

The Blade Heir

Daniel Adorno



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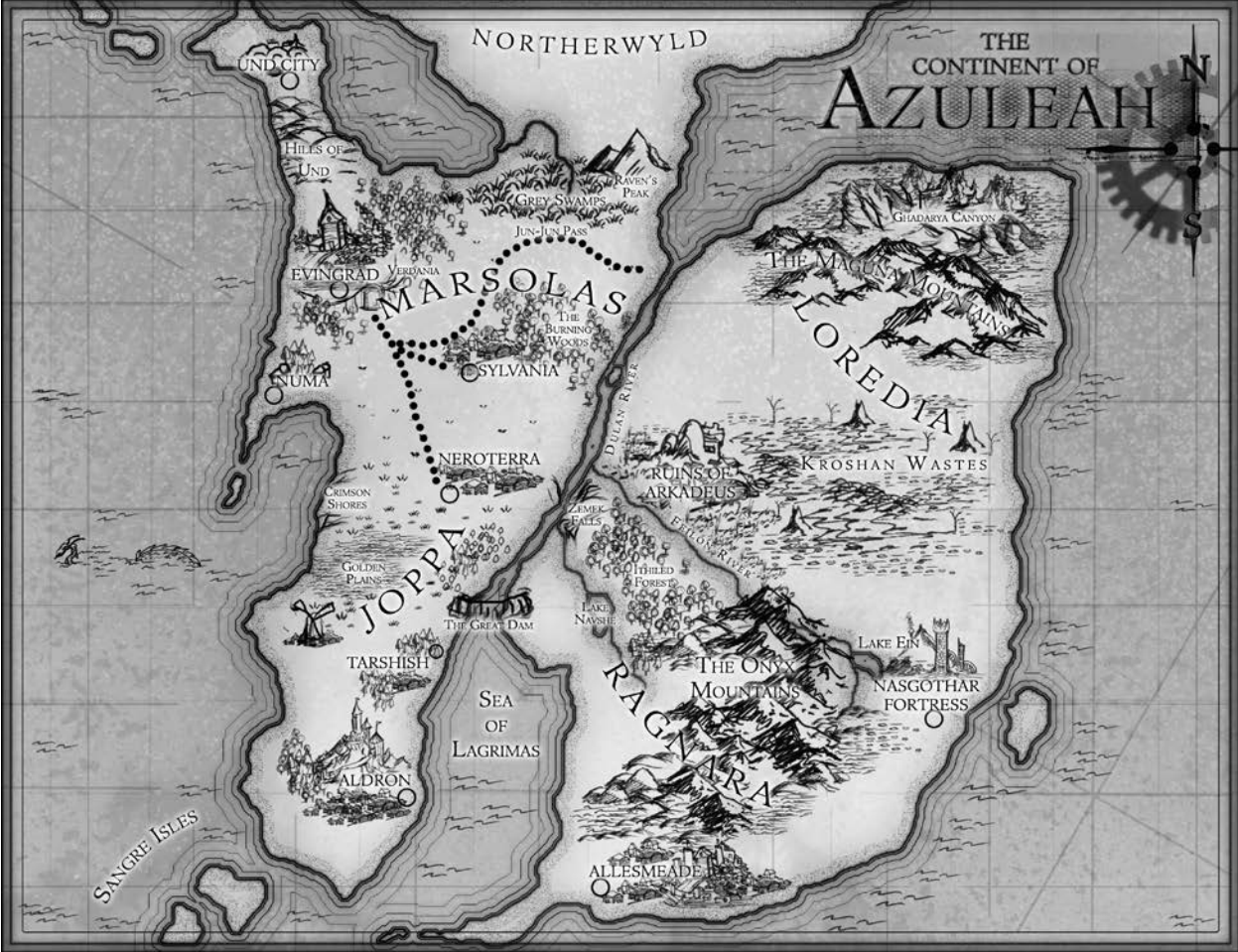


Table of Contents

[Dedication](#)
[Into the Deep](#)
[A Test of Skill](#)
[Revelations of Lineage](#)
[The Path of the Ellylei](#)
[A Grand Escape](#)
[Dragon Slayers](#)
[A New Dawn in Sylvania](#)
[The Healer and the Assassin](#)
[Lumiath](#)
[The Shores of the Dulan](#)
[The Blacksmith's Cottage](#)
[Nearing Death's Door](#)
[Machinations](#)
[Friends and Allies](#)
[Dark Alliance](#)
[In the Realm of Faeries](#)
[Siegfried's Trial](#)
[The Southern Passage](#)
[Golem](#)
[Hidden Royalty](#)
[A Dark Errand](#)
[As the Crow Flies](#)
[The Magpie's Roost](#)
[Bitter Wine](#)
[Aldron's Bane](#)
[The Approaching Army](#)
[The Wretched One](#)
[Trial by Fire](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Note from the Author](#)
[About the Author](#)

To my wife, Ariel. Your unfailing love and support have been invaluable in realizing a lifelong dream.

ONE

Into the Deep

The blue mist permeated the air once more and enveloped Lucius in the darkness of the land of Azuleah. Before him stood a great fortress, once prominent and awe-inspiring but now an empty shell of its former glory. Its towers stood ominously above him, dark sentinels beside the massive gate of the fortress known as Arkadeus. It was a sight to behold, both awe-inspiring and fearsome to Lucius.

From the outside, Lucius saw mist emanating from the open gate and he walked closer, entering the place where darkness dwelled and awaited him. He passed slowly through the mold-ridden doors. Once inside, he found himself at the outer edge of a massive courtyard with a fountain at its center. The blue haze surrounded him and radiated a surreal light within the courtyard. On each side of the front gate there were stairs rising up to the ramparts of the stronghold where tattered flags hung lifelessly from the sentry posts along the inner wall. Broken spears and arrow shafts lay strewn on the courtyard floor, evidence of a grand battle fought long ago. Beyond the aged fountain, there was an arched doorway leading deeper inside the halls of the old fortress. Every few seconds, the fog would billow out from the doorway like smoke from the mouth of a

pipe. Lucius made his way to the entrance, fearing what lay within the bowels of Arkadeus.

He peered inside and saw a long corridor with oak doors on each side. The mist floated above the floor and cast an eerie light on the cracked and moldy walls. A stench hung in the air, and as Lucius continued inside, it grew fouler, causing his stomach to wrench. He tried to open the doors within the corridor, but they were locked. And after the third door, he gave up and followed the mist toward the end of the hall.

Lucius stepped through another arched doorway and found himself inside a room full of overturned tables, shattered pots, and broken chairs. The mist was thicker inside this room and the stench stronger. A doorway to the right led to a descending staircase, while the one to his left ascended to some upper level of the dark fortress. Another doorway straight ahead was blocked with rubble and refuse. He glanced to his right and saw the fog billowing from that doorway, so he crept closer toward it. The putrid stench filled his nostrils and nauseated him. His uneasiness intensified as he descended the spiral staircase, but he could not retreat—some force beckoned him further down. The blue, hazy light seemed to brighten more with each step he took. Deepening dread began to overtake him, and he feared what evil lay at the end of his descent.

The staircase ended in a narrow hallway where the blue light shone steadily. Lucius heard a faint whisper calling to him from a glowing chamber at the end of the hall. He reluctantly drew closer to the light. Its gleam enticed him, pervading his every thought. The walls of the hallway bore arcane inscriptions and runes unknown to Lucius. He stopped just outside of the room and peered inside.

The stench was now burning his nostrils, and he fought to keep himself from retching. Within the round room, a blanket of fog covered the entire floor. He examined the walls of the chamber in the blue glow and noticed dark stains along the porous stone surface. Rusty hooks and chains hung from many places in the room. In the center of the room, Lucius noticed a small bump protruding from the mist. He squinted his eyes to examine the object in the dim light and soon realized it was glaring at him. The bump had two unblinking, dark eyes peering above the mist, keeping a steady gaze on Lucius. He

wanted to run and hide from the bump's relentless stare, but his legs were frozen in place. The bump did not move, and Lucius did not look away, fearing any movement might bring about his end.

His fear kept him motionless. But after a few minutes, Lucius broke his stare and quickly looked around for any kind of weapon. He saw nothing except the swirling fog around him. His eyes darted back to the shadowy eyes at the center of the room. They had not stirred in the slightest. Lucius crouched down, keeping his eyes fixed on the creature before him. He ran his fingers along the cold, damp floor hastily searching for a weapon. His hand felt something hard. He quickly snatched it up and gripped it with his right hand, eyes still trained ahead. The object was light, but felt hard enough to inflict some damage to the creature with a powerful thrust.

He hesitated a moment before attacking the unblinking bump challenging him within the dancing blue cloud. With a yell, he dashed forward, raising his right arm over his head, ready to strike. But before he could smite his enemy, Lucius stopped abruptly and, to his horror, finally realized what lay at his feet.

A human skull upon a pile of bones stared blankly at him as he lowered his weapon. His heart thumped rapidly in his chest. He had never seen the remains of a man before, and it soon became apparent the chamber he had wandered into served a dark purpose. The round room was a dungeon of some sort, and the stains upon the walls were the blood of those unfortunate souls who had ventured inside. Panic swelled within him. He raised his arm to wipe the sweat from his brow and gasped when he saw his weapon was a thigh bone. He dropped it and frantically wiped his hand on his vest. The sound of hoarse laughter from above startled him.

Lucius looked overhead, but only saw a dark expanse. The laughter subsided, and a faint whisper called out his name. A chill ran down his spine as he searched the piercing darkness.

"Who goes there?" Lucius cried. There was no response. He trembled while he searched for movement of any kind. Nothing stirred.

Lucius stepped away from the center of the room, heading toward the staircase slowly. A metal squeak overhead followed by a thundering flap of mighty wings alarmed him. Strong gusts of air from above rushed all around his body. The fog was blown off the floor momentarily, revealing scattered bones and bloodstains throughout the dungeon. Lucius' knees buckled, and he hit the floor hard.

A guttural bellow resonated in the darkness. The foul stench finally caused Lucius to vomit. And as he did so, a huge beast descended upon him. Its large talons crushed the pile of bones underfoot with a thunderous crack. Lucius looked up to meet the behemoth's glare. Its eyes were intense sapphires shining through the dimly lit room. The monster stood upright on its back legs, spreading its wings at a span that nearly touched the opposite walls of the room. Its breath reeked of death and decay. Large fangs inside a jaw the size of a man's body formed a wicked smile on the creature's face. Black scales adorned its body, save for the monster's belly, which was a pinkish hue. The scales shimmered in the dark. And as the creature craned its long neck, they lifted to reveal gills like those of a fish. With a sudden jerk, the creature folded its wings and inhaled deeply. It opened its jaw and released the blue mist from its gaping gills. The mist floated down above the floor and once again filled the halls of Arkadeus.

"Lucius, you have come to me," the creature said, lowering its head and staring at him.

"What do you want with me, demon?" Lucius said, cowering before the monster, which let out another laugh.

"I am no demon. I am a dragon, fool! Kraegyn is my name, Lord of Arkadeus and of all the aeries of Ghadarya. Fear my wrath, *Ellyllei*."

A dragon? Tales of such great beasts had been told to Lucius as a child, but he thought the dragons had vanished long ago. "Please, Lord Kraegyn, have mercy. What does a dragon desire from me?"

"Mercy?" Kraegyn grunted. "Mercy shall do you no good, *Ellyllei*. Your flesh shall burn from the sapphire flame I spew, and none will remember Lucius again!"

Kraegyn reared up and spread his wings. The dragon's nostrils opened wide as he breathed in the fog in the air. He let out a fierce growl, and blue fire erupted from his jaw into the cavern above. The chamber's immense height was revealed in the crackling flame. The walls climbed nearly fifty feet, ending in an iron grate where the night sky peered through. Between the grate and the room below, dozens of steel perches protruded from the walls. Then they disappeared into darkness when the dragon exhaled the last of its fire and quickly crawled on all fours before Lucius.

Lucius ran toward the staircase, but Kraegyn anticipated his plan and slashed at the foot of the steps with the long claws of his wing arm. Lucius jumped back to avoid the swipe and stumbled, falling backwards on the bones of Kraegyn's victims.

"Foolish boy! You will not escape this chamber, save through dust and ash!" Kraegyn thrust his claw upon Lucius and pinned him with all his weight. Lucius yelled in pain at the monstrous weight. He struggled to free himself, but to no avail. He quickly realized he would die in the dark chamber and endure the same fate as those he now lay upon.

"Be still now, *Ellylle*. You will be one with your fathers and share their doom!" Kraegyn said. The black dragon inhaled the remaining mist in the room and snarled as his jaws gaped open.

Lucius felt the blood drain from his face as flames ignited inside the dragon's mouth. Kraegyn lifted his talons from Lucius' chest and propelled the flame at his body. The fire singed his face and chest, delivering torrents of agony throughout his body. Lucius screamed, but his voice was drowned out by the sound of Kraegyn's laughter. Seconds later, darkness overtook him.



Siegfried Silverhart woke up abruptly when he heard his brother's scream. With elven swiftness, he jumped from his bed and snatched the elf dagger, *Riome*, from the wall. He

ran outside his bedroom into an elegantly decorated hallway, well lit by the moonlight cascading from open slits in the ceiling. His brother's yells persisted as he dashed to the last door at the end of the hall. Siegfried quickly opened the door, dagger at the ready, and lunged inside. He saw his human brother struggling on the bed, tossing his head wildly from side to side. A violent nightmare was upon him. Siegfried set the dagger down and lit a candle on his brother's wall. He stood beside the bed and placed a hand on his brother's shoulder trying to shake his brother awake, but he continued to suffer in his sleep.

"Brother, please wake!" Siegfried cried. "Lucius! Wake up!"

Lucius gasped loudly and finally opened his eyes. He looked up at the elf standing over him, not recognizing him at first. He examined Siegfried's silver locks of hair, his fair face, and the pointed ears characteristic of his race.

"Siegfried?" Lucius whispered.

"Yes, Lucius. It is I," he said smiling.

"Did I have another nightmare?"

"Yes. This one more terrible than the last," Siegfried said. The elf grabbed a glass pitcher from a nightstand and poured water into a small cup then handed it to Lucius.

Lucius sat up and drank the water. "It was worse than any of the previous dreams."

"We should talk about it in the morning. For now, you should rest for tomorrow. It shall be a busy day for both of us."

Lucius sighed. "Yes, I know. Please don't tell Father about this. I know how worried he can get over a foolish dream."

"I won't say a word." Siegfried took the cup from Lucius and set it back on the stand. "Rest now, Lucius. The light of D'arya shall be upon you."

Lucius nodded and lay down, pulling the velvet covers to his shoulders as his mind sank to rest. Siegfried walked out of the room and quietly sang an elven song of protection before closing the door. He returned to his bedroom where he lay on his bed pondering the nature of his brother's dream before drifting to sleep.

TWO

A Test of Skill

Lucius awoke to a knock on his door. Despite his long sleep, he felt tired and uneasy. The ghastly images of his dream were still clear in his mind. The knocking continued as he quickly put on his tunic. He opened the door and saw Siegfried, fully dressed in an emerald tunic and a brown jerkin. He wore a quiver made of tanned hide; in his left hand he held a long bow with a crescent moon embossed on its handle. He greeted him in the elven language and smiled.

"I see you are not yet prepared for our contest today."

Lucius' face flushed. "No, I just woke up. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to oversleep."

"No apology is needed. I will go to the archery grounds and shoot a few targets while you prepare yourself."

"I'll meet you there, Siegfried."

Siegfried bowed slightly then exited the hallway. Lucius dressed himself hurriedly and grabbed his bow and quiver from the hooks on the wall. He walked into the hallway and turned left through an arched door that led into a grand atrium where sunlight poured out from a circular hole in the ceiling onto ornate pillars and marble benches. At the center of the atrium stood a stone monolith with a crescent moon and tree carved on its

surface—the crest of the Silverhart family. Lucius walked up to the monolith, admiring the fine craftsmanship of the elves. On the carved tree's trunk, there was a symbol: three dashes in a column with a single vertical line running through them. It was the rune of D'arya, the elf spirit of Azuleah.

Lucius walked to the southern entrance of the atrium and stepped into a large courtyard. The sun shone brightly outside, giving warmth to the plants and saplings around the stone path he walked on. The path curved around the house and ended at a stone arch, beyond which stood the city of Evingrad. The city rested upon *Breninmaur*, the Great Tree of Verdanía—a centuries-old elvish oak rising seven hundred feet from the ground. Many of the Great Tree's topmost branches were burned in the Ancient War, allowing the D'aryan elves to erect a circular stone foundation in their place. During the construction of Evingrad, the elder elf sages used all their powers of healing to restore the tree and its lower branches. The branches grew in a distinct way, curling around the foundation like a giant, spindly hand tightly grasping the newly constructed city. These supporting branches grew hundreds of feet high, and the myriad of leaves provided substantial shade to the elves living within *Breninmaur*. The city became a living monument built to honor the last of the ancient elvish oaks.

Lucius ran through the stone arch and onto the western road of Evingrad, hastily making his way to the archery grounds near the city square. He passed many lichen-covered houses formed by the elvish wood that sprouted from the trunk of *Breninmaur*. The elves would coax the sprouts to form their dwellings by singing their ancient songs to them. The elf houses, known as *egini*, were the common dwelling, but a few houses were also constructed of marble. As Lucius passed several *egini*, he remembered as a child witnessing the coaxing ritual, where many elves sang day and night to form a house from a sprout no larger than a flower. The result of such patient labor was a beautiful home complete with lattice windows and elegant buttresses rivaling those of great lords and kings. The greater houses built of marble and glass belonged to elves who held great honor and esteem among the elf clans. Siegfried's clan, Silverhart, was held in such regard.

Lucius saw his brother at a distance, shooting arrows with impeccable accuracy at sacks filled with straw. Lucius approached the archery grounds through a gap in the wooden fence surrounding the area. Siegfried continued to shoot the sacks as his brother walked up beside him. Lucius chose not to disturb his practice, but even if he had, the elf's concentration would not waiver—each shot was as precise as the last.

Lucius strung his yew bow and pulled an arrow from the leather quiver over his shoulder. He nocked the arrow, taking steady aim at one of the five sacks dangling from a branch overhead. Marked circles painted on the surface of the sacks corresponded to critical targets on an enemy's torso. Lucius aimed at a circle marked where an enemy's heart would be. He took a deep breath and listened to the twang of Siegfried's bow before releasing the arrow. It whizzed through the air and landed on its mark.

"Very good, Lucius. Your skills are improving," Siegfried said, aiming and shooting at his target while he spoke.

"Indeed they are, Siegfried," he said, nocking another arrow. "Though I doubt I can ever be as good as an elf."

"I dare not question the abilities of a young man like you, but I am confident your potential will surprise many elves."

Lucius laughed. He took aim and shot another arrow, hitting a critical mark. "Let's hope this potential you speak of will help me in today's contest."

"You need not trouble yourself with worry, brother," Siegfried said. He shot his last arrow and hit the target's heart without looking.

"That isn't what troubles me the most," Lucius said, missing his target. "Last night's dream still troubles me."

Siegfried lowered his bow and furrowed his brows. "Was it ... *him*?"

"Yes. The dragon appeared in my dream again—darker and more menacing than before. Kraegyn's fire burnt my flesh."

"Do not speak his name—not here. I do not know what these dreams entail, Lucius. But perhaps you should tell Father about it."

"I don't want to worry him about this. He always secludes himself in his study when I share my dreams with him. I feel as if I've brought a great burden on him ... and to you also by arriving as I did," he said.

"Lucius, you have been a blessing to both my father and I, you know this. If Father worries about your dreams, it is merely because he cares for you. Neither he nor I would allow any evil to cause you harm."

Lucius nodded. "I know. Perhaps I should tell him, then."

"It can only help you, brother. And as for this matter of your arrival, you know that could not be helped. You were a mere infant when you were left at the Marble Gate," Siegfried said, placing his hand on Lucius' shoulder.

"Father still believes it to be a sign of some sort," Lucius scoffed. "But the only sign I see is that of uncaring parents."

Before Siegfried could speak, a horn sounded nearby. They both looked toward the city square. "Has the tournament started?" Lucius asked nervously.

"No, but we must not tarry any longer. Come!" Siegfried grabbed a second quiver of arrows leaning on the fence and rushed toward the western road.

Lucius quickly gathered his gear and tried to keep up with his brother's swift pace. They hurried along the road that ran through the outskirts of the city in a semicircle, eventually connecting with the eastern road. The eastern and western roads were split by an intersecting lane known as the Royal Road. Lucius and Siegfried ran along the eastern road for a few feet before they turned right onto the Royal Road, which led them to Evingrad's center. The cobblestone path was lined with the marble houses of the most honored families. The Royal Road descended a few feet as they neared the Tower of *Breninmaur*, a tall spire used as a post for the elven warriors patrolling the city. The tower also housed the entrance to the Hollows of *Breninmaur*, long tunnels descending into the world below.

The elves of Evingrad were all gathered in the oval court on the eastern side of the Tower. A dais had been erected at the end of the courtyard, and all members of the *Cyngorell*, the governing council of Evingrad, were seated upon it. The *Cyngorell* were

sages, judges, alchemists, and healers who led the elves of Evingrad with their ancient wisdom, seeking peace for all peoples of Azuleah. Helmer Silverhart sat at the right end of the dais and watched his sons, Siegfried and Lucius, run toward the crowd. He winked at Lucius as he lined up with the rest of the assembly.

Lucius stood behind some elder elves in long, velvet robes. He was out of breath, and some of the elves looked at him with raised eyebrows. Siegfried was as calm as ever, standing tall among his kin and waiting for the leader of the Council, Quetulya, to speak. A tall elf dressed in a flowing scarlet robe rose from the center of the dais. His eyes were fierce, but his demeanor was tranquil as he looked upon the crowd before him.

"D'arya be with you all as we gather here today. The *Cyngorell* is pleased to see so many of you here today willing to compete in this year's tournament. As many of you well know, those who claim victory today will become Protectors of Verdania and join our kin in the forests below to safeguard our land from the evils plaguing Azuleah. But this honor cannot be bestowed on any elf ... or man," he said while glancing at Lucius, whose eyes lowered to the ground. "Only those whose skills with a bow and a sword surpass the challenges ahead will be deemed worthy by this Council to serve the Great Tree."

A brief applause came from the crowd as Quetulya sat down. An elf with braided blonde hair and thin eyebrows stood up beside him. He stretched out his arms and recited a poem in the elven tongue honoring D'arya. Then he opened a scroll set on the dais and called out the names of those competing in the tournament. Lucius straightened his posture when his name was called.

"Please step forth from the crowd and join Kiret and Athri on the green seal," the elf said, gesturing toward the large green circle just a few feet from the dais.

Lucius and Siegfried moved through the crowd to the seal where two elves with long, slim swords stood. They wore light armor with a dark green elvish oak emblazoned on the front and back of their torsos. Their greaves gleamed in the sunlight and revealed elven inscriptions. Lucius was most impressed at the artistry of the Protectors' weapons.

The elven blades were a curved shape, and the brown leather scabbards bore the rune of D'arya.

Lucius watched as both Kiret and Athri bowed their heads slightly when the competitors assembled on the seal. Kiret, a shorter male elf with brown hair tied in a knot, motioned to one of his kinsman holding two swords to come forward. Kiret sheathed his sword and took the two swords from the elf's hands. He then signaled Athri with a nod to address the assembly.

"D'arya be with you all who compete here today," the darker-skinned and slender female elf said. "To begin we shall test your efficiency and grace with these elvish swords in combat. Your opponent shall be Kiret. Whoever deals the fatal stroke shall be considered the victor, but the graceful control of your swordplay will be taken into account above victory by the *Cyngorell's* ruling. Let the first warrior step forward."

A young, ruddy elf stepped forward and took hold of one of the swords Kiret handed him. They quickly squared off against each other, Kiret leading the first offensive blow. The young elf parried it gracefully. Kiret thrust his sword at his opponent's chest with ferocious speed, but the elf sidestepped the attack and swung his blade toward Kiret's neck. Kiret anticipated the move and quickly brought his sword up to his face, parrying the swing with a resounding clang. He then lunged forward with his shoulder, catching the young elf off guard, and swept him with his right foot. As soon as the elf hit the ground, Kiret's blade hovered just an inch above his throat. "Next competitor!" he shouted, then helped the defeated elf to his feet.

Lucius and Siegfried stood quietly observing Kiret make quick work of the competitors, each hoping to gain victory and the acceptance of the *Cyngorell*. Many elves eagerly met the elven warrior in combat and came close to defeating him, but neither their graceful sword strokes nor their phenomenal speed could match Kiret's prowess with a D'aryan blade.

"This is madness. No one will overcome Kiret," Lucius whispered into Siegfried's pointed ear.

"Do not fret, Lucius. A battle is not always measured by victory. Put trust in your skills as a swordsman and the grace in which you enter combat. These will aid you in dealing the fatal blow. Search for the gap in his defense," Siegfried advised. The elf scrutinized every parry and thrust made by Kiret.

His words did little to boost Lucius' confidence. He watched each match with dread, knowing his name would soon be called and he might suffer the same defeat as his peers. Practice in elven swordplay had become a ritual for him in the past year. He had sparred with Siegfried for countless nights, learning every thrust, swing, parry, and counterstrike known to the elven masters of the D'aryan blade. Despite his diligence, Lucius had never scored a victory over his brother. Siegfried was more cunning and graceful with a sword than any elf Lucius had known. If anyone could defeat Kiret in a contest, it would be Siegfried.

Athri suddenly called Lucius' brother to the center of the seal where Kiret had just vanquished Isis, the daughter of Quetulya. She stood up in shame as her father glowered at her from his seat. Siegfried approached the Protectors calmly without any hint of emotion. Lucius rubbed the back of his neck as Athri handed Siegfried a sword. The blade's edge was dull, and should the competitors fail to restrain an attack, the weapon would not cause serious injury.

"At the ready!" Athri yelled. Both elves drew up their swords and took their stances, glaring at each other with restrained intensity. In an instant, Kiret charged toward Siegfried with an upward swing of his blade. Siegfried gracefully blocked the charge and dashed behind Kiret, to his bewilderment. Kiret quickly turned to face Siegfried, who arrogantly smirked at the Protector. Kiret scowled and swung his sword at his side, but it was a feint. As Siegfried hurried to parry it, Kiret immediately arched his blade and swung at Siegfried's other side. With little time to react, Siegfried jumped backwards, but the edge of Kiret's blade still slashed the surface of his jerkin, exposing his undershirt. Lucius and the crowd gasped. Siegfried did not let his opponent's move deter him. He quickly charged Kiret with a series of short thrusts, but the Protector was able to block them. And after parrying the last of the strikes, he sidestepped then placed his right foot

behind Siegfried's and tripped him. Siegfried fell on his back, and Lucius knew Kiret's next move would be the last if his brother did not act swiftly. Kiret drove his D'aryan blade downward, aiming at Siegfried's neck, but Siegfried shifted his upper body to the side. He then grabbed the hilt of Kiret's sword with his left hand and pulled the elf's sword to the ground. The blade struck the stone floor with a clash. With one swift move, Siegfried brought his blade up with his right hand and the tip stopped just an inch below Kiret's throat. Kiret's eyes widened as he realized he had been defeated.

Athri looked at them in surprise and announced, "Siegfried is the victor!" The previously silent crowd erupted in applause and cheered enthusiastically for the younger Silverhart elf. Siegfried was helped to his feet by Kiret, who looked rather flustered. Siegfried turned to face the dais and bowed before the Council and his father. Helmer smiled at his son, but only for a brief moment to avoid any suspicion of partiality among his fellow councilors.

Siegfried walked back to his place beside Lucius, who expressed his joy at the victory more than anyone else did. But Lucius' wide grin quickly turned to a frown when Athri called him to the seal. Siegfried reminded Lucius to trust in his abilities, but his brother's words did not prevent the knot forming in Lucius' stomach. He took a deep breath and walked up to the Protectors who glared at him. They saw a young, dark-haired human—one incapable of defeating a Protector of the Great Tree and unworthy of the respected role. The race of men had been a thorn in the side of the elven realms for centuries, and no victory or kind words from Lucius would change the intense disdain he sensed coming from Kiret and Athri.

Athri handed him the D'aryan blade. "Prepare yourself."

Lucius grabbed the sword and faced his opponent, who was still anguished at his previous defeat. Lucius took a defensive stance and breathed calmly. Kiret's stare bore into him, whether to intimidate him or communicate a deeper dislike, Lucius could not tell. Athri yelled for the match to begin, and Kiret immediately dashed forward. His first attack caught Lucius off guard, but he managed to parry the elf's vicious strike.

Lucius reared back, took a breath, and charged at Kiret with a broad swing to the elf's shoulder. Kiret ducked beneath the blow and thrust his sword at Lucius' neck. Lucius leaned back, away from the tip of the blade and desperately blocked the thrust. The move annoyed Kiret, who expected a quick victory over him. The Protector took a few steps back and twirled his sword with both hands as Lucius watched.

Kiret was taunting him.

Lucius scowled, then with a cry swung his sword at Kiret's side, anticipating a parry. Kiret did so, and Lucius quickly whipped his sword at the elf's head. The Protector barely blocked the ambitious swing, but lost his balance for a second. Lucius capitalized and swung his blade in a downward arc that caused Kiret to fall backward while blocking the force of the blow

A sudden silence fell upon the crowd, and everyone watched in anticipation of a human besting an elven warrior. Lucius swiftly tried to position the dull point of his sword at Kiret's heart, but the elf was too quick. Kiret rolled from his prone position with cunning grace, lifted himself to his knees, and flicked the edge of his blade beneath Lucius' jaw all in a matter of seconds. Lucius sighed in frustration and dropped his sword.

"Kiret stands victorious," Athri announced.

The audience applauded Lucius and Kiret's spirited contest, but Lucius felt unworthy of any applause. He sauntered back to where Siegfried stood, glancing at the Council dais toward his adoptive father. The white-haired elder Silverhart nodded slightly at him without a hint of disappointment.

Siegfried stood with his arms crossed and a smile on his face as Lucius approached. He knew what Siegfried wanted to say. *My technique was rushed and too erratic to defeat a Protector.* But his brother said nothing. He only bowed his head at him and continued to watch the remaining contests.

Only two more elves were able to score a decisive victory over Kiret when the tournament was over. The short Protector looked flushed after the fighting had finally ended. When the entire assembly of competitors had lined up as Athri commanded, the *Cyngorell* spoke quietly amongst each other. Lucius felt more than a few glances from

the Councilors on him while they conversed. After a few minutes, the whispers atop the dais ceased and Quetulya stood up.

He looked at the row of prospective Protectors before him solemnly. Lucius felt uneasy whenever Quetulya's stare fell upon him. The wise elf sighed deeply and looked to the heavens for a brief moment before he finally spoke.

"I congratulate every one of you for competing in this tournament, which has been a tradition of Evingrad for ages. You have all fought with great honor and valor this day. Nonetheless, the *Cyngorell* has come to a decision on whom among you are worthy to guard the Great Tree of Verdania," Quetulya said. The councilor paused briefly and let the anticipation in the crowd reach its full limit. "Siegfried, Mora, and Isis step forward!"

The three elves stepped forward in near perfect sync, arms at their sides. Lucius grumbled in disappointment as Quetulya began to speak again.

"You have all been deemed worthy of defending the Great Tree and land of our ancestors. Your grace and skill with a sword has placed you above your kinsmen. However, in order for the burden of the Protector to be bestowed, you must now prove your skills with a bow. For the rest of you, the archery tournament will be a chance to redeem yourselves. The D'aryan bow is the heart of an elf on the battlefield, and a Protector of the Great Tree is required to wield it proficiently. The bow always precedes the sword. After a brief rest, you will all compete, and we shall determine who will join Siegfried, Mora, and Isis in the ranks of the elite."

Quetulya signaled to Athri and Kiret. The two Protectors dismissed the competitors for a short time. The elves dispersed, talking among themselves and their family clans who stood watching a few feet behind the green seal. Lucius walked up to Siegfried and patted him on the back.

"Well done, brother. It is quite an honor, and I see no elf more worthy of it than you."

Siegfried nodded solemnly. "Thank you, Lucius. But I have yet to bear the armor of *Breninmaur*."

"I have no doubt you will after this next contest," Lucius admitted.

"Have you not seen what is happening here, Lucius?" Siegfried's tone grew serious. Lucius looked at him quizzically. "Isis was chosen over you."

"So? What of it?"

"Isis is Quetulya's daughter, Lucius. She suffered a quicker defeat than you."

Lucius followed his logic. "You're suggesting the Council was biased in their ruling?"

"Yes. You fought more valiantly than she did. Go present the matter to our Father, or Quetulya himself. The honor is rightfully yours," Siegfried persuaded.

"No, Siegfried, I don't wish to get involved in the *Cyngorell's* decision. It's not my place ... I am not even of elven blood." His voice trailed off.

Siegfried shook his head and walked toward the dais where the councilors were chatting and laughing. Lucius realized what his brother planned to do and he reached out to stop him, but it was too late. Siegfried called to his father.

Helmer abruptly stopped his conversation with one of the councilors and turned to his son. Quetulya, who had been writing on a piece of parchment, looked up at the fair-skinned elf.

"I do not agree with the *Cyngorell's* decision," Siegfried said, eliciting a few gasps from those nearby.

"Why not, my son?" Helmer asked.

"Father, it is clear to me that I should be honored by this Council for worthy display of skill with a D'aryan blade and the defeat of a Protector. But it is unclear why Lucius, who displayed the same skill and valor as I, should not also be bestowed this honor."

Before Helmer could answer, Quetulya interrupted, "young Silverhart, it is not your place to question the rulings of this Council. We alone will judge who is worthy of recognition for such a prestigious honor as that of a Protector of the Great Tree."

"As a descendant of the great sage Ellylei of the ancestral line of Silverhart and heir to my father's seat in the *Cyngorell*, I have every right to question your ruling, Quetulya Elvinstar," Siegfried challenged.

Quetulya stood from his seat and turned to Helmer. "Is this the manner of respect you have taught your son, Helmer?"

"Siegfried speaks for himself, Quetulya. He is not a child anymore. The decision has been challenged. Now what does the Grand Councilor suggest?" Helmer retorted.

Quetulya clenched his jaw. "The decision to honor Siegfried, Mora, and Isis was fair—"

"Fair?" Siegfried interrupted. "How fair was it that your daughter, Councilor, should gain honor when she was defeated quicker than any other elf who faced Kiret? Surely, if she is worthy of the Protector's armor, then so is my brother."

"Enough!" Quetulya snapped. "One more insolent word from you, Siegfried, and your honor shall be stripped of you."

Lucius swallowed hard and put his hand on Siegfried's shoulder, pleading for him to stop. But he did not.

"There is no need, Quetulya. I forfeit my honor since you have chosen to withhold my brother's."

The faces among the crowd of elves who had formed behind them looked on, aghast at Siegfried's words. Lucius couldn't believe what his brother had just done.

"Very well, Siegfried," Quetulya said with noticeable satisfaction in his tone. "You will no longer be considered for the role of Protector—unless, of course, this Council nominates you again after your performance in the archery tournament."

Siegfried scoffed. "Even if I shoot my bow with the grace of a seabird of Und, you will not nominate me again, nor will you consider Lucius, who I dare say, shoots an arrow with skill rivaling the best archers of Verdania."

"Alright, Siegfried," Helmer spoke before Quetulya had a chance to chide his son. "You have had your say in this matter. Go and compete, if you so choose."

Siegfried sighed and glared at Quetulya one last time before he clutched his bow and walked away from the green seal. Lucius followed him reluctantly, asking whether he would compete or not. Siegfried didn't answer and kept walking away from the square toward the Royal Road. Lucius stopped at the edge of the seal and watched him for a

while until the blast of Kiret's horn filled the air. The archery tournament was about to begin.

The elves grew silent and hurried to their positions, both spectators and competitors. Lucius did not wish to compete without Siegfried present. But he knew this would be the last chance to show Quetulya and the Council he was worthy of being chosen to be a Protector. He hurried toward the green seal, grabbing his bow from the spot on the floor where he had left it. He pulled the bowstring a few times to prepare his arm muscles for the contest while he listened to Kiret and Athri state the rules of the tournament. It was nothing new to him. Various targets would be set up at differing distances and had to be hit within a predetermined time limit. Accuracy, speed, and grace were of the utmost importance.

After another poem to D'arya was recited by one of the *Cyngorell*, Lucius and the rest of the competitors lined up. Athri commanded them to nock their arrows and aim. The tall, attractive elf raised her hand as the contestants readied themselves. A few seconds later, her hand dropped and Lucius released his arrow.

THREE

Revelations of Lineage

"Your skills were unmatched, Lucius," Helmer complimented as they walked down the western road.

"If that is so, then why didn't the Council nominate me, Father?" Lucius replied, knowing the answer.

Helmer looked up at the Great Tree's high branches as they passed underneath, perhaps seeking an answer hidden among the leaves. "Lucius, you know the sensitivities of the elf-folk of Evingrad. There is a marred history between the elves and men."

"Yes, the Battle of Verdania, I know," he confessed.

"Then you should also know that the elves have not yet forgotten the savagery of such times."

Lucius looked down and kicked a twig on the road. "But I wasn't present during those times! Why am I looked upon with such contempt?"

"It is not you whom they have contempt for, Lucius. It is your people. Since the time when mankind stepped into Azuleah, they have only shown the elves their insatiable lust for power over this land." Helmer turned a corner behind a moss-covered house onto the northern lane that led to the Silverhart house.

"I understand the bane my people have been to this world and to the elves, but have these qualities been seen in me, my lord?" He stopped at the intersection of the roads.

Helmer turned around to face him, "No, Lucius. They certainly have not. I daresay you are unequaled among the men of this world. And it is for good reason that I embraced you into my house eighteen winters past. You may not yet know it, Lucius, but your life is of great value to the elves and to your kin."

Lucius raised a brow. He had never heard his father speak of him this way. When he attempted to get more answers from the wise sage, his father dismissed them. Helmer put his hands on his shoulders affectionately and said, "The answers to the questions you seek are soon coming, like the dawn of a winter's night. Have patience, my son. Come, I am curious to see what Siegfried has been up to in these passing hours."

They continued to walk down the road, walking past many elves who were on their way to the oval courtyard to see the three newest Protectors of Verdania: Isis, Mora, and Thrinmiel. The sun was beginning to descend in the western sky, and a gilded hue fell upon the verdant houses of Evingrad and the narrow road they traveled.

They soon arrived at the stone arch of the Silverhart estate and saw Siegfried sitting in the courtyard playing his wooden flute. Birds in the bushes and branches of *Breninmaur* chirped along with the notes of his joyful melody. Some fluttered away when Lucius walked up to him. Siegfried appeared to be in a trance while he played his song with fluidity and grace. Each note filled Lucius' ears with peace, and he found himself unconsciously swaying to the rhythm of the enchanting song.

Siegfried opened his eyes after a few more notes and looked up at Lucius and Helmer in surprise. "You've arrived! How great it is to see you both," he smiled.

"That song was beautiful, Sieg. I didn't know you were so skilled in playing the flute," Lucius said, still in a slight daze from the enchanting music.

"I have played the *telyn* since my mother still walked this land. She taught me the song of Prince Mervenyon. But it has been almost an age since I last played it," he said sorrowfully.

"You have played it with the grace and skill that she once did, Siegfried," Helmer walked up from behind Lucius to greet him. They grabbed one another's forearms and slowly pulled each other closer, until their foreheads pressed softly together—the common greeting among the Evingrad elves.

"Tell me, Lucius," Siegfried turned to face him, "how did you fare in the archery tournament?"

Lucius looked down and tugged slightly on his bowstring, "Not well."

Helmer took a deep breath, "I shall be inside my study should any of you need me. Siegfried, make sure you tell Peniel to serve some pomegranate mead tonight at the table."

Siegfried nodded, and Helmer walked toward the house and disappeared inside the atrium. Siegfried looked over at his brother and asked him about the contest. Lucius was hesitant at first, but with some gentle persuasion, he finally told his older brother what had occurred.

There were fifteen archers at the ready when Athri signaled for them to shoot. All of them released their arrows at the sacks of hay and hit their marks. Lucius was confident his arrows would find their mark on the next two targets.

The next target was a wooden cube, which had been enchanted to dodge all of the archer's shots as it flew wildly in the air. Lucius had missed his first two shots, but his last shot struck the small cube. Only a few elves had been able to land their arrows on the marked sides of the cube, which included Isis, Mora, and Thrinmiel. There were only six competitors left to participate in the final round after the others had been dismissed by the *Cyngorell*. Quetulya watched intently as Athri and Kiret brought the last target out into view. It was around six feet tall and covered with a silk cloth. The two Protectors pulled the silk cloth from it and revealed a cage with a banshee inside. The banshee floated inside like a surreal mist and watched them with shiny red eyes. Her face was gray and luminescent with a mouth full of jagged teeth. Though banshees pass through physical barriers with ease, this one could not leave the confines of her prison because it was constructed of *efydd*—an exquisite metal imbued with magical properties and created by

the elves long ago. *Efydd* was one of the few substances in Azuleah capable of killing banshees, and the tips of each of the competitors' arrows were made from it.

Kiret and Athri opened the cage doors without warning, and the banshee flew out in haste. Her scream pierced the air, greatly distracting Lucius and the others who tried to shoot the nightmarish creature above their heads. The banshee avoided all of the arrows whizzing past her spectral form, dodging with fiendish speed. Lucius nocked another arrow in his bow as the banshee spiraled down toward him, mouth gaping wide and ready to tear into his flesh. Lucius fumbled with his bow, trying to take aim at the banshee's head, but before the creature finished its ferocious dive, Isis landed an arrow in its side. The banshee howled in pain and ascended into the sky. Mora and Thrinmiel both shot at the creature's heart as it twirled into the tangled branches above. Their arrows found their target, and with a sharp cry, the banshee fell from the air, her ghastly corpse evaporated before hitting the ground. A loud cheer came from the crowd, which had watched the spectacle in apprehensive silence from the moment the banshee escaped her cage.

Lucius stood with his head hung low as the Cyngorell congratulated the three elves who felled the banshee and were now Protectors. One moment had cost him victory and a place among the great elves of Evingrad. Though he was merely a man, he desired greatly to be accepted by the D'arya elves, just as Siegfried and Helmer had accepted him. But perhaps such thinking was folly and his kind would never find a reconciliation or acceptance among the elves.

Siegfried nodded his head throughout the recounting of the tournament, "A banshee is not an easy opponent to strike with arrows, my friend. However, you have proved your bravery and skill in battle"

"How can that possibly be? I was not chosen to be a Protector of the Great Tree. I was not worthy, Siegfried," he said, walking past him and entering the atrium of the Silverhart house.

"You know so little about your worth, dear brother," Siegfried said quietly as Lucius entered the house.



Night descended upon Evingrad like a velvet curtain falling from the heavens revealing the blue light of the stars in the vastness of the summer sky. Lucius, Siegfried, and Helmer sat in the dining hall of the Silverhart estate around a long, oval table. Helmer sat at one end while Lucius and Siegfried sat across from each other. They all delighted in the feast Peniel, the housemaid, had prepared for them. The table was decorated with an array of colors, delicious aromas, and exquisite delicacies that Lucius reveled. He particularly enjoyed the loaf of omer bread made from the sap of *Breninmaur's* branches. A single slice tasted sweeter than honey and nearly satisfied his appetite. A roast of Verdanian sheep and fresh apricots also lay upon the table on silver platters. The large spread reminded Lucius of the grand banquets Aldronian kings hosted in the epic stories Helmer had shared with him as a child. Rounding out the feast lying on the table was a pitcher of pomegranate mead, which was highly favored by the D'aryan elves. It was poured on special occasions and rarely drank otherwise. Lucius could not imagine what occasion this might be, considering both he and Siegfried had failed to become Protectors of Evingrad.

When they had finished the main course and their mead, Peniel entered the dining hall with a small silver platter in her hands. She had the appearance of a young girl: fair skin, auburn hair, and sparkling emerald eyes. Despite her appearance of youth, she was an elf maiden who had served her masters generations before even Helmer was born.

She placed the small platter in the middle of the table and bowed her head slightly, "An elderberry torte for my lords before they retire?"

Helmer smiled, "Thank you, Peniel."

She bowed her head again and silently walked out of the room and into the kitchen.

Helmer cut the pastry and served his sons. The torte had a delectable taste and put Lucius' mind at ease as he ate it. They finished their dessert in silence, and Peniel stepped in again to gather their dishes. Siegfried departed to his room after bidding Lucius and his

father goodnight. Lucius sought to do the same, but Helmer asked if he would join him in the study.

Lucius followed the elf sage inside his private study for only the second time in his life. The first time, he was eleven years old and stepped inside without permission. He remembered seeing Helmer and Siegfried arguing about something. He had entered thinking they had called his name, but later learned the argument had been about him, the details of which have eluded him ever since.

Once inside, Helmer asked Lucius to take a seat in a wicker chair in front of a large desk adorned with the Silverhart crest on its side. The desk was piled with dusty tomes and scrolls. At the far end of the room stood large bookcases lining the entire wall, and mysterious runes inscribed on parchments hung on the wall closest to the door. Beeswax candles flickered on an ornate candelabrum beside a lattice window where the moonlight shone through and into the study. The combination of candlelight and moonlight gave the room an ethereal glow. There was a heavy smell of aged paper and leather inside, but it was a pleasing aroma to Lucius.

"It has been eight years since you first stepped into this room unannounced, Lucius. Do you remember?" Helmer questioned behind twinkling eyes.

Lucius looked around, "I do remember."

"It has been with great apprehension and excitement that I have awaited your entry again into this study for a revelation that will surely change your life."

"I don't understand, my lord," he furrowed his brow.

"Lucius, have I told you how you came to be in Verdania?"

"Yes, of course. I was left on the steps of the Marble Gate inside a woven sack. You and Siegfried found me upon returning from an errand in Numa," he said proudly.

Helmer shook his head. "I'm afraid it isn't true, Lucius. Tonight I wish to reveal the true account and why your arrival to Evingrad was more than mere fate."

Lucius leaned back on the chair, anxiously awaiting the truth that had been withheld from him. Helmer took a seat in the large chair behind the desk and fixed his gaze on

Lucius. For a moment, Helmer hesitated to speak. But after a heavy sigh, he leaned forward and began.

"It was not I who found you nineteen winters ago, Lucius. Nor was it Siegfried. The Protector whom you fought in combat today, Kiret, he found you beside the Marble Gate during that chilly night. You were wrapped in bundles of wool blankets inside a woven sack, crying desperately into the night for someone to find you. Kiret was keeping watch on the outskirts of Verdania that night when he heard your shrill cries. He thought it was some trick of an unknown enemy to leave an infant at the steps of the Marble Gate. But when he realized it was not, he had pity on you. He fed you some of his rations and brought you back to the Great Tree and to Evingrad. He saved you, Lucius."

Lucius furrowed his brow. *The elf who nearly killed me in combat saved me?*

"He did not know what to do with you at the time," Helmer continued. "It is within the nature of elves to help any creature in need, even a child of men."

"Kiret brought you before the *Cyngorell*, placing your fate in their hands. Quetulya believed your arrival at Evingrad was a great omen to the elves and in direct defiance of D'arya. He admonished Kiret for his irrational act and demoted him of his rank as Chief Protector. The Council argued for days, not sure whether to send you to Joppa, the land of men, or to care for you until the time when you would return to your kin. Quetulya was clear on what he wished to do with you. He would not stand for a man's son to live among the elves and taint the sacred ground of *Breninmaur*, and so he argued vehemently that you be cast out of Verdania immediately. His own family had not been spared by the men of Joppa during the great Battle of Verdania."

Lucius understood now why the leader of the *Cyngorell* held him in such low esteem. The thought of his patronizing voice suddenly angered him.

"But despite his objections, you would not be turned aside so easily," Helmer confessed with a smile. "Unlike many of the Councilors, I viewed your arrival as a blessing to this land. I chose to defend you, Lucius, and desired for you to have a place in my house equal to a son of the Silverhart line."

Lucius slouched in his chair and pondered Helmer's confession. "Why, Father? What deemed me worthy of such an honor?"

"Nothing, Lucius. I saw your vulnerability as an infant and, like Kiret, I had pity on you. You see, like many of my kinsmen, I have long grieved for the children of men and the world they inhabit. So much war and malice wrought by their hands when they are capable of loftier pursuits. And I did see a lofty pursuit in keeping you among us."

Helmer stood up and walked to the lattice window. He looked at the moon for a few moments in silence, contemplating how to phrase what he wanted to say next. "The *Cyngorell* did not easily concede to my wishes for you to have a place in Evingrad. They needed to be convinced you would not be a threat to Verdania or to the peace of D'arya. It proved difficult to sway them, considering you were not only a child of man, but also a royal heir of Aldron."

Lucius' eyes widened and his posture straightened. "What? An heir? How can you be certain of this?"

Helmer placed his hand inside his garment and pulled out a flat, stone octagon the size of his palm. He handed it to him for closer inspection. The seal was lighter than Lucius expected and had a slight sheen in the candlelight. On its surface was a carving of an eagle with wings outspread, clutching a sword with its right talon and a scroll with its left. Above and below the carving there were words inscribed in an ancient language of men, but Lucius could not decipher their meaning.

"'In the Lord Yéwa do we stand and in his son, Yesu, do we trust.' This is their meaning," Helmer said.

Lucius raised his brow and searched the stone for any further meaning, "I don't understand—"

"How this pertains to you?" Helmer finished the question. "The stone carving you hold is the crest of the King of Aldron, Cervantes Nostra. Kiret found it among the blankets you were clothed in."

Lucius knew little of the legendary king, Cervantes, who had reigned in the kingdom of Aldron nearly a millennia ago. In those days, elves and men fought together against

the Draknoir of the east before their alliance faded into gloom. The current ruler of Aldron, King Alfryd Dermont, was not from the line of Nostra. The third generation of Cervantes' line had been hunted down and killed off by the Draknoir and various enemies of the throne. A servant of the Nostra house named Gareth inherited the throne of Joppa and established his dynasty in the southern province of Azuleah. Knowing the Nostra line had been wiped out for years before his birth, Lucius saw the stone as nothing more than an artifact and not evidence of royal status.

"This stone proves nothing, Father. The house of Nostra has been desolate since before I was born. I am no heir to the kingdom of Aldron or the province of Joppa," he said, setting the stone on Helmer's desk.

Helmer laughed, which slightly annoyed Lucius. "Desolate? Who told you it was desolate? Siegfried?"

"Well ... yes," Lucius admitted.

"My son, Cervantes had many sons and daughters. When the Draknoir invaded Joppa ages ago during my youth, Cervantes ordered his family to be evacuated in a caravan led by the king's servants. Cervantes died in the ensuing chaos the Draknoir inflicted upon the city of Aldron, but his children were hidden throughout Azuleah secretly. The Draknoir have an intense hatred of the Nostra line—and all of mankind for that matter. They have forever cursed the day when men settled on the southern shores and challenged their dominance of the region.

"After King Cervantes fell, the Draknoir searched Azuleah for his scattered heirs and descendants. Many were found and killed, including women and children. The long hunt for the remaining survivors of the Nostra line lasted for centuries. Eventually, rumors began to spread throughout Azuleah that the great royal line had been completely destroyed by the Draknoir. But many believed a few descendants were still alive and lived as nomads in the far north, constantly on the move to hide from their enemies," Helmer said. He walked up to the desk and picked up the Nostra seal. "This seal proves you are indeed a descendant of Cervantes and heir to a great dynasty. Seven of them were

made for each of the Nostra heirs and were passed down over the generations. You are of noble blood, Lucius."

Lucius let the truth of his past sink in. An heir to the throne of Aldron? He could barely imagine himself taking the role of a Protector of *Breninmaur*, much less of a king over thousands of subjects. The responsibility of such a position was far beyond his imagination at this point in his life. "What does all this mean? Am I to return to Joppa and challenge the rule of Alfryd?" he asked apprehensively.

Helmer shook his head. "No, Lucius. There will be a time for that, but I do not believe it is now."

He sighed in frustration. "Then what is to become of me, Father? I feel a sudden burden from all these revelations you bring me."

"I am sorry, my son. I did not wish to make you sorrowful over all this. But you are of paramount importance to your people. You would not have been left on the threshold of Verdania if it were not so." Helmer sat down again and began looking through the assortment of papers on his desk.

A question lingered in Lucius' mind as the wise elf foraged through the tomes and scrolls. "Does the Draknoir know I am here? You said the descendants of Cervantes were hunted and killed by them. Could they have followed whoever left me here?"

Helmer looked up at him with serious eyes, "I'm not sure. But I can assure you no Draknoir fiend would dare enter the sanctuary of Verdania, lest a swift descent to the grave be their desire."

"What are they?" Lucius asked curiously.

Helmer's countenance turned grim, "They are a fallen race of the *ellyll*. An ancient race of elvish warriors who were once highly favored by D'arya, but their lust for power led to their downfall. They abandoned the ways of the Elf Queen and embraced the detestable dragon god, Nergoth. Through Nergoth and his dark magic, they were given an abominable power, which consumed them and, in the end, transformed them. They are no longer elves, but beings of darkness. No more do you see fair-skinned folk seeking peace, but scaly, monstrous beings waging war and yearning for blood.

"In the years after their fall, the Draknoir allied themselves with the dragons of Ghadarya paying tribute to their lord," Helmer paused abruptly and whispered, "the Black Dragon, Kraegyn."

Lucius felt the blood drain from his face. The blue fire of the great dragon consuming his flesh immediately filled his thoughts. His heart raced in fear of the hypnotic blue stare of the Black Dragon's eyes.

Helmer sensed his sudden burden, "What is it, my boy?"

Lucius hesitated, "It's nothing."

"Tell me, has another dream or vision disrupted your mind?" Helmer asked.

He wished to remain silent, but his father's incredible foresight would determine the answer at some point. "Yes."

Helmer nodded his head. "I feared you would have another one. Was it more vivid than the last?"

The Black Dragon's hot breath burned in his mind. "Much more vivid."

Helmer sighed and started digging through the clutter on the desk again. He pulled out a withered tome and quickly searched the pages. His eyes gleamed in the candlelight, darting from side to side as he read the text.

"Ah, here it is," he whispered. "Read this page, my son."

Helmer handed him the book, pointing at the inscription. It was written in the common language of Azuleah. The text was very faded and written with quick pen strokes. It read:

Yéwa, the deliverer of the race of men has spoken to his prophet. He has found favor in Joppa through Yesu, the Great King to come. A star has fallen on Azuleah and spread through the land. Men have partaken of the land and have lost their way. Yéwa has seen the evil of Nergoth; his time is coming.

King Yesu has chosen the line of Cervantes, in whom the Lord Yéwa was pleased, to lead the men who fell from the sky. One like a king will rise from the house of Nostra and serve. He will lift Yéwa's name in Joppa and a song for Yesu will be heard from the North. Nergoth and all who follow him will tremble at the sound of his footsteps and

know Yéwa is with him. He will not forsake him nor allow harm to come upon him if he trusts in Yéwa with all his heart.

These are the words of Yéwa, our Deliverer, and Yesu, our King.

"Is it a prophecy?" Lucius asked, looking over the text again.

"Yes, Lucius, it is. It was inscribed by a man named Zebulun, one of the servants of the king and a loyal follower of Yesu."

"I know of Yéwa, the god men worship, but who is this Yesu?"

"I could probably speak all night to you about him, but perhaps you should figure that out for yourself, my son," Helmer opened the top left drawer of his desk and fetched a scroll. "I have been saving this for a very long time, Lucius. It is a near perfect copy of a great heirloom in the kingdom of Aldron. The answers to many of your questions can be found here."

Lucius leaned forward and took the scroll. He unrolled it, revealing many small characters in elvish script. The scroll was about the length of his arm. But because of the complexity of the elven language, it would take a day or two to read it completely.

"There is something more I wish to reveal before you go and rest."

Lucius closed the scroll and listened attentively, anxious to know what else the wise sage could reveal in one night.

"Zebulun's prophecy correlates very well with an elven prophecy foretold many ages ago. I reminded the *Cyngorell* of it when we debated years ago whether you should stay with the elves or be cast out. The words of the prophecy read thus:

'Behold, a light will fall on D'arya's doors

Unknown to the fair folk of old

A child without home among the poor

But with a quest told once before

A sword and scroll he will hold

On his way to quench the flame

Which defiles *Ellyllei's* name"

Lucius sighed deeply, his hands shaking slightly. This morning he had been an ordinary young man, wishing only to become a Protector of the forest of Verdania—the limit of his aspirations for greatness. But now his path was leading to a place he did not wish to go. The daunting role of *Ellyllei* already burdened him as much as the chilling prospect of facing the Black Dragon.

"Your path has been foretold, Lucius. Your people need you, and even the elves need you, though they may not yet know it," Helmer said softly.

"I do not know if this is the path I wish to take, Father. Fear overtakes me at what may meet me on this path. Why must I rise to such responsibility? Why was I chosen? My mind is full of questions, and my mind is unwilling to hear the answers," his head sank.

Helmer stood from his chair and walked to his son's side, placing a hand on the young man's shoulder to comfort him. "I know there are many things that have not yet been answered, my son, but do not be discouraged. It is best now if you rest. We shall talk further in the morning."

Lucius wanted to object, but he suddenly realized how tired he was from competing in the tournament. He stood up at Helmer's request and went to his room.

For the first few minutes, he laid on his bed, afraid to sleep. Kraegyn's piercing stare was still vivid in his mind. Eventually, sleep overtook him, and he dreamed of a great palace on a golden plain.

Four mighty bastions stood high on each corner of the palace, along with two spires jutting into the air: one from the northern wall and one from the southern wall. Large doors stood in front of him, adorned with a golden eagle whose wings were outspread. A voice from inside called his name. It was soothing and beautiful to his ears.

The doors opened slowly, and a light brighter than the sun illuminated from inside the palace. Despite its radiance, Lucius found no need to cover his eyes. An elegant lobby lay ahead with polished marble floors and gleaming white walls. A tall statue of a bearded man holding a scepter stood at the center of the lobby. The man wore a crown on his head and a flowing robe draped over his muscular frame. His face held a stoic,

determined gaze. Behind the tall effigy, there was a wide, double banister staircase rising to a wooden door below a gilded archway. A large elm tree was embossed on the door. He was compelled to go up the stairs and into the door, but the voice spoke again before he took his first step onto the staircase.

Lucius. The voice spoke from inside his head, but somehow he sensed its source came from overhead. He looked up and saw a ball of light pulsating from the ceiling above. He cowered at the immensity of the light.

"Here I am," Lucius said, his voice cracking.

Lucius ... the time has not yet come for you to enter the door.

"When will it be time?" he asked curiously.

Soon, but now you must forge the Requiem Sword. Go and seek counsel in the swamps of the north. The light began to ascend and fade within the ceiling.

"Wait! Why must I do this? I don't understand!" Lucius cried, but the light did not respond and continued to fade away. The regal lobby began to fade as well, and Lucius heard a faint call in the distance.