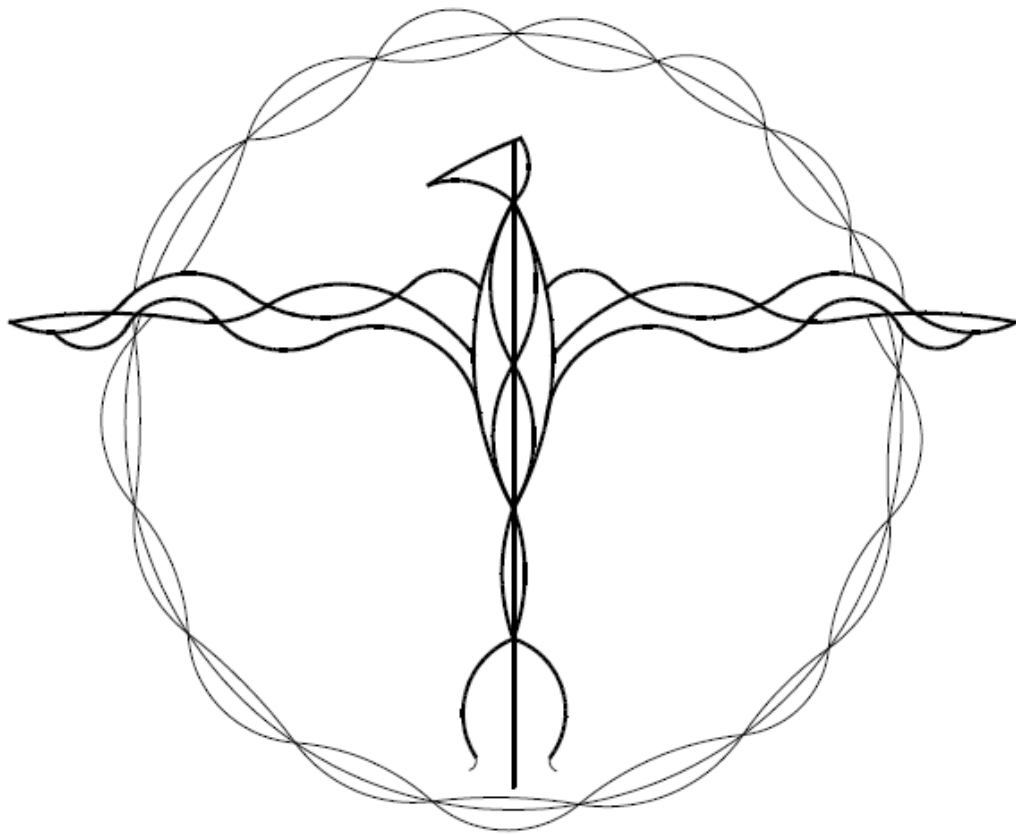


The Blade of



phoebe

THANKS

Well, I figured a few people needed to be thanked. First and foremost, the friends I game with that continue to let me abuse them mentally and spiritually. What's great about them is that they keep coming back for more.

Next would be the D-man for giving me feedback on this story and for letting me twist and mangle the Valus campaign. That was a great return to writing.

Next are my son and girlfriend for always managing to interrupt me. Without the two of you to 'bring me back to reality' I would never sleep. And I'm sure my writing would be the worse for it.

Finally are the readers of Enworld. Without you, I wouldn't have anywhere to spend the majority of my days. Be it to bicker or to find out someone's address to send cookies, Enworld is my second home. Thanks for your praise; Thanks for your criticism and grammar editing. Thanks for everything.

~Funeris

INTRODUCTION

What follows is an epic tale woven upon the homebrewed continent of Norum da Salaex, a Dungeons and Dragons world.

The continent, which is slightly larger than North America, was ripped out of the ocean during a war amongst the gods. One god, Ara'kull, the self-proclaimed God of Men, is the only acknowledged deity on the continent. He rules the world with an iron fist through his proxy and first cleric, King Toq Arma.

Myths claim Ara'kull arose from the corpse of Guymardt, the first God of Men beside the newly birthed human race after another deity slaughtered the Guymardt.

The continent is completely isolated while Ara'kull slowly but surely severs it from its original reality. His intent is to pull it into a completely new universe where he and only he will exist to reign over the people.

Naturally, I will not say too much about what is actually going on with regards to the Universe-shattering event. I'll let the stories do that because, well, that's what they're supposed to do. I hope you enjoy.

~Funeris

Dramatis Personae

DM: Ronald King (Funeris)

Winter 2004

<u>Character</u>	<u>Player</u>	<u>Enworld Alias</u>
Anastrianna Rowen	Catherine	<i>Happycat2000</i>
Cassock of Cael	Bill	<i>TheYeti1775</i>
Gabrielle	Shannon	<i>(none)</i>
Aramil T. Kingsom	Boswell	<i>(none)</i>

Summer 2005

<u>Character</u>	<u>Player</u>	<u>Enworld Alias</u>
Anastrianna Rowen	Catherine	<i>Happycat2000</i>
Cassock of Cael	Bill	<i>TheYeti1775</i>
Zayda Silverbough	Shannon	<i>(none)</i>
Aramil T. Kingsom	Boswell	<i>(none)</i>
Rhynos The Grimhand	Mike	<i>Hobbit Killer</i>

Translated from *The Book of Phoebe*

*And whence the mother came is of no import,
Her bright beauty caused the darkness to flee.
Her light, her love, the brightest cord,
Killed the darkness; melted the ice; created the Sea.*

*The last of the dying races,
Adopted as her own blood,
Given rule over all the places,
The power to do what they could.*

*The old peoples were reborn and spread,
Except for the human race.
But old rivalries returned, many now new became
dead.
The last man, now god, refused his kind a place.*

*The Mother birthed a true god,
To quench the fires of hate.
A god from whence all the others trod,
A god once divided, continued to mate.*

*A pantheon of power was born,
Dared slaughtered the last man
And still the adopted gave no heed only scorn.
From the ashes, darkness rose again.*

*Humanity was created in the fires of death,
Led by a malicious being bent by power.
By his hand, the other Gods released their last
breath
And brought the world into its final hour.*

Preludes and Interlude

Anastrianna

The Box

She shifted quietly in the shadows of the manor, her presence unknown except to her employer. His hired men had not noticed her for the past fortnight, so quietly she moved. For all they knew, they were alone. Their crude jokes and mannerisms just proved their lack of awareness.

For hours and hours she sat in silence in the dark having to endure their stories about the most recent wenches they had the pleasure of having. Anastrianna knew better. These guards suffered from overactive imaginations. These men, and she used the term loosely, would not be able to pleasure a woman if given verbal, step-by-step instructions from a master of the trade.

In the shadows she remained, waiting for her benefactor to leave. Master Crawson was one of the more important merchants in the city of Nordaa Saam. And by important, Ana meant wealthy. He had hundreds of contracts at any one time, whether they be the production of arms and armor for the Empire or individual deals to hunt down antiques or relics. The word on the street was if it could be found, Master Crawson would be the one to find it.

Ana was a little more skeptical than most. She needed proof of his abilities, of his importance. Her skepticism was what caused this indentured servitude. Using the tools of her trade, she had broken into the manor she was now forced to guard. Easily she had bypassed his traps and tricks, seeking out his main vault.

When she found Crawson's inner sanctum, she had been astounded. Gold and silver lied heaped in piles along with rubies and other gems of exquisite cut. On a pedestal in the center of the vault was a unique adamantine box. The box was perhaps a half-foot long by a half-foot wide and just as deep. Engraved on the top of the box were symbols the likes of which she had never seen. There was no edge to the box, almost as if it was a pure piece of adamantine. But, when lifted, the box felt light as if hollow.

That was when Ana's astonishment doubled. The door to the vault slammed shut behind her. She spun, dropped the box and she heard the sound of its locking mechanism close. A quick examination showed no way to unlock the door from the inside, so she sat down on a pile of gold defeated.

Mere moments later, a metal slat opened on the door and two old blue eyes peered into the vault. Master Crawson had caught her in the act. Instead of informing the guard though, he offered her a way to pay off her debt. Now she was stuck indefinitely as a guard for the very fortune she had come to claim.

A soft click broke Ana from her recollections. The old oak door had closed, signaling Crawson's leave. Quietly, the rogue slipped through the shadows to the lone guard left in the office. With a quick thrust of her hand, the guard dropped to the floor unconscious.

Anastrianna moved to the only window in the office and slid it open. She then secured a grappling hook to Crawson's massive and heavy wooden desk. Next, she tossed a

length of rope out the third story room.

She whistled and then turned from the window, heading to the vault. Using her lock picks, Ana managed to open the vault door just as three noisome half-orcs climbed through the window. She dashed for the box and slid it into her satchel, placing a steel replica in its place on the pedestal.

A sickly sound marked the death of the guard she had knocked out. The three half-orcs plodded toward her.

“Shhhh,” she warned, motioning with her finger for quiet. “Grab what you can from the vault then get out.” The half-orcs started filling their satchels hand over fist with gold.

Ana reeled in the climbing rope and shut the heavy glass window. She checked to make sure the half-orcs were distracted. Ana smashed the window open and flung the rope outside. Three confused half-orc heads turned in her direction.

“GUARDS!!!” Ana wailed.

The half-orcs faces went crimson as they charged their ex-partner. As they reached her, the doors burst open and armored guards filed into the office. Crossbows rose toward the three crooks.

The lead half-orc smashed Ana’s face with his large, grimy hand before he leapt out the window. The second followed his leader out the window. But a volley of bolts slammed the last. He struggled for only a moment before his life flowed out of the many wounds.

Master Crawson strode into the room to find one dead guard, one dead thief, and Ana picking herself up off the floor.

“What happened?!” The old merchant demanded.

“Thieves, Sir,” Ana replied. She wiped blood from her quickly bruising face. “I called for the guards as you instructed. I think they only managed to get some of the gold. I’m going after them.” She stalked toward the now shattered window.

“Wait just one minute.” Crawson peeked into the vault to assure the safety of his most precious treasure. Then the merchant turned back to the indentured rogue. “I’m not sure that’s entirely necessary, Ana. The box is still there. The other trinkets mean nothing to me.”

“That’s not what you pay me for, sir.” Ana grabbed a hold of the rope and flung herself out the window.

“I don’t pay you at all.” Crawson mumbled as he entered his vault.

Toren tapped his fingers rapidly against the hard oak table. Ana, having known Toren for over seven years, easily recognized the worried quirk for what it was. She slipped backward into her chair, sipping from the crystal wine glass.

The entire room was furnished with the most expensive and finest of everything. Exquisitely crafted furniture, padded with the softest down wrapped in silk cases, circled the magnificently carved table. Dwarven runes inlaid the oak table in a spiraling pattern. Ana could not read the Dwarven script but Toren had taught her to distinguish between the written languages. A table as finely crafted as Toren’s centerpiece was easily worth a fortune by itself if only for the script. Items created by the older races, considered contraband, always priced higher on the market.

Contraband seemed to be Toren’s favorite means of decoration. Items practically

littered his shelves and desks, all from other cultures. Elven script, Halfling script, even the writing of a race of snake-descended people reflected the candlelight. The Elven writing was by far the most beautiful in the flickering light, Ana thought.

Her mind drifted back to the glass in her hand. She shifted to empty the remains of the decanter into the crystal. Toren's drumming cadence filled the edge of her perception again as she swallowed another burst of flavor. Her mentor leapt out of his chair and moved to refill his own glass.

Unlike Ana, who reveled in the delightful zest of a fine Elven wine, Toren had long ago grown to cherish a Dwarven brew. Unfortunately his stocks were slowly depleting. The Empire had recently stepped up the holy war against the older races. Dwarven ale was becoming increasingly rare and thus increasingly costly. If Toren could ever adapt to the foul drink of the Orcs, Trolls, or even the sludge the Goblins drank, it would save him a fortune. He smirked in distaste as he refilled his mug.

"So, are you going to show it to me, Ana?" Toren queried.

The rogue lifted her sack and removed the adamantine box. Carefully, despite its invulnerability, she placed the engraved box on the table. Toren returned to the table, ponderously examining the work of art. His eyes darted over the symbols and runes, memorizing every detail, every edge.

"What language is that?"

"That is Phoeic, the writing of the druids." Toren glanced upward, "You won't see it much. They voraciously guard their relics. And to find the writing on metal is quite a rarity. They abhor metallurgy even while respecting the necessity of the art."

"So it is worth a lot then?"

"Worth more money than I'll ever see," Toren responded. "It is definitely unique, to say the least."

"What does it say?"

The older rogue chuckled. "If I knew that dear, I'd probably be dead. Druids don't share their secrets. And the Empire executes them just as often as they do elves and dwarves." Toren leaned back up, taking a deep swallow of the ale.

"How much can you give me for it?" Ana tapped her boot-sole with impatience.

"I cannot buy it from you, dear. You can't sell it in Nordaa Saam." Her mouth dropped open in protest but Toren interrupted her with a wave of his hand. "By now, Crawson probably already knows that the box in his treasury is a fake. This means, he knows you were in on the heist and that you probably have this artifact. Selling the item in this city would only bring you a swift death.

"Your life is in jeopardy just by staying here. As is mine," he added with an ironic grin. "What I suggest is that you take the box and leave. At least, for awhile go somewhere safe. When everything calms down, I can send for your return. You do have somewhere you can go, right?"

Ana thought for a moment; dreading her decision, dreading her destination. "Yes."

"Good. Where?"

She cocked her eyebrow and reluctantly said, "The Town of Green Hills. It's to the west some distance. It should be small enough that I'll be safe."

"Good, good. Does anyone else know about your theft?" Toren finished his glass with a gulp.

"Only Argot, I needed someone to craft a replica. I paid him well and I trust him. He



won't turn on me." Ana slid the box back into her pack and readjusted the straps.

"A little extra silver will help keep his silence," Toren claimed. "Go now, Ana. Take my horse. It should help you gain a lead on Crawson's lackeys."

"Thank you, Toren. I appreciate...everything you've done for me." Ana took a step toward the back door. Toren grabbed her shoulder and gave a quick peck on her forehead.

"Safe journey, Ana." Anastrianna silently exited the room. Removing the empty crystal from the table, Toren waited for the departing sound of hooves.

Once sure she had left, the rogue removed his robe and donned his work outfit. Silently he packed the gear he would need and picked up his trusty dagger.

"A little extra silver could never hurt." He smirked as he left to clean up Ana's mess.

Cassock

the path of lightning

Hendrick Balsoon stormed down the stairs, tossing his father's worn backpack carelessly by the door. He paused for a quick breath and opened the door. A hooded figure darted in quickly, motioning for the door to the cottage be closed. Hendrick acquiesced to the somatic request and turned to greet the guest.

The visitor tossed the hood back revealing silvered hair and a worn face. The man's eyes were bright blue and lacked the age shown upon his brow.

"Baron Tyne," Hendrick stammered, dropping to his knees.

"Oh come now, Master Hendrick. You know I consider your family my own family. Stand up and address me as Dragos." Hendrick stood, head still slightly bent in respect. "And here," Dragos removed his traveler's cloak and tossed it to Hendrick.

Hendrick quickly hung the cloak upon a hook, turning to speak with the visitor. "Is my father expecting you, Dragos?"

"Yes he knows I was coming tonight. Please, let's move into the parlor, shall we? My old bones need a warm up and your father's whiskey should do the trick." The old Baron smiled a pearly grin and paced toward the interior room.

Hendrick went to a cupboard to procure three glasses and once in the parlor, filled all three with a potent whiskey. Dragos quietly sipped for a moment, allowing the warmth to flood back in his cheeks.

"Winter seems to come earlier and earlier each year," Baron Tyne remarked to no one in particular. "My body can't take much more of this." The politician burst into a hacking cough as if to emphasize his point.

"I'm sure you'll outlive us all, Baron." Hendrick downed a healthy bit of the whiskey, a smile covering the burn of the aged drink.

"I truly doubt that." Dragos peered down the hallway, toward the door, his eyes focusing on the rugged pack heaped carelessly. "Going somewhere, Hendrick?"

"Yes. My life here in your great city is coming to an end, I think. I'm setting off to find my own way in the world." Hendrick smiled again, although not to cover the effect of the alcohol.

"I remember my own adventures, long ago. The world's not changed much since then, I'm afraid." A shadow crossed Dragos' worn, leathery face before passing into nothingness. "I wish you luck on your journey."

"Thank you, sir."

"I will ask one thing of you now, though. A promise I expect you to keep. You are a man of your word, like your father?" Dragos' expression now reflected a stern look; still lurking behind his eyes was a kindness incomparable.

"Of course, sir. My father and mother have taught me well. They are virtuous."

"That they are, that they are. Your promise is this: you must swear to never enter into politics," the stern gaze was immediately replaced with a friendly grin. "Whatever horrors you may experience upon your travels, nothing compares to the atrocities of the political arena." The Baron's grin only grew larger as he awaited a response.

"I have no desire to rule, sir," Hendrick was quick to reply.

"Ah, but neither did I when I was your age. The things I saw though," his eyes drifted

back through time as he spoke, “made me want to change the world. I warn you now: it’s a futile effort in this damnable Empire. With a ruler as old as the Empire, I fear things will never change.”

“There is always hope for change, sir.”

“Bah. Only if the King were to die could anything ever change. Perhaps that is a lesson you will have to learn yourself. I still need your oath, Hendrick.” Dragos leaned in to pour another glass of firewater.

“You have my word, Baron Tyne. Never will I enter into the political arena, as you so labeled it.” Hendrick smiled, refilling his own empty mug.

The front door opened again, this time a good-sized man stepping through. His pitch-black hair was cropped close to his head. Two white jets of color stained the man’s temples. The light from a fire barely reflected from the deep-set black eyes.

“Dragos, my friend.” The Baron stood, clasping hands with Hendrick’s father.

“Morgan, I hope all is well with you.”

Morgan leaned downward to grasp the unclaimed glass of firewater and decanter. “All is as well as ever, Dragos. If you’d like, we can retire to the library.”

“Of course, of course. Hendrick, when do you leave?”

“At dawn, sir.”

“Well, boy, you should get some sleep. I’m sure you have a long day of travel ahead of you. Besides, you father and I have some business to discuss.” The old man grasped Hendrick’s shoulder. “Remember your oath. And safe journey to you.”

“Good night, Baron. Father.” With an informal bow, Hendrick returned to his room for a long night’s rest.

“You have a good son, Morgan.” Dragos smiled.

“Yes. His fate is upon him now, though. It is good for him to leave and find his own path. Come, old friend.” Morgan led Dragos into the small, comfortable library. Within a few moments, a fire blazed within the confines of the small, stone chimney. Both the fire and the firewater warmed the veins of the men. Morgan quietly closed the door and settled in a chair opposite the Baron.

“Dark times are upon us, Morgan. A war is coming and I don’t just mean with the Elves and Dwarves. Rumors abound that the Orcs and Trolls are going to make a play for power. If the Trolls overrun the Goblin territory, Port Divi’sad will likely fall again. I can only assume the Orcs would push further into the Troll territory when they’re distracted.”

“It would be a logical attack. Maybe too logical for those beasts.” Morgan pulled a large map, rough with age. Marks in various colors adorned the map, showing the various boundary changes throughout the years.

“My thoughts exactly. It’s whispered that the Orcs are going to turn against the Empire. But how is not known. If I have heard these whispers, then I guarantee so has the

Notes:

<1> - *Cael (rhymes with Pail) is one of the old gods (half of the first child of Phoe); specifically the God of Death.*

<2> - *Legend is the name of one of the thirteen territories in Norum da Salaex. It is named Legend because the majority of the Path of Legends runs across it.*

<3> - *In case the allusion isn’t very clear, Morrick was a cleric of Cael. But I didn’t want to just come out and say he was a cleric.*

King.”

Morgan filled both glasses again, settling into his chair. “I have a feeling you did not come just to discuss a possible war or rumors that may or may not be true, Baron.”

Dragos sighed, another dry coughing fit welling up through his body. “No, Morgan, I did not. I am old. I can feel Cael’s <1> icy grip on my body. Soon, I fear, I will pass on. And I’ve no heir to leave control of this territory.

“You’ve been my faithful advisor for years and years. Never have I found better advice than your own words. I wish for you to take my place when I die.” Morgan looked down to the floor, weighing the Baron’s words.

“Dragos, I cannot serve the King. You know this. I cannot and will not. If you leave me in charge, I will secede.”

“I know that. As I said, dark times are upon us. You’re the only one with enough strength and experience to pull Legend <2> through the coming wars. I do not ask you to take up this role as Morgan, the secret advisor of Baron Tyne. I ask you to take the role as Morrick, the Hand of Cael.” Dragos paused, to gauge the effect of his words.

“On those terms, I will accept the position, although I am no ruler.”

“No, my friend, you are no ruler. But, you are a leader and a damn fine tactician.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” Morrick smiled as he downed another shot of the whiskey.

“You did save Port Divi’sad thirty years ago, not to mention my life.” Again, the Baron’s eyes clouded over, consumed by memory.

“You were a damn fine sergeant, Tyne. If not for you and the men that sacrificed their lives, the battle would not have been won. Besides, Cael was with us.”

“And how is the old God of Death, Morrick?” Dragos refilled his own glass.

“I’ve not heard him since that battle. For thirty years I’ve had silence <3>. I think things may change soon though. Very soon. That is what I pray for at least.” Morrick stirred from his reverie and looked downward at the map. “Shall we plan some strategy for the wars?”

Hendrick lifted the satchel from the floor and secured it tightly to his back. He turned for his final farewell and absorbed the comfort of home one last time.

Gwenyth, his mother, and Morgan stood side-by-side, arms entangled on each other’s shoulders and bodies. A lingering scent of alcohol wafted from his father. Morgan’s eyes were red-rimmed, either from exhaustion, sadness, or a combination thereof.

“Are you sure there is nothing else you need, son?” A flash of concern lingered momentarily in his father’s voice.

“No. I think I will be alright.” Hendrick turned longingly for the door, for the road.

“You will remember all that we have taught you?” Gwenyth questioned. Her flowing blonde hair quivered slightly against her face. Despite her age, no wrinkles had dared to crease her brow. No silver had dared taint her perfect sunlight-colored hair.

“I could never forget my home or my teaching. I will remember it often. It will form a comparative basis against the education I receive upon my travels. I will not forget. And I will return.” Hendrick opened the door. The first rays of the dying summer sun flooded into the entryway. Its warmth was slightly retarded by a brief, brisk breeze.

“Tell me of the Gods, Hendrick. The True Gods.” Hendrick spun toward his father’s

voice. An edge had crept into the old soldier's tone, the demanding and forceful voice of an educator. The edge mated with a near-crazy manic glint in his piercing black eyes.

"The first was Phoe the Savior, the mother. She came upon our world and purged the taint of hatred and evil. She adopted one member of each of the races to bear the new bloodlines.

"But the world was devoid of life because of the purge. The world was without light. Phoe birthed a child, Myrcael, to journey into the heavens and restore light to the world. Myrcael traveled to a dead star and breathed life into the red twilight. The star burst with raw power and fed Norum da Salaex with its living rays.

"Myrcael did not return from the star as one. Without Darkness there could be no Light. Two beings returned from the sun: Myr, the Goddess of light and life, and Cael, the Lord of Darkness and Death.

"Myr and Cael created the pantheon under which the world has thrived. The Mother chose to slumber within the planet, restoring the natural order. The Embraced children began to replenish their own races, except for one.

"Guymardt refused to shape humanity in his image. It is said humanity had been responsible for the darkness that had destroyed the world. As such, he refused to birth our race.

"The world flourished for a time, until the War in Heaven began. Myr and Cael had birthed four younger deities. These gods then reproduced again, although only to create two more. The Kin Gods, those of direct relation to Phoe, ruled over the Embraced.

"But the Embraced fought amongst their selves. Their races also warred across the world. And then Nar'sra, the God of the Snake-Race, slew Guymardt. Guymardt's corpse fell onto the world, shattering. The Kin Gods were unable to prevent the death.

"From his bones and skin sprung the humanity he had died. Also from his dust rose a dark form: Ara'kull, the Fallen God, the destroyer. The War that began with the death of a God and the birth of mankind, still continues to this day." Hendrick swallowed, his mouth dry from the well-instructed story.

"You are ready." Morgan released his wife and embraced Hendrick. "May the old Gods protect you, son."

"And you, father." Gwentyth moved to grasp her son one last time. The three stood huddled for several minutes before Hendrick broke away. He walked into the street and toward the edge of the city.

Gwentyth turned to her husband. "He will be alright, won't he?"

"His fate is beyond us now, love. Cael will watch and the darkness shall protect him."

"If you offer your blessing, then so shall I, Morrick," Gwentyth replied. "Let the lights of Myr guide the path of my son. May her rays bless and refresh him in his times of need." With a quick kiss, the clerics of opposing churches returned into their home.

Two long hours later, Hendrick stopped upon a hillock and turned back toward his home. The capital city Legend spiraled upward into the heavens and yet, from this distance seemed quite miniscule. He smiled and turned back to the Path of Legends. Slowly he journeyed away from his home, his old life, and toward destiny.

Hendrick Balsoon had been traveling for nearly a fortnight non-stop southward. Each day of walking brought the dying days of Kullyc <1> closer. The scrub brush along the Path of Legends was steadily disappearing. He had noted the slow shifting of the colorful foliage beginning.

When Hendrick had been just a child, the leaves would not turn until the end of the first month of the season. That month, Brenn, was still a week from beginning. With each year, it seemed as if winter came earlier and lasted longer. And so, the leaves started to change now at the end of the summer months.

Two hundred miles now separated Hendrick from his birthplace. Still each day at dawn he packed his gear and started a march we wouldn't stop until late in the night. The flowing hills surrounding Legend originally stretching upward toward the sun had sloped downward for days. As the Draeul Wood closed on Hendrick's right, the Coastal Spine appeared out of mist guarding his left. The path was incredibly wide and worn from ages of travel. Hendrick held closer to the forest preferring to keep the massive pillars of stone at a safe distance.

Soon after the appearance of the forest and mountains, Hendrick found himself standing on the edge of a great chasm. He had finally reached the boundary separating Legend and Nordaa Saam. An immense bridge crafted of the strongest steels arched over the depth. The bridge itself was nearly a mile long. At its center, Hendrick looked into the ravine. His eyes strained, focusing on a faint blue line etching its way across the land. The Draeul River, Hendrick had guessed before comparing reality to the old hand-drawn map in his satchel. The Draeul River was birthed in the Coastal Spine Mountains and flowed westward, through the Great Chasm before veering north and flowing into the Norden Ocean. At the coast, the great river actually divided Port Divi'sad in half. A port shared by the Goblin Territory of Maatz and Hendrick's own Legend.

A deep rumbling from the south broke Hendrick's thoughts. His eyes peered heavenward catching sight of a massive black storm swiftly swelling northward. Quickly stuffing the parchment back into a ceramic tube, he picked up his pace. Hopefully, he would be off the bridge before Hell rained from above.

One hundred paces from the bridge, another booming roar shook the air around Hendrick. He bowed his head, preparing for pelting rains and accelerated into a run. As soon as the first thunder subsided, another split the air directly above Hendrick's head. An ocean of crackling filled his ears; the hair on his arms and head began to stand straight up.

Two hundred paces from the bridge, fire cascaded from the heavens. The bolts of energy poured into the large bridge and charged the very molecules of air. Hendrick refused to lower his speed, bowing his head more and charging along the path. A few big globs of water foreshadowed the torrent of rain, suddenly exploding from the dark clouds. Within mere seconds Hendrick was soaked to the bone.

Fully under the thunderclouds, the setting sun's rays were completely obscured by shadow. Hendrick glanced up every few moments to check his direction. With the darkening sky, his human eyes quickly registered less and less. A random root broke the surface of the trail and snagged Hendrick's foot. Unable to slow, Hendrick's momentum carried him straight down. With a bone jarring force, his head slammed into the packed dirt of the trail.

A warmth spreading through his face alerted Hendrick to the vitae pouring from his nose. A slight searing pain also stretched across his face. He moved his hands to lift himself back up and another series of lightning bolts pounded into the dirt inches from his skull.

"By Caevari's <2> will!" Hendrick cried as residual electricity straightened his jet-black hair yet again. Quickly, he pushed himself from the earth and broke into another run. Two steps from his prone position, lightning crackled into the earth flash-boiling his blood and the rain.

The strobe lightning revealed Draeul Forest growing ever closer as Hendrick charged forward. The lightning continued to attack along with the large and ceaseless raindrops. Hendrick always seemed to be just to the left or right of the individual bolts and suffered nothing but a slight static charge.

Another bolt crackled to the left, Hendrick twisted his foot and shifted direction to the right toward the forest. The huge, ancient trees were only three paces from him now. Suddenly, a horrific epiphany crossed his mind. *I'm being herded by the lightning*, Hendrick thought.

Lightning burst earthward again but smashed into the large oak above Hendrick. He ducked instinctually and looked upward. With a crack, a huge branch plummeted. Hendrick tried to dodge but the branch smacked him in the back of his skull. He fell forward, a jeering pain lurching through his head. He blinked twice, wiping mud and blood from his eyes.

A thunderous roar and the sound of the tree being zapped again by the heavenly fire filled Hendrick's ears. His eyes noticed nothing but darkness.

"By the Gods," he murmured groping blindly. Still his eyes would not function despite the continued lightening he could only guess to be more electricity. He could feel warmth spreading quickly above him, the terrible swift hunger of fire. A splintering sound boomed above him.

With a quick lurch, Hendrick pushed into a roll and somersaulted down a steep hill. The sound of another branch smacked into the earth behind him. His body contorted; legs overhead and arms then vice-versa for a blind eternity. Slowly the ground evened out and his speed declined.

Abruptly, his roll came to an end against a rock face. Hendrick lied in a fetal position, unconscious.

Slowly, sounds started echoing through the young man's mind. There was a roar of flames, definitive by the warmth on his body. Sometimes, there was a sound akin to whistling or whispering. It was light, hollow and only tugged at the edge of his consciousness. Often, the whispers were accompanied with a light summer breeze.

Raindrops could still be heard; heavy, steady and monotonous and at a slight distance. Aside from the dampness of his clothing, Hendrick felt no added moisture. *I must've stumbled into a cave*, he thought. *The fire would mean I am not alone*. Hendrick reached for his satchel but it was nowhere near his body.

"I wondered when you would wake." The voice was old but filled with joy. It seemed to be coming from the direction of the fire.

"Who are you?" Hendrick demanded as he sat up. The throbbing in his head had

passed. As his hands glanced across his face, he felt no swelling or cuts of any kind.

"I tended your wounds, young master." The voice replied somewhat bemused. "Your question cannot be answered quickly or simply. Who I am is quite a long story and I'm afraid we haven't the time for such digressions or niceties. But while you are here, you may call me Master." Hendrick could almost hear the man laugh.

"I don't have time for any games. Where is my pack?" Hendrick stood, his sore body crying out for him to stop. Throbbing began again as he bumped his head on a stone ceiling. He barely muffled his cry with his hand.

"I think, my young master that you have quite a bit of time on your hands. Unless you think you can continue your journey blind. Personally, I think a day out in that rainstorm and you'll be in a worse position than you are now." Hendrick frowned as he sat back down.

"You've healed my wounds. Can you heal my sight?"

"If you let me, I can help you to see clearer than you've ever seen before. I will help you see through the shadow. I can show you the truth of the world."

Hendrick pondered the man's words for just a second. "I will accept your help. I am..."

"You," the old man broke in, "are Cassock. Cael has brought you here for your training. Your life as Hendrick Balsoon has ended. From this day forward you are Cassock, the bringer of Cael." Before Hendrick, now Cassock had only a quick moment to wonder how the old man had known his name before his training as a priest began.

Time was unfathomable to Cassock's blindness. According to his Master, roughly a month had passed; a true eternity in Cassock's unwavering shadow world.

All of the rites of Cael had been firmly memorized by hours of verbal study. Theology had been pounded into Cassock's head. All the stories originally told by his parents as bedtime tales of the Old Gods were revisited and expounded upon.

Suddenly, Cassock could feel the old man staring at him. His hackles rose for a moment and the shadowy veil began to lift from his eyes.

"Will you accept the path Cael has chosen for you, Cassock?" The young man nodded mutely. "You will be a bringer of Death and Destruction. Use your gifts in Cael's name and you will be rewarded at his side. Forever more, you will only be known as Cassock, the Bringer of Cael. Hendrick Balsoon does not and never did exist."

"I understand, Master."

"I am no longer your Master, Cassock. You answer only to Cael himself, now. Once your vision returns, you will find a mace, a holy symbol, and some armor here in the cavern. Take it. Return to the world and bring glory to Cael's name."

"Where are you going, Teacher?" A soft summer breeze was Cassock's only answer.

Suddenly, Cassock could make out the details of the room. He turned to the entrance and the darkness revealed it was night. He turned toward the fire but there was none. Nothing cast light inside the cavern but the priest could still see.

Raising his gaze from where the fire should have been, Cassock saw two statues standing across from each other. One statue was carved of black marble; a man holding a sword in its right arm pointing toward a sun. The other was of a woman, white marble, touching her blade to the same sun. The half of the sun touched by the woman was bright

white, almost as if it could cast light. The other half was a molted black and red, true shadow.

Cassock instantly recognized the statues as Cael and Myr. Below Cael, rested the gear the old man had promised. His torn satchel sat beside the mace, mended. The old man was nowhere to be seen. Cassock hastily donned the armor and gathered his gear. He knelt before the statues, the mace across his lap.

“Cael watch over and bless me. Let the darkness guide my path. Let **Your** darkness protect me.” Cassock quickly bowed then stood. He turned and left the cave.

Once outside, he realized he was no longer near the Path of Legends. He spun back toward the cave but it was gone. Turning around again, Cassock saw the flickering of lights. He headed toward the village.

Notes:

<1> Kullyc (Kul-ick) is the name for Autumn. Originally it was called Caelyn (Kel-in) but was renamed by Ara’kull’s church.

<2> Caevari is the God of Luck. He’s also known as the God of Plenty and Traveling. He is one of the Kin Gods and is one of Cael’s and Myr’s Grandson.

Aramil and Gabrielle

IMPRISONMENT

The forest streamed by.

Greens and browns coupled with the yellows and reds of the sun glinting from the leaves. Branches reached out, razor thin edges scratching ravenously. A deeper, thicker red melted into the dense foliage.

Lungs heaved. Muscles tired, then ached. Fresh wounds bled openly. The viscous, congealing fluid left black stains upon leather. Still, muscles pushed on. Lungs burned from overexertion.

A rough blow exploded from the side. Bone-jarring force resonated through his skull. The world spun and twisted. Limb over limb, colors merged and mated. Confusion was its progeny.

The world stilled. Dusk had come, bringing the twilight of the day, the twilight of youth. Cascading silver rained upon the landscape as daylight faded.

A shrill cry split the air. His body twitched but would not stand. Muscles ached, ceaselessly complaining for rest. Lungs still throbbed from their struggle. Another scream filled with utter and complete pain. This time though, it was coupled with resignation. Roughly, he tugged at the foliage. Still, his body denied the command to stand.

Night, a raptor, swooped from above and chased the light. One final, piercing screech shattered the darkness. Death dripped from the shrill notes. Hopelessness flooded the skies. Night devoured its prey.

Aramil bolted upright. Half-dreaming confusion wracked his mind as his eyes darted about. The nightmare had returned again in the dark of night. The burning sun hadn't yet risen above the eastern mountain range. Within an hour, the fiery orb would begin its daily trek across the blue sky. Pinks and light reds were already clawing their way into the heavens.

The tiny mountain range in the east barely blocked the orb's rays. The range was at least a week's walk away. And from this distance, he could already tell they were nothing more than oversized hills. They were nothing but ants compared to the dark, brooding peaks splitting the skies to the south.

Aramil stifled a shudder. He was glad to be traveling away from the southern peaks that marked the edge of Midloth, the King's royal territory. But the ant-sized peaks were not his destination either.

Slowly, he turned north to look into his future. Months of journeying remained, at the very least, to cross the hellish terrain. The next major terrain feature would be an old forest perched above a series of canyons. After that marker, the last range of mountains danced along the coast and hiding a treacherous sea. In that sea was his destination: Aedil, the Thirteenth Territory of the King. The only territory rumored to be just and fair to any of all races. Aedil gave the King its allegiance and yet, managed to disobey the racial laws. At least, that had been what he was told just like his companion.

Aramil shifted his gaze back to his right side. Gabrielle lied, curled upon a bed of dry leaves and moss. Draped over her small form was Aramil's tattered blanket. Gabrielle

stirred; her dark, curly hair flopped from side to side. Quietly, Aramil waited for the halfling's shifting to end. *Our destination*, he corrected.

With a dirty, travel-worn hand, Aramil wiped the thick layer of sweat from his brow. Summer was fading and the nights were already beginning to chill. Because of the nightmare, because of his memories, he still awoke drenched in sweat. Since Aramil's personal demons and devils couldn't bleed him dry, they tortured the sweat from his body. The constant running through his dreamscape coupled with the monotonous never-ending traveling left his body sore each and every day.

Gabrielle's half-waking twitches slowed as she lulled back into her own dreams. Aramil stood and pulled his dark hair back. A delicate gesture confined the straight hair in a leather tie, exposing his slightly pointed ears. Once Gabrielle woke and they continued their journey, his hair would have to be released again. With delicate, angular bones Aramil ran too much a risk of discovery without displaying his half-elven ears.

Traveling north had been a difficult trek alone. It had only complicated matters, when the half-elf had crossed paths with Gabrielle. She, too, was running from her past and her heritage. She had been directed to head north to Aedil. Learning that Aramil was on the same path, the halfling practically became attached at the hip to the half-elf.

She slowed his progress. She also ate more food and made more noise than a rabid band of goblins. Her stature alone caused problems in the few towns they dared enter. Passing her off as a child didn't even ease the situation. Her mouth usually negated any clever disguises Aramil could create. As such, they had been forced to circle around several of the more recent towns. Once stopped for the night, Aramil had to backtrack in the dark and pilfer what food he could. His nights seemed to never end.

Aramil sighed as he stared at Gabrielle. Despite the grief she caused him, she was like a sister. She was another outcast to share the brunt of this journey. Before the journey ended, he was sure more than just a brunt would be borne by the both of them. Blood and tears awaited their travels. Hopefully, they would survive. But the half-elf had serious doubts.

Removing a hardened loaf of bread from his pack, Aramil sat back down beside Gabrielle. He greedily tore a hand-sized chunk and devoured it quickly. As soon as he had swallowed his piece, he waved the bread under the halfling's nose. Gabrielle's nostrils twitched and her eyes opened swiftly. Her hands lurched toward the bread but he snatched it just out of her reach.

"Not just yet. Get up. We have to get going." Aramil stood again, waving the bread tantalizingly in front of his face. "Get up."

"Fine! I'm awake." Gabrielle sat up on the makeshift bed and gathered her things. "I didn't get enough sleep, you know."

"Neither did I." Aramil retorted. "But, we need to keep going. Rest just enough so you can keep going, that's what my father used to say." The half-elf grimaced as a memory of his father surfaced. He shrugged it off as best as possible.

"Your father must've been a stupid man." Gabrielle threw a hand over her mouth but couldn't stop the words. Aramil's face contorted with anger. "I'm...I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

The halfling's apology was silenced as a hunk of bread hurled toward her head. She dodged it nimbly and the bread collided with the soil. "Let's get going!" Aramil commanded. The half-elf stalked off, all of his gear already packed.

Gabrielle quickly threw her things and Aramil's blanket into her satchel. Then she snatched her lute and grabbed the bread off the ground. She dusted the dirt off and screamed, "Hey! Wait up!!"

The shoulder high field of wheat was a curtain of blindness. Aramil couldn't see more than fifty feet ahead of his position. The sloping hills he and Gabrielle were trekking across rose steeply in front, blocking his view. The half-elf wasn't at all happy.

Gabrielle plodded, not-so-silently, behind him. She had taken to plucking on the infernal instrument she carried. She had practically no ability with the lute and her voice was a horrible accompaniment. Always, her tone registered flat compared to the voice of the instrument. Her cacophonous chords did nothing to alleviate the strain on his sensitive half-elven ears. Aramil grumbled quietly.

"Would you knock that off?!"

"No. I am going to be the best singer on the island of Aedil. And right now, I need my practice." The halfling returned to her prodding of the horse-hair strings.

"Stop!" Aramil spun and knocked the lute out of her hands. "I need to be able to hear. And I can't do it with the racket you're making." Gabrielle's face welled up with tears. Aramil released his anger with a hoarse breath. "Look, if you don't want to be captured by the Tyrant's men, I'd suggest you be silent. I need to think." Aramil pulled a worn map out of his satchel and tried to calculate their location.

Gabrielle plopped down beside Aramil and tried to peer at the map. Quickly, she became impatient and turned away. Within moments, she was strumming the lute again albeit at a quieter volume.

"I don't understand it. This map must be old. Clearly, we're nearing a town but it doesn't appear on this," he shook the parchment roughly. "It must be. Why else would we be traveling through a field of wheat?"

"Oh, do you think we could maybe stop in and get some food?" Gabrielle beamed. "I'm so hungry." Her stomach rumbled loudly in emphasis.

"I don't think that's a good idea. Besides, the town isn't on my map. So, we'll be lucky to even see it. It must be quite tiny."

"There's nothing wrong with being tiny," she shot back. "We should try to find it anyway. I'm quite hungry."

"I heard you the first time. Either way, you're not entering the town. I'll get us food. Let's get moving again." Aramil began the arduous task of plowing through the field and leaving a path for his pint-sized friend.

Suddenly, the half-elf tensed. His ears had picked up a strange noise that raised the hairs upon his neck. He tried peering through the blind wheat again, but to no avail. "Run!" he hissed.

"What is it?" Gabrielle asked.

"Horses. Now, run!" The half-elf shoved the halfling before turning to charge after her. They fled as quickly as they could back down their obvious trail. The galloping noise of hooves began to grow louder and louder.

Aramil chanced a glance back and spotted two riders coming on strongly. Both were decked in black half-plate armor and were waving weapons in the air. Swiftly, the gap between the groups closed revealing more detail. Aramil spotted the symbol of Ara'kull

emblazoned on the armor, a broken bastard sword nearly arranged into a cross. The rider on the left was waving a mace in the air, while the rider on the right twirled a net.

At the last possible second, Aramil shoved Gabrielle off the path and darted the other direction. The net had already been released and easily caught the halfling. As Aramil plunged headlong into the crop, the horses changed direction and ploughed toward him. He moved as quickly as possible but the stems of the wheat clung like greedy hands, slowing and pulling him down.

A shrill cry pierced the air from behind him. He could hear another rider coming down the hill, although he dared not look.

His pace increased but his vision was shrouded with memory. Reds and yellows glinted off of the wheat. Terrified he charged along even faster.

An arrow sailed over his head but he kept going. The wheat left welts on his skin, but he wouldn't stop. More arrows danced above his skull, just barely missing their mark.

Gabrielle shrieked again from behind, a dull thud chasing her fading voice. Sweat beaded across Aramil's brow as his lungs began to burn. *Out of my head*, he demanded mentally of his memories. But the weight of his father's death effectively crushed him.

The Orcs were behind him again as he ran with his father through the forest. They had been heading to Aedil when the Orcs came out of nowhere. Aramil's father shoved him off the trail, where the child had tumbled down an embankment and into the cover of dense foliage. When the half-elf had awoken at dusk, he heard the shrill cries of his father being tortured. When Aramil found the body several days later, he realized his human father hadn't been tortured but devoured alive. The half-elf's rebellious body had saved him from the same fate.

Aramil burst out of the forest of wheat and into a clearing at the base of a hill. A small stream cut through the trench. A traitorous rock that pierced the water snagged his boot. The half-elf tripped and plummeted to the ground.

A rough blow exploded from the side. Bone-jarring force resonated through his skull. The world spun and twisted.

He struggled to roll over. He reached for his father's crossbow and clumsily loaded a bolt. The soldiers burst through the edge of the crop and into the clearing.

Aramil raised the crossbow and pulled on the trigger. An arrow shaft pierced his arm, sending his shot wide. The rider with the mace charged forward, swinging low. The half-elf scrambled away but the forged metal connected solidly with his head.

Colors merged and mated creating confusion as the sky disappeared and the ground darted upward. Darkness swallowed Aramil's consciousness.

"Did you kill the child?!" A gruff voice pierced Aramil's veil of unconsciousness. The half-elf shifted slightly, sentience and pain flooding back into his mind.

"No, I didn't kill it. I should though. The bitch is a halfling." This voice was slightly higher in tone but leering and condescending.

"You are not to kill it," a third voice commanded. This one was older, laden with discipline and demanding respect. Aramil struggled to open his eyes until he realized a torn cloth was tied tightly about his head. Similarly, his arms and feet were bound as

well, although in heavy metal clasps. He tried to rotate his head against the cold earth to try to hear more.

"I won't kill it then. But I am going to have some fun with her." Aramil heard the sound of hands working against leather. He struggled against his bonds.

"Heh. Do you think they're skilled whores?" The gruff voice questioned.

"Dunno," the condescending soldier answered, "but they can't be too bad. They're the same height as children, after all. I'm sure her stubby fingers can work wonders." Laughter broke out between the two men. Aramil struggled loudly against his bonds.

"Now look what you've done!" The commanding voice shouted. Aramil felt the man coming closer and then felt a solid piece of oak crack against his skull. Aramil tasted the metallic flavor of blood in his mouth as darkness swallowed him again.

"Heh. I bet the elf would benefit from you as well," the gruff voice replied.

"Rufus, shut the hell up! You're just encouraging him. Neither of you will touch these prisoners in anyway unbecoming of your stations." Captain Lockhart glared at both of the men. He pushed his sweaty gray hair out of his eyes. Before either of his men could speak he stated, "If however, they need to be helped along with their...confessions, you may turn toward your particular methods. But not one hand will be laid upon them until we return to the keep, unless that hand is mine."

The Captain threw a set of manacles to his men. "Chain her up and then blind-fold her. Once we've gathered their gear, we'll leave." The aged soldier grabbed Aramil by his nape and threw him onto a warhorse. Then the Captain leapt onto the horse and adjusted the half-elf.

"Sometime today if you ever expect to receive your transfer!" The Captain cursed the Royal Army silently for sending him the worst recruits to train. Lockhart watched as the recruits carefully chained the halfling, making sure their hands wouldn't stray too far. Once everything was collected, the group rode toward the Town of Green Hills.

Interlude: The Battle at Port Divi'sad

of war and prophecy

Nearly Thirty years prior...

The rising sun glinted dully off the steel edging of the greatsword. Ancient runes carved in the language of the Gods were barely visible through the dried blood and gore accumulated on the metal. The battle-hardened warrior-priest raised the blade into the air, pressing the cool steel against his dirty brow. He dropped to his knees in silent prayer on the field of battle.

Strewn around the praying warrior's body was thousands of quietly smoldering bodies. Severed appendages littered the once green grass of the park. More than a hundred thousand gallons of blood had stained the grass deep red.

For your honor my Lord...

The warrior-priest bowed forward, touching his face and the blade to the earth. Silently, his lips murmured his prayers. The gore of the field clung to his unshaven face. He seemed not to notice or care as he continued his prayers.

This was the third day of the battle; the third day he had held his position, the third day without any rest. Four days ago, he had been outside of the city, Port Divi'sad, preparing to lead his soldiers in the defense of the city. They had marched from Legend, the territory that had claimed dominion over Port Divi'sad.

Borders in the Kingdom of Norum da Salaex were as ever changing as the seasons. The Troll-ruled territory of Draat had been expanding their territory relentlessly for the last twenty or more years. The Trolls had already devoured much of the Goblin state, Matz and were now pushing into the territory of Legend.

One week ago, the warrior-priest had sworn to take back the city. He had made this oath to the Baron, Dragos Tyne. The men he led were not an official army and as such, were not subject to the chaotic whims of the individual Barons or the ruthless agendas of the King. These were men dedicated to his personal causes; men that had rallied to the calls of courage, self-defense and the betterment of their own stations in life. These men had learned the arts of war only for defense of their own families not to obtain land or riches. These were nearly one thousand good men, and now he would have to bury and bless all but maybe ten of them. The warrior-priest sighed as he shifted his weight slightly raising his head and allowing his tears to cleanse the blood from his face and then the earth.

He had led nearly every single one of his own men to their deaths. They would have willingly followed him into the deepest, darkest depths of the Hells if it would guarantee the safety of their families. If the Trolls were to maintain their foothold in Legend, the regenerating beasts would likely take the entire territory. His sorrow creased and formed a solid grimace as he stood, muscles straining wearily.

Give me strength, my Lord. In this, my final hour, bless this blade and bless my body. They are but weak vessels for your holy might, your holy wrath. And with them, I may

send more of these fiends into your eternal embrace.

Reserve a spot at your side for me, my Lord. Know that I died in your name, doing your will. I died honorably and in defense of those unable to defend themselves from the wrath and hatred of Ara'kull and his minions.

Bless me, my Lord.

The warrior-priest kissed his blade once more, basking in the warmth of Cael's wife Myr. The sun was now above the eastern horizon by quite a distance. He turned away from his homeland to stare toward the Troll camps in the west.

It had been nearly five years since he had actually received the words of his Lord, Cael. But always steadfast in his devotion, the warrior-priest prayed every night to his God. Often, he would even pray again in the morning, hoping his words were being carried to the ears of his God. Several times, he had felt the divine power that coursed through his veins falter. At those moments, the spells he had been concentrating upon would fly from his mind and he would be left powerless except for the blade he carried. Still, his devotion held and he stayed on the path he had been set upon so long ago.

He noticed movement on the western horizon. The Trolls were moving forward again. The beasts were not fond of battling in the day's light. They had found that the warrior-priest actually preferred the nights as well, his power waning during the daylight hours. It was a calculating move on their part similar to their overused tactic of throwing as many goblin slaves at him as possible before attacking with their trained soldiers. Both tactics had failed horribly over the preceding days. However, the Trolls had to know they would eventually wear him down. The warrior-priest was, after all, outnumbered especially with the loss of his troops.

Calmly, the warrior-priest roused the remains of his men. He allowed them time to eat and prepare themselves as much as was necessary. This would be their final fight together. He was not afraid of death but he did not relish the thought of sending his few remaining soldiers to their afterlives as well.

"Men," he screamed his voice harsh and raspy from days of misuse, "You are free to go. You have honorably served me and my God." He turned to look the ten, ragged men in their eyes. "I will not bind you to my own fate. You must each choose your own path. Each of you has a family to watch over. Your place is with them and not at my side. I suggest you leave while you can. The Trolls will be here in a matter of hours." The warrior-priest pushed the two bleached locks of white hair back behind his ears. In that position, the long, white curls clashed with the short black hair that was cropped closely to his head. He smiled grimly, realizing that in battle they must look like gleaming horns spinning and attacking his victims. "You're dismissed!" He turned away from their nearly empty camp and looked to the horizon, to his own death.

"Sir." A young sergeant tried to pull him from his reverie. He was unsure of the sergeant's name. The soldier was one of his quieter men.

"Yes."

"I think, sir, I speak for all of us. Our place is at your side. This is the best way for us to take care of our families. And not just our own families but also all those left fatherless and brotherless by this war. If we do not stop the Trolls, sir, then who will?" The sergeant stepped back, respectfully and returned to the breakfast fires. The warrior-priest smiled.

Cael, do not fail us now.

The warrior-priest spun on his heel. "Men. Today we die. Let our deaths not be in vain. There is nothing to fear from an honorable death. Cael will embrace each and every one of us into his arms. And he will devour the souls of our enemies! Into your positions!" The soldiers formed up alongside and behind the war-priest; five to each side creating an inverted vee pattern.

The trolls had stopped two hundred feet away. The warrior-priest noted the prominence of the diminutive Goblin slaves making the first rank. In the middle of the front rank was a line, maybe ten trolls wide. "This is a new tactic," the warrior-priest grunted silently. "Ready your arrows!" Each of his ten soldiers lit the arrows they held and then proceeded to nock the arrows in their bows.

A dark speck darted from the Troll ranks, running as fast as it could. The Goblin's short legs weren't built for long distance running; he seemed to sputter and trip at numerous points in his journey.

"Extinguish arrows, men! I believe they wish to parley." Cheers exploded behind him as the arrows were carefully extinguished.

The Goblin toppled over as he reached the humans' positions. His breath was hoarse and rasping, from his full-speed run. The warrior-priest lowered his weapon, resting the point of the blade only inches from the Goblin's long, twisted nose. The runt scrambled backward onto his knees, not even daring to raise his eyes.

"What message do you bring, slave?"

The goblin scratched his head for a moment, trying to release the memories of his orders. Then he stood, carefully and slowly taking great pains to not look up. "Dey sen me." Its common was broken and scratchy. It motioned back toward the Trolls to get the point across. "Dey speak: Fierce, war-yer o' black night, be coward. Go to dem. Dey let not-men go." The Goblin bowed his head, his transmission complete.

The warrior-priest grimaced. He looked toward the enemies' ranks and saw the line of Trolls part. In the center of the massive army, he could make out the distant shapes of women and children, cowering with fear. The Trolls alongside the prisoners rose gigantic axes into the air.

"And if I don't?"

The Goblin raised his head and stared directly in the warrior-priest's eyes. "Dey speak: Den you see dem die. Den you die."

The warrior-priest gritted his teeth. "Fine." He sheathed his weapon and turned once again to his men. "I am going to turn myself over to the Trolls." Grunts and moans arose but he cut them off with a swift gesture of his hand. "Prepare your arrows. If they do not release the prisoners, make them regret their dishonor." He turned stoically toward the enemy encampment and began the walk over with the Goblin.

Twenty feet from the Trolls, the prisoners were clearly in view. Most of the prisoners were women and children but there were a few elderly chained down as well. One of the prisoners stood tall and straight, long blonde hair cascading down her shoulders. Her bright blue eyes showed no mark of violation, unlike her body and clothing. The bruises, welts and lacerations that covered her naked torso dimmed in the serenity of her eyes. She cocked her head backward, allowing the warmth of the sun to brighten her face.

He raised his eyes toward the sky as well. *One last moment of peace*, he thought. The sun had moved to its zenith and basked the gore of the field in its warm rays. A shimmer suddenly appeared just below the sun. A blood-red moon was speeding toward the fiery

orb.

Morrick, the Hand of Cael, hear my words now. Let my power guide and stay your hand. Gather your strength from my own. Your fate is upon you, the last of your adventures. But your life is not forfeit as of yet.

This woman before you is your just reward for a life of service. She is a follower of Myr and will produce an heir for you. She is your salvation. She will be your love and your confidant. Protect her for your own future. Protect her for my future. And do as she requests. This is your future.

I bless you Morrick.

The crimson moon hovered in front of the sun, casting the battlefield into darkness. Worried murmurs arose from the Trolls. Morrick stared downward at his blade as he crossed the remaining twenty feet. Warmth trickled slowly down the scabbard and through his bones. He whipped the blade out of its covering, the ancient runes glowed an unearthly blue which quickly shifted into a bright, searing red hue.

The Trolls leapt backward as Morrick's blade danced above his head, in a fast arc. As the blade slid through the beasts, their bodies erupted into flame. The flaming corpses stumbled backward allowing the flames to spread rapidly through the ranks.

The army surged forward to close the ranks and pin the cleric. Morrick's men unleashed a barrage of flaming arrows into the army. They then dropped their bows, drawing their own melee weapons and began a charge.

The flaming arrows did nothing to slow the progress of the hordes of Trolls and Goblins. Morrick grabbed the woman in white and pressed her downward onto the ground. He spun left and right, setting more of the creatures ablaze with the glowing sword.

The warrior-priest screamed in rage as the tides kept pouring toward him. He saw his men trying to hack their way through the ranks to join their leader. Claws and blades hacked into his body as he fell forward, over the young woman. Blood poured from the multiple lacerations, his eyes glazed.

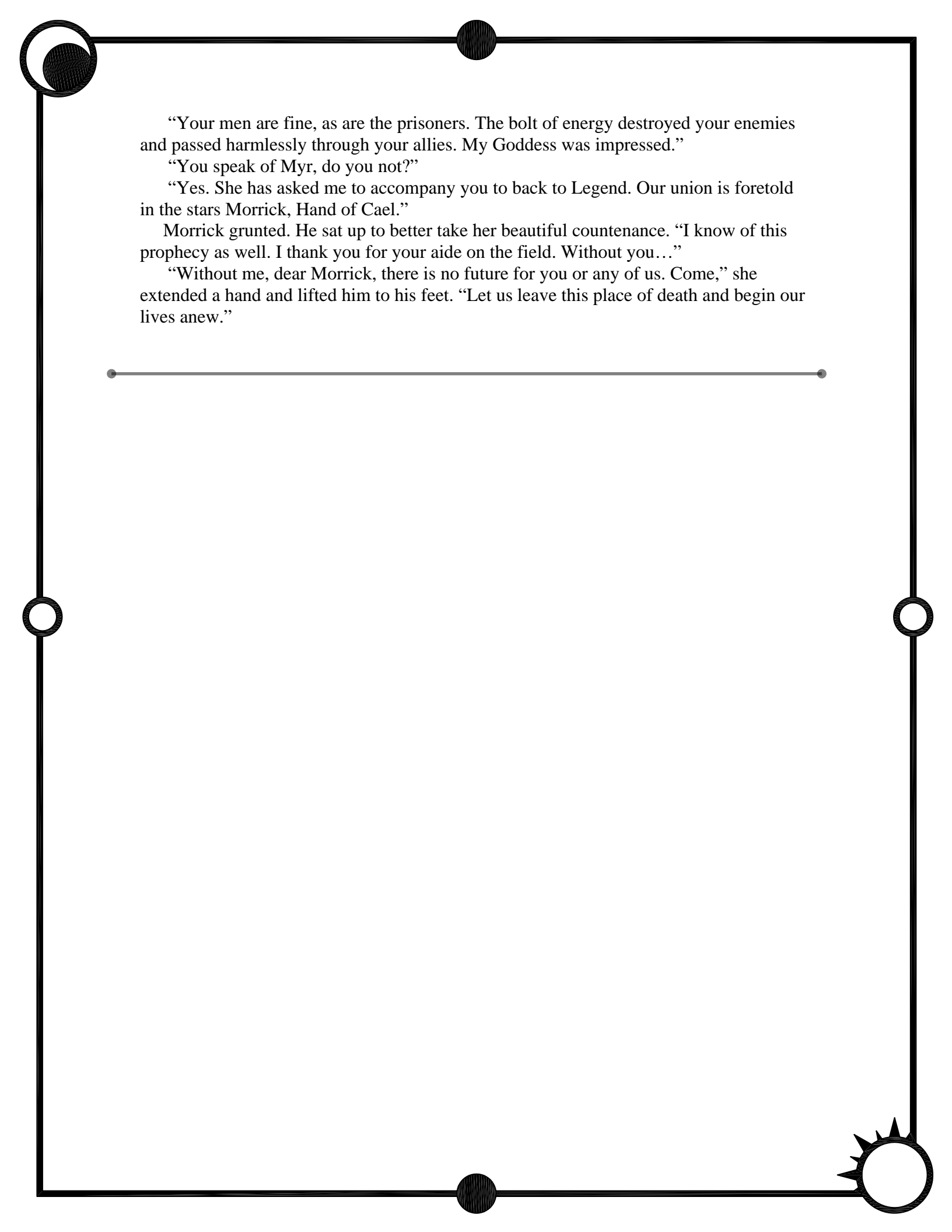
The woman stared up at Morrick's face. She raised her hands, gently caressing his face. A bright light gushed from her hands. Morrick felt his wounds close and his vitality return. He stood straight and glared at the ranks surrounding him.

The horde broke momentarily as Morrick raised the greatsword toward the sky. A fluid black energy poured from his body, engulfing the sword. Morrick felt divine energy coursing through his veins. He brought the blade down and pointed it at his enemies. A divine radius of black energy sped outward decimating the rival army.

Morrick collapsed to the ground.

When Morrick opened his eyes, he was staring into the face of the woman he had been protecting. He jumped upward, a pain in his back keeping him earthbound. Quickly he glanced to each side.

A devastating scene spread around his prone form. All of the Trolls and Goblin slaves lie in burning heaps. The grass itself was stained and charred. He struggled to search the wreckage for his men, but her gentle hand pulled his gaze upward.



“Your men are fine, as are the prisoners. The bolt of energy destroyed your enemies and passed harmlessly through your allies. My Goddess was impressed.”

“You speak of Myr, do you not?”

“Yes. She has asked me to accompany you to back to Legend. Our union is foretold in the stars Morrick, Hand of Cael.”

Morrack grunted. He sat up to better take her beautiful countenance. “I know of this prophecy as well. I thank you for your aide on the field. Without you...”

“Without me, dear Morrick, there is no future for you or any of us. Come,” she extended a hand and lifted him to his feet. “Let us leave this place of death and begin our lives anew.”
