into the tiny cracks of the foundation. There they fought with the rats for safety until both parties felt their number dwindling.

In a panic, they all fled the palace, searching for the enemies of the shadowfowl.

Perth, having no idea where to go had taken a wrong turn in what she called the Park of Onions, where so many of her kind had fled that the feline folk begun congregating there for free meals. She didn't even notice the pixie-bob until it was too late and she was nearly crushed by the weight of the half-breed.

“Wait!” She squeaked before it's stinking jaws closed in.

The pixie-bob (a half domestic cat, half bob-cat breed) turned its purr into a mild snicker and lifted its head enough to take in the site of its prey. “Why would I do that little mouse?”

Perth cried, but the truth poured from her mouth in black, ominous waves. The pixie-bob's laughter ceased shortly after she begin telling her tale. The raven-folk (what the animals of the wylde referred to the shadowfowl by), were once prey of the feline-folk as well, but they disappeared long ago. The only time that they were thought upon now were when the crows tried to trick them to save their own skins – noisy buggers.

“Is what you speak true?” The pixie bob asked, having long ago set free the tiny rodent.

Perth, who did not even notice her freedom nodded and suddenly found herself cowering again as all good mice were taught to do.

“Then you must speak to the owls.” The pixie-bob advised.

The faint sense that she may have found an ally against danger vanished and she felt the color even bleach out of her soft, dappled fur. The owls were not only one of mice-kind's natural enemies, they were the most dangerous! Not only would they kill you, but they would steal your soul and use it's energies to fuel their necronomic beasts born from the bones of their vanquished. She couldn't talk to an owl!

“Do you not know anything of woods-lore little city mouse? In their war for territory long ago, the great owls defeated the ravens and claimed the warm marsh lands, in which we were all borne, for their own. They have been kinder than you think, but you are right to be wary.”

Perth listened intently as the pixie-bob explained the history of its half-ancestors and what they observed from the side-lines, where they didn't care and ate merrily.

“But how would I find them?” Perth inquired when the story was done, now suddenly finding herself alight with a sense of hope despite the normally grim circumstances.

“I will show you, climb onto my back and hide in my mane.”

As soon as she did what she was told the pixie-bob took off. As they traveled he showed the mouse how it was that cats traveled so quickly and they jumped onto an invisible highway known only to those that know what to look for. An unseen beam of sorts that balanced light and day, nature and wasteland, love and hate; and little Perth found herself enlightened and filled with emotion as she saw it all presented before her as if in a high-speed moving picture gallery.

Before they knew it they were in Wyldewood – a mystic realm that defied all realms. It was here that greatness happened in other worlds than this one and on certain instances of self, they were made apparent.

“I let you off here little mouse. Follow the trail of sunflowers to it's end and carry on one day past it's end. You will find the owl Tiereth of the great horns. She still carries on the old ways.” The pixie-bob lowered the mouse on the paved path and sat down, crossing his paws as if preparing for a lecture. “When you come to the clearing of the lone palm, stand straight and cry at the top of you little lungs. She will find you and ask of you a single question. Be as wise in your answer to her as you were with me.”

Perth nodded and left the pixie-bob to enjoy the sunlight.

Now, a day past the end of the trail of sunflowers, she found herself shivering. The

pixie-bob must have tricked her, to full on his other meals to do more than make a game of her. This was not a sane quest, this was suicide!

She was about to turn back, but then she considered the alternatives. It seemed that no matter what she did, she was bound to be chomped to death by one creature or another. Such a cruel existence is that of a mouse!

After catching enough breath to feed her muscles she dove into the grass of the great clearing, trying not to think of anything but the instructions that her escort had given her. Before she knew it she passed the lone palm and stopped. There the adrenaline and fear combined into an eruption of pure emotion that sounded more like a cat's roar than a mouse's squeak.

“That was mightily impressive,” Came a sharp voice from behind Perth, who spun around before she even realized how frightened she was.

Standing before her, crushing a fallen frond of the palm tree, stood a great horned owl of the type that she only saw in picture-books that the residents of the Palace left behind. Had she not been a mouse she might actually enjoy seeing such natural browns, creams, and whites combine like a living painting, but she was too terrified to appreciate it.

“It is rare that a mouse comes along to provide me with a meal. Why is it that you are here rodent?”

Perth almost forgot that she was supposed to answer a question in light of the question itself. “I uhh... err.”

The owl, stepped forward, and as with the pixie-bob the mouse divulged all of her knowledge in one long and panicked breath.

This indeed picked the curiosity of the owl, but she was not as easily impressed as the pixie-bob had been. She was the lord of this territory and had fought many a marsh and red-tailed hawk for it. She was not willing to forfeit this achievement to help a dinner in waiting.

“The cat said that you once called them ‘raven-folk’, but now they take on the appearance of human-kind.”

Tiereth paused at that and ruffled her great wings, increasing her perceived size greatly, caused the small mouse to cower in ways that she hadn't fathomed before (had her parents seen her now, they would have been proud).

“That is a great concern,” the owl stated as she settled back once more into her normal stature. “What would you suggest little one, whose name I have not yet appear to have earned.”

“It’s Perth, my lord and I...” She found herself surprised to find that she actually had a suggestion, “I think that we should disguise ourselves and infiltrate the palace.” When did she get so brave?

Tiereth pondered on this and after a brief nod she flew up to the living fronds of the lone plam and shouted down to the little mouse. “This is not a normal plan for a mouse, but it is not entirely bad. We will need help though!”

With that the great horned owl screeched into the pre-twilight sky (for it is a myth that owls are only out at night) and begun shaking the fanning branches in which she stood. The sound, harmful to the ears at first, soon begun taking on a hypnotic rhythm and Perth found herself entranced by it.

The he little mouse had not then noticed was that the bones strewn about the clearing had begun to move. They rolled along towards one another, picking up mud as they went, until they ran into other bones. Eventually they combined into strange shapes that looked more and more human as they stood. These constructs were rooted to the mud floor of the marsh one could only guess that they were to protect the owl's home.

What Perth had noticed was that during her trance she felt her insides shatter and expand - the pain of it all was outweighed by the music in her head. She too was becoming human.

When the music stopped she found herself standing awkwardly in the middle of the clearing, where her new-found weight squished marsh up through her now stubby toes. She heard a noise to her left and turned to face it.

Once again the great owl Tiereth stood nearby, only now she mirrored the once-mouse in that she also gained a human form. Her proud head-features were now great tangles of hair and her wings replaced by arms.

“This should suffice, but we still need more. We must now travel to lands north of here to find the great Satyr that resides there. I have long heard of his traveling revelries and I believe that he might be some help.”

Chapter 2

Traveling on foot was something that an owl was not accustomed to and very quickly she developed a new appreciation for any living creature that was forced to "walk" on a regular basis. The mouse on the other hand seemed to have no trouble with adapting to her new form and, in what would be a first for her kind, Tiereth found herself envious of a future dinner.

It felt ages since they left the distant borders of Wyldewood, where those that like to run away eventually wind up to hide. Tiereth was embarrassed to have camped out there for so long, but she would not admit it. Her reasons for leaving Orlandia were hers alone, and she severely doubted that anyone who would remember would be alive to plague her with them now.

What threw her off was that Orlandia seemed much the same as she remembered.

There was a darkness to the atmosphere that was all but imperceptible here on the outskirts, but it was there. Perhaps it was always there and only leaving as she did was what caused her to notice it this time around.

"Or Perhaps..." She let loose under her breath as she looked at the little now-human mouse, who was desperately fiddling with something involving her teeth.

Not wanting to think that the past mistakes of the world had repeated themselves, the owl - in her own human form - walked around the mouse to see what could be troubling her so. Almost immediately she found herself trying just as desperately not to laugh as the mouse repeatedly crammed an acorn into her human cheeks only to spit it back out again.

Perth however did not think that it was funny.

"Well how else am I supposed to keep it safe!" She shouted at the owl, who was taken aback by the mouse's assertiveness.

"You... don't..." Tiereth made a gesture to throw it away. " There's no point in keeping

something as silly as a nut. Either eat it or get rid of it. We don't need you fretting about with something so trivial."

There's was something almost predatory in the gaze that Perth shot her new traveling companion and for the second time within moments, Tiereth tried not to shrink under the gaze of her own prey.

"Its... special..." Perth eventually divulged. "My great great great..." she stopped to try and count on her hands, but gave up after losing count a couple of times. "My Ancestor stole this acorn from a troll who was going to do something stupid with it."

She dried off the small nut and held out in front of her, admiring its shape. "My grandfather gave it to me one year for my birthday and told me that it was of a great importance to the world. I kept it in my burrow up until I left and now without a cheek-pouch to store it in, I don't know what I'm going to do with it."

Tiereth was about to mock the little mouse for being so obsessed with something as mundane as an acorn, when a distant memory surfaced itself. Forcing her to vaguely remember something that she learned growing up.

"Wasn't there a legend about something like that..." She asked the mouse, not really expecting an answer.

Perth looked at the owl with her habitual air of mistrust and shrugged. "The only thing that I know is that the troll my family stole it from lived by a great body of water."

The owl shrugged, a gesture that she was familiar with regardless of the form that she took. "Eh... We'll make a pouch for it. What we really need to do is find the revelers, or somebody with a better understanding of the human's world than us."

"What about the elves?" Perth chimed in, as she remembered the elven bread they had once snuck out of the Palaces kitchen.

Tiereth shook her head, "We're currently on the other side of the Sea of Oak from there, so that trek would likely be a bit more than we need." She paused to think.

The reason that the owl had settled on the idea of meeting up with the professional partiers of Delamarre was due to their reputation for being able to mingle with anyone, regardless of heritage. It had been a long time since Tiereth had interacted with the humans, and she felt that they would be able to help both her and her future dinner adjust

to their world.

She had also heard that they were in the area somewhat recently.

"There's a small farming town not too far away. Every now and then I can hear their reap-time festivities on the wind. Perhaps they would know how we can get in contact with the Satyr's group."

The little mouse seemed a bit disappointed at not being able to gorge herself on elven sweets, but she agreed with the line of thought and the two of them made their way up towards the small town of Gielen.

Chapter 3

After the scattering and somewhat early into the new emperors reign, it was discovered that the idea of simply infecting the towns people of Orlandia in order turn favor had a single fatal flaw - that being that the infected would often lose their minds. Not a profitable turn if one considered for a moment that the basic functionality of a town was dependent upon the learned skills of it's people.

Ruling the towns through fear turned out to be a much more worthwhile endeavor, but this required rather extensive communications to be carried out between the different towns and the palace. This chore was initially placed upon prince Validus, who would have been easily overwhelmed with micromanagement if he had not - in a flash of brilliance - delegated the work to a small committee of shadowfowl and turned Orlandians.

Charge of this committee was then placed in the hands of a extraordinarily tall shadowfowl that simple went by the moniker of "the Messenger". At first it only served as a liaison between the committee and the prince, but as time wore on it took on more duties and wound up regularly traveling the roads of Orlandia to carry them out.

Since the flame texts appeared, the Messenger's primary duty had become to differentiate those loyal to the emperor from those that defied him. The large bamboo staff it carried had been enchanted to burn the anarchist's "A" brand into the defilers that they took prisoner and to carry small rewards for those that aided with the capture of such scum.

It was these particular duties that led the Messenger to travel down the roads that would lead towards the villages on the outer edges of the empire. Not Bedlam of course. That town was obviously overrun with vermin that the emperor was certainly set to exterminate. No, it was the other towns that had certain things in common with that village it was going to inspect.

It was on it's way back from the border towns of Svenson and Gielen when it stumbled upon a strange pair of humans that were so heavily buried in glamor magic that they obviously needed branding.

"Perth look out!"

The little mouse barely had time to dodge out of the way of the business end of the Messenger's branding staff when Tiereth took a flying leap at the shadowfowl, causing it to topple backwards under its own unbelievable height.

Contrary to its own appearance the Messenger was fast and before Tiereth could manage to roll out of its grasp it placed a clawed hand on her throat and clenched. It perhaps would have killed her then and there if brilliant little Perth had not taken that opportunity to attempt to break a rock on its head.

The Messenger dropped the owl and staggered for a moment, which gave Tiereth time to half change back into her natural form so that she would have talons in which to rip at its throat with and Perth found another rock.

The Messenger regained its center in time to lose it again as the owl charged with her claws at its head. It whirled out of her way and brought up its staff in its unnatural speed to smack the owl out of the air. Once again it underestimated the mouse, who took its knees out with another rock.

Though the others would not know it, the Messenger was forged from the earth, but it did not like it. In fact it was rather afraid of being reunited with it and so once its head hit the ground it exploded into the magic equivalent of a blind berserk rage and dissipated in a cloud of dark smoke. Then, before its opponents could react, it was above them where it re-solidified its form and with a driving strike, caught the half-owl square in the chest with its staff and sent her flying into the mouse.

Tiereth's call of anguish from being branded was cut short as she was caught by Perth, who only puffed a little as she was knocked out from her own collision with the ground. The messenger did not wait for the owl to get her bearing before attacking again, this time with a side-swipe that threw her into the bushes on the side of the road where Tiereth watched in frustration as the giant shadowfowl used its staff to also mark her unconscious friend.

She dashed out of the bushes in an unplanned charge and found herself nearly staggering over the spotted where the messenger used to be as it just as suddenly decided

to continue it's trek down the road.

"What the... " Tiereth asked the air as Perth finally came to and sat up.

Perth wearily followed the owl's gaze, flinching as she put pressure on the burnt flesh of her arm. "Not that I'm not pleased, but why is it leaving?"

Tiereth, once again fully in human disguise, poked lightly at the tender skin just below her collarbone and flinched. "I think it's done with us."

"What do we do now?" Perth inquired.

"I guess that we..." Tiereth's thoughts were interrupted as, in the process of helping her friend up, the pouch containing the acorn brushed against her arm. Thousands of images flashed into her mind, including that of a gray mouse not to unlike her friend, ran through a field with a different acorn in it's mouth.

She dropped the one she was aiding to the ground as she forced herself to break contact with the pouch.

"Ow hey! What you do that for!" Perth shouted as she picked herself up from a hard landing, but immediately calmed as she noticed her escort blink away the daze caused by memories that were not one's own.

"That's not the acorn that you're ancestor stole..."

Perth looked at the owl in confusion. "What say you?"

"Where did you say that he got that from?" The owl asked as she pointed at the pouch.

The mouse backed up a little bit, again unaware of how she should act around the owl. "A city by a great body of water... blue water."

It was not an unsatisfactory answer, but there were hundreds of cities that fit that description in the world, as so Tiereth scanned both her own memories as well as the intrusions and realized that she had an answer after all.

"Does Lazuli Bay sound familiar?"

Perth paused for a moment and realized that she did in fact know that name. "It does!" she exclaimed and then suddenly found herself confused again. "Why do you ask?"

Tiereth frowned and tried to shake away the bazaar feeling of destiny suddenly overcome with and found that she could not. "I think that's where we need to go. Come, let us continue our way to Svenson and hope that we can find a map."

With that the two made their way to the other nearby farming town, being sure to continue down the path in the opposite direction of where the Messenger now traveled.

Chapter 4

Going to Svenson was a mistake.

Upon arrival the unlikely pair discovered exactly what their brands represented and that the majority of this particular town's citizens were rather against it for they were loyalists. Cowards that chose the easier of two paths and had decided to follow the new emperor out of fear instead of standing up for their rights.

After being chased for what felt an eternity they rounded a corner and found themselves in a dead-ended alley, which was all but empty of life for few moments. "Thank the stars!" Tiereth exclaimed as she threw Perth forward and dropped the disguise spell that they both had to endure up until this point.

Before Perth could protest she found herself held gently in the owl's claws as she flew her way to the top of a roof. The little mouse barely caught sight of the now-confused townsfolk as they maliciously poured into the little alley and found themselves perplexed as to where their prey had vanished to.

"That was close." Tiereth said as she landed on a part of a roof that was obscured by a outcropping meant to collect rainwater.

"Yeah..." Perth agreed as she jumped out of the uncomfortable feel of Tiereth's talons. She then glanced at her arm and found, alarmingly enough, that the brand was still in tact even in this form. She glanced up at saw that owl's had remained as well.

"Apparently I was not the only one that decided that the shadows were bad."

The great horned owl flipped her head upside down to try and get a better look at her own brand, but could not and righted herself to give up on the tiny effort. It made Perth laugh.

"It's going to make getting information a whole lot harder though..." Tiereth stated as

she tried to work out a way to obtain a sense of where they were in the scheme of things. As she was lost in thought, Perth stepped up with an idea.

"Umm... I am a mouse. I could just sneak in through the wood-work and find us a map."

Tiereth, who had been going through the archives of spells learned, realized that she totally overlooked the obvious and was suddenly glad that they dropped their disguises because the blush that would have shown up on her would have given away her embarrassment. There was literally only one small problem to this however.

"How would you carry it?"

Perth, who was now so small that she was sitting on the pouch that they made for the acorn, tilted her head and shrugged - a habit that she picked up from her escort. "If I can't fold it up, I'll just try to remember it. The human's are rather proud of their 'cartography' skills, so it shouldn't be too hard to figure it out."

The owl nodded and then gestured at the pouch, a little weary of what she was about to volunteer because of her previous experience with the thing. "Would you like me to carry that for you?"

Perth stared long and hard at the owl before eventually sighing in agreement. Now that she was in her mouse form again, she could carry the acorn in her cheek, but somehow she felt that it would be best not to get caught with it if she were to get caught at all. "Yes. That might be best."

Tiereth first went to reach for the pouch with her claw, but then realized that there was a better way to carry it and knelt down for the little mouse. Perth caught on and climbed up her friend's wing to loop the strap over her friend's head and around her neck. This also gave Perth a different idea.

"Hey... instead of carrying me in your claws could I use that to ride on your back?"

The owl shrugged, hiding her feelings on the subject. "I guess so..."

"Thanks." With that the mouse was off on her mission, climbing through a hole in the roof in which the outcropping fed rainwater into a large bucket inside. The building itself turned out to be a small tavern, which was both good news and bad as it meant that there would almost assuredly be a map, but lots of people to avoid.

There was also the temptation of food, which caused Perth to realize that she had not eaten since she met up with the owl. She then realized that this also meant that the owl had suffered the same. Fighting back the chills of such thoughts, she decided that fasting might be best and continued on her way.

It took her easily a couple of hours to sort through all the different rooms and determine which were the most likely to contain her current goal. She was almost seen once, but a quick dart under a shelf rectified that.

It had been a while since she scurried like this and it felt good. If there were another mouse here she would certainly tell them that they had a magnificent place to do such, but she had not seen another aside from herself. That suddenly worried her.

Almost as though the thought itself called it into being, a shadow rose up behind her and reached out to grab her tail - the easiest part of her to reach. She squeaked out of surprise and spun around to see the shadow creeping to engulf the rest of her. Out of reflex she turned and bit the thing and was surprised to find that there was substance to cling to. The shadow recoiled out of pain and she used that opportunity to run as fast as she could into the tavern's main hall, where she was blessed with a site that she somehow never expected.

Not only was there a map - there was a giant map! It stretched all across the wall and had a wonderfully detailed flourish of the tavern's location on it. She couldn't read the human's writing in this form, but the illustrations more than made up for it and she was able to spot Lazuli Bay on it with ease.

She wanted to run up to the roof and tell her owl friend all about it, but she forced

herself to stay the extra minute to double, and then re-double check the directions in her mind. Once she was satisfied that she knew the way she turned and saw that more shadows had blocked her way back. She would have to find another way out.

Rapidly she scanned the room and found that the only way out was the main door... which was closed. She would have to wait for it to open. She looked back and panicked as she saw the shadows making their way towards her. She would just have to chance it.

She expertly scurried along the wall and made her way right next to where the door would open and waited. The shadows crept along behind her, teasing her as they slowly closed in. Perth could feel her heart racing as they closed in and just when she thought that they would have her an angry drunk stormed away from the bar, shouting obscenities as he plowed through the door.

Before she knew it she was climbing the outer-wall of the tavern and thought that for sure she would have lost the shadows, but in the time that she had taken to find the map night had fallen. This was their domain.

Somehow she made it to the roof and found herself dismayed in the fact that the owl was nowhere to be found. She cursed herself for leaving the acorn and then again for trusting an evening predator like she did. All mice were trained not to believe the words of their predators and yet she allowed herself to do just that.

With a new found anger she turned to fight the shadows, and then suddenly found herself airborne - clutched carefully in familiar talons.

"I'm sorry to break our agreement little mouse, but it's been insane out here since night fell." a breath between wing beats. "Where you able to find a map?"

Perth readjusted herself so that she was sitting comfortably in Tiereth's claw. She was both angry at herself for resenting the owl and pleased that her friend came back. "Yes!"

"Good! Then we best be on our way for I cannot think of a safe place for us to rest until morning."

Chapter 5

The twin suns zenithed over the sea of oak and found an odd sight amongst the branched of a tree, where a great horned owl and a mouse slept inside the remnants of an osprey's nest. They had flown all night and managed to close the majority of the distance between Svenson and Lazuli Bay, but were often stopped short because of a need to battle odd creatures that were perhaps once something familiar.

The evening left the pair exhausted and the abandoned nest was the perfect place to rest up as they would be both invisible to air-born predators as well as those on the ground. They however did not get to sleep for long as eventually the sounds of battle washed over the mighty forest.

"What is that?!" Perth, who had been trained all of her life to wake upon the sounds of danger jumped up and crawled out of the camouflage that were Tiereth's feathers.

"Fffttttt..." Tiereth answered back in her sleep. She wasn't ready to be awake yet for she was dreaming of bigger, more important things - things involving a phoenix, a tree, a nut...

A stray arrow whizzed many feet below the branch the they were sleeping on and caught in a bush. Perth saw the whole occurrence and although she did not understand the details of human battles, she recognized this situation as possibly dangerous.

The little mouse climbed up onto the owls back so that she could look directly into her sleeping face and flicked at the spot right between her eyes. "WAKE UP! WE'RE IN TROUBLE!"

Almost as though she were released from a trance as opposed to simply waking up, the owls eyes flicked open and narrowed on the little mouse. "What are you going on about?"

Perth silenced herself and pointed up, indicating that the owl listen to the air around them, where the sound of battle only intensified. Realization dawned in those sleep-

addled eyes and soon she was gazing off in the direction the sounds emanated from.

"That's not like any battle I've ever heard before. Let's leave before it makes its way here."

Perth - who was already on the great owl's back - grabbed the strap of the pouch and squeaked in agreement. With a silent drop-propelled take off, they were back on their journey.

Their flight was unhindered as the shadowfowl that were out had other things to orient their attention upon. The rest undoubtedly were taking a break from the light of the twin suns - which were for Tiereth and Perth, sparkling beautifully off the bluest waters that they have ever seen.

Lazuli Bay lived up to its name, as the cool semi-precious waters were set beautifully into a sea-side town of ivory and gold. Fishing boats were docked and the marketplace was bustling with life that appeared to be unaffected by current affairs.

They landed on the awning of a fish vendor's booth, Tiereth taking special care to make sure that nobody on the ground would be able to see the brand that had darkened the feathers on her breast. Perth, also not wanting to be noticed jumped down to hide underneath the owl's folded wings.

"Why'd we stop here?" Perth asked as she watched a little kid point at Tiereth and incorrectly label her as a simple "birdie".

"I'm hungry." Tiereth replied in a manner that sent chills up Perth's spine.

The owl seemed to catch wind of this and huffed. "I'm going to steal a fish. You can do whatever you want. Just meet me over at that boat as soon as you eat your fill."

Perth followed the owl's gaze to a large boat that appeared permanently docked in the harbor as it was half underwater and resting on the cobblestone walkway that ran along

next to it. It would be easy to board.

"Ummm... okay." the little mouse said as she scurried down the back-side of the fisher's booth. When she was a while out of sight, the owl swooped to snatch a fish right out of the vendor's hand as he was trying to present it to a potential buyer. The both of them shouted curses after the owl, which Tiereth prayed were empty for she had enough troubles of her own.

Her recent dreams for example were particularly troubling. As she landed on a cross-section of a broken boat mast and picked at her fish, she pondered on these.

She had followed Perth's ancestor as a target for her dinner (which would have been infinitely better than the salty aquatic she was eating now) and stopped short as she was greeted by a tree.

It is common knowledge that trees do not talk, let alone move, but this one was doing both and it's attention was aimed at her. The tree commanded her to cease her hunting and because you don't argue with a tree, she listened and landed softly in the field shortly behind the mouse, who eventually climbed into a small burrow between the the trees roots.

This site made her angry because she needed to eat and the tree denied her that. When she voiced her opinion on starving she was greeted in kind by a giant flaming bird that said the mouse was fated to deliver an acorn to someone whose name somehow escaped her memory.

Tiereth assumed in the dream that the acorn was supposed to be delivered to the tree and argued that now that it was delivered that she be compensated. The phoenix flared up and burned new markings into the features of the great horned owl and proclaimed that the acorn to be delivered was not the same nut that was now safely buried inside of the tree, but was a different one that was to serve as the key to reach the first one.

The dream-owl then feigned ignorance and her new markings caught fire. The phoenix informed her that she was to protect the key-holder and bring her to the tree on

the day that fate called for it. The giant flame-bird then vanished and the tree silenced itself, becoming invisible amongst the rest of it's kin in the forest.

Tiereth finished her fish and held a wing out so that she could clearly see the markings on her feathers in the slowly fading sunlight. They were the same as they always were - vaguely swirly with a hint of oak bark in their jaggedness - nothing noteworthy about them. She checked her other wing just to be sure and found the same thing and a bit of disappointment.

Perth had joined her before she noticed and she wondered how the little mouse managed to be so stealthy. She then realized that she was more lost in thought than the mouse was sneaky, but she dismissed this as it seemed like Perth had something to say.

"Find something out?" she asked the mouse with her full attention.

The mouse nodded and then pointed towards one of the many sea-facing doors that dotted the coast. "The large door over there. The green one. That's the house that we stole the acorn from. I saw it while I was climbing up here and I know that is where the stupid troll lived. I know it!"

Tiereth wanted to call the little mouse out on following gut feeling, but the dreams were still too fresh in her mind to argue with her. Instead she nodded and spoke "All right. Climb on. We'll go pay them a visit."

Another silent take-off, a glide, and a disguise spell later two humans knocked on a large green door. When there was no answer they knocked again. They were about to knock a third time when it opened inward with a rush and an angry voice - belonging to one of the biggest and yet somehow most beautiful troll either of them have ever seen - boomed out at them. "Whateryou want?"

Perth seemed to find her composition before Tiereth did and once again the owl found herself in envy of the little mouse's finesse. "We.. um... know something about a relic that was once in your possession. A acorn..."

A vague hint of understanding crossed the troll's eyes and she stepped aside, allowing them into her incredibly odd, but somehow pleasant home. It was decorated with all sort of indefinable clutter, but it was organized by color, which made the single-room suite into an interesting rainbow of earth tones. Tiereth was actually comforted by this display as it reminded her somewhat of her own woods.

The troll locked the door and turned to face them - her whole demeanor changed and she was suddenly as pretty inside as she was outside. "Sorry about that. Strange folks have been visiting lately for equally strange things and I've appearances to keep. I've no doubt that they are after the same as you are, but you twos the first to say what specifically it was."

Perth and Tiereth exchange glances and then looked back at the troll, who eagerly introduced herself. "I'm Jarrhundii Greenwater, formerly the Greenwardens. Who might you be?"

Once again Perth stepped forward and spoke for the both of them. "I'm Perth and this is Tiereth. We're... what's wrong?"

Jarrhundii's whole expression had dropped and she looked troubled. "I know the name Tiereth..."

This left the owl more perplexed then ever, but she didn't want to derail anything good that they had going for them now, "I do not know why my name would bring any recollection to you, Miss Greenwater. I am just here as an assistant to little Perth here, who wishes to speak to you of an incident involving your kin many years ago."

The troll continue to stare at Tiereth cautiously and made her way over to Perth, who explained that she knew that the troll no longer had the acorn. This news made Jarrhundii both excited and nervous at the same time which she explained was because her family always wanted to know what happened to it.

Between the two of them the story of the acorn became clear:

Glubbon - one of many in the line since Junedel Greenwarden - had inherited the acorn from his grandmother, whom he took for a gibbering old fool when she departed from life, for he was of a rebellious nature. When he got the nut as his inheritance, he became angry and tried to pawn it off on a friend in exchange for something of no importance. After he had badgered his friend enough to finally make the swap, he discovered that the nut was missing.

He was plagued with nightmares from then on, which eventually drove him mad and he jumped into the ocean never to return from it. His children, whom have come to understand what the dreams meant pretended that the acorn never left the family as a means to protect it from those that would follow it's trail. They were also the one's to change the family name from Greenwarden to Greenwater, for that was the color the water turned when their father dove into it.

Perth's ancestor was a local resident during the time of Glubbon and his whole family understood the value of the acorn. They plotted against the troll and had him steal it when they realized that it would soon be out of the hands of it's proper caretakers regardless of what they did.

It was at this point that Perth had retrieved the pouch from Tiereth and presented the small nut that they'd been carrying all this time. The owl knew that this was not the real acorn at all, but remained quiet.

The whole apartment had in fact gone quiet save for a low cackling that at first seemed to resonate inside their heads and then soon expanded outwards until it was emanating from Jarrhundii herself. While Perth stood frozen in uncertainty as to what was going on, the troll snatched the acorn from her hand and changed as her faint shadows began to darken and ooze off of her.

"Walked right into that one didn't ya! Haha!" She danced a little jig and shot a blob of sticky black stuff at them, which pinned Perth to one of the walls of junk, but left Tiereth alone.

"I knew it!" the troll exclaimed and then stepped forward. "You and I, we're of the same batch we are! Darklings from before. I a troll... and you... you were an owl!"

Tiereth stepped backwards from the entity who guessed entirely too right. "I don't understand what you are saying..."

"Ah but what is this?! An Anarch are you?!" The troll gouged a finger into the branded A on the human owl's chest, which much like the acorn did, sent a wave of memories flooding back into Tiereth's mind.

The first was of the natural act of hunting and being cornered by shadows similar in many ways to those that chased them night before, but less developed... as if from an earlier age. They engulfed her and convinced her that there would be more food if she joined their side. As this was a persuasive enough argument for the young owl, she agreed.

Then there was a great battle and she had a human-ish form as she cast spells and fell a great number of their enemies, whom only appeared as menacing pillars of light in her mind.

Then there was a scattering, but it was different from the one that recently split Orlandia up, and she found herself chasing a mouse. Knowing all too well the treasure it contained was one that the darkness had sought to retrieve from the trolls.

Then she backtracked to another memory of herself storming through the very door of the apartment that they stood in now so that she could run a sword through Glubbon Greenwarden so that she could take an item that he possessed.

The owl collapsed as the forgotten memories of her own being a shadowfowl flooded her mind and she tried to breathe but could not. She was a simple creature and was far too young for this to be true... but then she thought of her birthday and realized that she could not remember it - a ridiculous thing for owls, who are proud of their age. She also realized that the run-in with the phoenix was no coincidence and that this was the point where she was stripped of the darkness and re-made into the being that she once was. She was ashamed of this though and had run away to the Wyldewood where the generations blurred and she forced herself to forget all of the unpleasant memories of a long past.

As she was facing the truth she lay vulnerable to the evil magic-wielding troll that now stood before her - her former accomplice in crime. She didn't know what would have happened to her, for all she knew was that once again, somehow, Perth had saved her from an attack that could have killed her.

"I thought that was my job." She said under her breath as she watch the mouse fight the troll off to retrieve the acorn.

Tiereth stood up, and chanted a spell so that she changed into something that carried a slight sibilance to the form she took as a shadowfowl in ages past and approached the troll, who smiled at her. "That's my girl! Now finished off this human brat!"

The troll apparently had not realized that Perth's ancestor was a mouse and thus did not realize that it was Tiereth's magic that made her appear human. The owl could hardly believe the audacity of the troll, who assumed that her few words were enough to convince her to once again side with the dark faction that had taken over Orlandia.

Tiereth easily slinked her way across the apartment to where the troll managed to blast the mouse with another blob of sticky black goop and force her to the ground. Memories attached to the shadowfowl form invaded her mind and she remembered that she once had a favorite weapon from those days. Making unconscious gestures with her not-quite hands, she summoned the evil, jagged black blade and balked slightly at its lack of weight in her hand. It felt fake, but she knew all too well that it was not. The troll had looked up from the mouse and mis-read Tiereth's distaste for the sword as a grimace for the disguised mouse on the floor.

"Weeeohh! Look at you! You beautiful!" The troll then moved out of the way to let Tiereth plunge the blade of her sword into the captive at her feet.

"Ummm... No." Tiereth was quick to disappoint and rather eagerly plunged the disgusting sword through troll's eye, felling her instantly.

Tiereth let the shadow form illusion wash off of her and she sighed. She nearly tried the form on to see if the memories were hers or the troll's, but as she wore the disguise

she felt the familiarity of it and the vague longing to regain something that was once lost and shuddered.

The troll had spoken true.

Perth, who had no idea what to think at this point stood in silence with the acorn that she retrieved from the troll's dead hand.

"Lets go. You need to swap that one for another." The owl said coldly as she walked outside of the single-room apartment that was the proud Greenwarden estate.

Chapter 6

Tiereth was moody over the next couple of weeks as she tried to sort her thoughts and feelings out. At one point Perth felt it was best to try and help and found herself learning entirely too much about her recently acquired friend and realized that the feeling of mistrust that she had for her may not have simply been a matter of being her dinner.

After a while she gave up on this thought and looked at the current situation. The owl could have eaten her a number of times and she could have taken the acorn easily while they were in Svenson and didn't. She even killed someone that she recognized as having been once a comrade all just to protect a little mouse like her.

After another day of the owl's brooding, she brought this up and the owl lightened up enough to eat some berries - which Perth could have sworn were not a part of her diet. Days afterward Tiereth seemed to have felt well enough to surprise the little mouse by flying her over a forest that, for reasons unknown, called to her.

Eventually they landed in a clearing where Tiereth informed her that she was on her own. Perth panicked and demanded to know why the owl was abandoning her after all that they had been through. The explanation was simple enough though, the owl was forbidden from entering the forest on the side of the clearing.

Although Perth didn't understand this either, she continued and found a tree that seemed to speak to her. In fact it actually DID speak to her.

“Little key-keeper, you must bring the seed of the first oak to the avatar.”

Talking tree. The tree was talking...

“Be not hesitant little one. There is no time to waste!”

Angry tree. Oh no! The tree was angry!

Perth ran forward a little unaware of what she was doing and soon she found herself standing at a tangle of roots that looked, to her, a little like a doorway. She spotted a strange little nook in the middle of it all and decided unconsciously to put her acorn into it.

A strange screeching sound somewhat similar to metal rubbing against metal emanated from the tangle as it moved and lifted to form the vague semblance of an archway, just large enough for a mouse to fit through.

“ENTER!” Commanded the tree and Perth dashed through the strange doorway, leaving Tiereth alone with the tree as she waited in the clearing.

The tunnel under the tree was unlike any that Perth had ever seen before. The first big noticeable difference was that it was lit. The second was that it was smooth, and appeared to have stairs that were spaced perfectly for a tiny quadruped.

This tunnel ended abruptly at a wall with a single thorn protruding from it. Perth sniffed around the thorn and after a while, tried pushing down on it like a lever that a human might use. This did nothing but make her arms sore.

Using proper mouse logic, Perth tried to alleviate her confusion by sniffing the thorn itself and pricked her nose upon it. A single drop of blood clung to it's tip and she cradled her wounded nose in her hands. Through watery eye she saw the droplet become absorbed by the thorn, which then retracted and irised outward to form another doorway.

Although she was mad about having to endure a little bit of pain just to make a door open, she walked through and found herself in a huge chamber with a single, cypress-knee-like pedestal in the middle of it. On said pedestal was the most beautiful acorn that she had ever seen.

It appeared unearthly in the sense that it glowed with it's own calming green light through a surface that glistened as though it were coated in morning dew. To the touch however it was dry and very solid. Her already watering eyes spilled over as she was granted the privilege to hold such a wondrous thing.

Understanding came with it and she realized that it was but one of ten items that needed to be obtained by the satyr that they were originally seeking.

"I never thought the world to be so small." Perth exhaled, amazed that they had followed the right course of action after all.

Leaving the tree was nowhere near as adventurous as entering had been, but as she came to the clearing she heard a noise that at first startled her, then made her happy: Tiereth was laughing.

She was laying on the grass in her human disguise, which she obviously had switched to so that she could read a piece of paper that she was holding out in front of her. On it was a proclamation of celebration in the capital, where Perth's family lived as well as did the emperor. It was a silly proclamation, but it was perfect for having been created by a reveler such as the one that they were seeking.

Perth laughed after Tiereth explained it to her and then handed over the acorn so that the owl would be able to put it in the pouch that originally contained the key. "That's... that's amazing... I hope we get to see him soon."

Tiereth's smile faded from her face and she took on the stance of one who was worried about such a meeting. "We have to go to him next, but I don't think that I can full face him as I am now. I apologize, but we'll give him the acorn and then leave."

Perth's own jovial appearance dropped and she stared at her friend out of concern. "What's wrong?"

Tiereth shook her head and then switched back into her natural owl form to hide her emotions. "It's nothing my little friend. I just need some time reflect upon some things forgotten. If he really is the avatar for the phoenix as the tree suggested then I would simply have a hard time speaking to him as an old friend."

The mouse nodded a faked understanding and climbed onto the owl's back. "Think

you can find him?"

Tiereth nodded and explained that the handbill had come in on the wind, but contained enough of its originating spell so that they could follow the trail to its origin (with the aide of a spell of her own). From there they might be able to find out where the satyr had gone off to.

What they didn't expect was to follow the paper's trail to the dwarven city of Hindwalde, a place that because it was underground, Tiereth very much wished not to enter - no matter how jovial it sounded. Neither could guess what happened to put everyone in such a good mood as they were not within the mountain itself, but the vent shafts and war windows emitted the sounds and smell of festivity.

They landed near a shorter shaft near the base of the mountain and were fortunate enough to overhear a conversation about the battle that took place in the towns square, its victor, and the fact that he left through the main entrance as opposed to the secret tunnel that was created for him eons ago.

Being a hunter as she was, Tiereth was able to pick up on the sweet smell of a clean wood fire on the wind and recognized it as the smell of the phoenix, which she followed for quite some time to the town of Hedgenbury... which had turned into some sort of war camp, which although necessary, terrified Perth.

"I think... I'll agree with you on not sticking around to chat with your friend..." The mouse said as she looped off the pouch so that Tiereth could catch it in her claw for ease of delivery.

After a while of flying around the city they came by a window that had the same camp-fire smell that they had been following for hours. It had no window sill to land upon so Tiereth pecked at the glass until finally the Satyr inside came to the window. Despite the confused look upon his face, they did not stay to chat with him and instead flew off as soon as they were rid of the pouch.

"Remember the way home?" Tiereth asked once they were as close to the moonlight as they were going to get.

"Of course." Proclaimed the little mouse and pointed in a direction she was certain was the correct one.

"Okay then. Let's just hope that the rest of your kin don't mistake me for some evil thing that would eat them." the owl jested as Perth lightly punched her in the back of the head. "If I were not with you they might, but I think that they'll just be happy to see me." She explained.

The unlikely pair made their way to the capital, where despite the infestation of shadowfowl, things were finally starting to look up.