

The Final Dragonkeeper: Quest for the Relic



José J. Amador

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PROLOGUE: The Prophecy

He took a deep breath – held it for a moment with pursed lips – then let out a long, tired sigh. With a slight feeling of foreboding he realized that time was becoming short. The Dragonkeeper was dying.

Suddenly the doors to his chambers flew open, a palace servant entered quickly and said, “Grand advisor, forgive me, but it’s the Tighearn. He’s calling for you, please hurry!”

The grand advisor and servant made their way to the Tighearn’s bed chamber. Hastily they walked down the long darkened hallways of the palace, imposingly high walls ending in forcefully sculpted stucco ceilings added to the ever increasing sense of dread spreading throughout. A hush had fallen and he could see as they passed the look of worry on the faces of other servants.

Upon entering the bed chamber the grand advisor noticed the Dragonkeeper lying – he hoped – asleep on his king-sized bed. He was underneath pristine white sheets, a withered figure of the great man he once was his head looking strangely small on huge overstuffed white pillows. Besides numerous servants and palace guards standing watch, towering next to the bed was the Head Dragon of the Council, a Eura Dragon named Burrax, up on his hind legs resting back on the thick base of his tail. The head dragon waited patiently with hands and arms resting on his thickly scaled, gold-colored stomach. He turned his head with big bat-like ears and sharp green eyes toward the grand advisor, flicking his tongue in greeting. The grand advisor gave him a respectful nod of acknowledgment and placed himself opposite the large dragon. He looked at the Dragonkeeper relieved to see him still breathing.

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After a moment of silence, the grand advisor noticed a puff of smoke floating above the head dragon's nostrils – usually a sign that a dragon was about to speak. He looked up keenly and waited. Burrax spoke in that deep melodic language of Dragon Runes.

“Have you found a successor to Jiro?” said the head dragon.

“No,” replied the grand advisor after a moment's hesitation. “Not yet, but we are still looking.”

“We cannot let time just slip by between Dragonkeeper's, as it did between Arall and Shafie, *especially* now,” said Burrax firmly. “With the traitor Hifearnan growing stronger, we need to keep the dragon clans and their allies' united.”

“I am well aware of history and our current situation.” the grand advisor said with a hint of annoyance. “We have no intention of going long between Dragonkeepers.”

Everyone was well aware of Dragonkeeper history. Only twice in 1,500 years had there not been one, most recently was about 450 years ago after the death of Tighearn Dragonkeeper Arall and before the discovery of Shafie. Dragons can only stay united in harmony for so long without a Dragonkeeper. Sixty-two years separated Arall's death and the start of Shafie's reign. In that era, disunity and discord had almost broken the Council of Dragons, allowing the Cennud races to cause problems across the Realm of Faerie. Fortunately, Shafie was discovered in time and peace had once again been restored. Everyone in the Realm of Faerie knew that dragons without a Dragonkeeper were a problem – a big problem.

A small snore came from the bed, both head dragon and grand advisor looked down in surprise. The Dragonkeeper was stirring; Burrax and the grand advisor exchanged mixed looks of concern and relief.

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“Tighearn, you called for us,” asked the grand advisor gently. “How may we help you?”

“Tighearn Jiro, we came as soon as we were called, but you were asleep,” added Burrax.

“We did not want to wake you.”

The Dragonkeeper tried to sit up, but was unable. Instead, with a hoarse throat he said, “So, you decide to talk over me as if I were already dead? Even Minh here comes dressed in his formal clothes. Already in mourning I see?”

The Grand Advisor, Minh Chu, wore his formal dress clothes; a Mandarin captain’s hat which designated his station as advisor, and a richly colored crimson Mandarin jacket with matching loose fitting trousers. The jacket had oversized sleeves which allowed him to hide his hands and arms crossed, in opposite sleeves, in the traditional Assuwan style. The coloring of his jacket was in contrast to a deep tan shown over his face. His perfectly trimmed white moustache, drooping over the corners of his mouth, matched the neatly trimmed goatee cut to a point and hanging down from his chin.

The grand advisor felt his face get hot with embarrassment; a dragon on the other hand has smoke come out of his mouth, lots of it. The Dragonkeeper looked at them and coughed out a short laugh. His expression promptly turned serious, he looked at the grand advisor with squinted eyes.

“Have you spoken to Burrax about the next Dragonkeeper?” Tighearn Jiro said.

As the grand advisor was about to answer, Burrax interrupted him taken aback by the Dragonkeeper’s question. He answered while frowning at the grand advisor.

“Tighearn, I have been told that the search goes on, unsuccessfully. Forgive me for saying but it is of utmost urgency we locate your successor sooner rather than later.”

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“Ah, I see,” said the Dragonkeeper, slight displeasure in his voice. “Minh is waiting for a better time to inform you of our situation.”

“What situation, Tighearn?” said Burrax eyeing the grand advisor suspiciously.

“The fulfillment of prophecy my dear dragon,” croaked the Dragonkeeper. “We have arrived at the end of an age.”

Burrax gaped and said, “What is he talking about, grand advisor? What prophecy?”

The grand advisor steadied himself, as if preparing to take a blow. He took a step away from the bed then turned around facing the large dragon. He replied in a slow and steady voice, as if telling something to a child for the first time.

“We have arrived at the time of strife head dragon, as predicted by the *Final Dragonkeeper Prophecy*. As the Tighearn told you, the ‘end of an age’ is upon us.”

Smoke billowed out of Burrax’s nostrils. His eyes shifted as he thought, *The Final Dragonkeeper Prophecy – what is this about...?* Then the understanding hit him like a slap, hard to do when you stand eight feet tall.

“Tighearn, this prophecy you speak of, no one has believed for over 500 years.” Burrax said bewildered. “Nothing has happened since that time to prove it. The acts of Tighearn Dragonkeeper Shafie all but showed the Prophecy false. It is now told to children, human and dragons alike, as a story, a fanciful myth.”

“Head dragon, the Prophecy is true, we are about to begin its fulfillment,” hissed the Dragonkeeper.

“The Prophecy is *true*?” repeated Burrax sarcastically. “Let me see if I recall...Ah, yes, the final Dragonkeeper would come from the Realm of Grey; he would be a young man, many

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consider him a boy; he would require a 'Protector', the Prophecy states 'is of his own blood.'

There is more, I just cannot remember. But really, this is simply a children's story, nothing else."

The Dragonkeeper tried to sit up again, but could not, his face reddened in anger and he shook slightly. Noticing this, the grand advisor took a commanding step forward and spoke for the Dragonkeeper.

"The Prophecy – it is being fulfilled as we speak! We can show you..."

"If this is true, then all is surely lost against Hifearnan," abruptly interrupted the head dragon.

"It is true and all will not be lost," said the grand advisor calmly.

Burrax was beginning to lose patience. Smoke came from his nostrils and mouth, floating into the air twisting and turning as if alive, seemingly mad. As Burrax spoke the grand advisor noticed a small jet of flame in his mouth. A good indication the dragon was dangerously close to losing its temper.

"Tighearn, a Greylander will *never* be accepted as a Dragonkeeper, supposedly the *final* Dragonkeeper," snarled Burrax.

Jiro, with great effort lifted a bony arm and pointed into the air. A bluish-white, crystalline-like bubble appeared above his extended finger, it was transparent. Somehow the bubble began spinning and shimmering all at once. Inside a picture started to form, fuzzy at first, but as the bubble continued spinning it became clearer, it was like looking at a television image. It was a young boy, he seemed happy.

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“The Prophecy you so much deny, my dear old dragon, it said *he* would be rejected at first, remember?” said the Dragonkeeper crossly. “It is *not* a child’s story. *This* is the final Dragonkeeper; he must begin his quest and defeat Hifearnan. It is the only way.”

All the while the dragon stared intensely at the floating bubble, with its picture of a happy boy. Images and sounds entered the dragon’s mind, slowly at first – then in a rush. Visions that frightened him, yet the dragon could not deny now as truth. He wondered why one so young must be tasked so hard – there was no answer to this. He understood now, the Prophecy was not a simple story but a realization. The dragon remembered more about it and started feeling sorry for the boy. The emotion was pushed aside by hope. The *final* Dragonkeeper will get help, not only from those that serve him, but from their allies. A resolve started to build inside Burrax to aid this final Dragonkeeper anyway possible. More visions flooded his mind; the resolve grew stronger, the hope greater.

To the grand advisor it seems that Burrax was mesmerized, he knew what the Tighearn had done, wondered if it were enough to convince the head dragon. As he watched, Jiro lowered his arm heavily. Instantly the bubble stopped spinning, the image dissolved, and it slowly disappeared. It seemed to knock the dragon back into the moment.

Burrax rubbed his face with his big hands, as if waking from a deep sleep. He raised his head while pushing off his large tail, then stood squarely on his hind legs – an impressive sight. Two grand puffs of smoke exited his nostrils.

“Tighearn Jiro, it was foolish of me to doubt you,” said Burrax humbly. “I *see* now, it is the only way. But I’m afraid we are short on time to train him, the Protector will need time also. How are we to defeat Hifearnan before he becomes too strong?”

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“Time is very short indeed,” said Tighearn Jiro, looking very weak from his display of magic, “that is why the boy and his Protector will need – how do the Greylander’s say it? ‘On-the-job-training.’”

“I do not understand, what does that mean?” asked Burrax.

“We will teach them as much as we can, as fast as we can,” interjected the grand advisor, “and they will train as we search for the *Dragon’s Eye*.”

Burrax glanced up at the ceiling, lost in thought briefly trying to recall what he knew about the Dragon’s Eye.

It was given to the great Eura Dragon, Glicemax, by the Child of the Light almost 1,000 years ago; the Dragon’s Eye was a crystal object, an artifact that would aid the final Dragonkeeper in his fight against the Father of the Marag and his Evil One. Obviously, Hifearnan is the Evil One – the second traitorous Dragonkeeper since Meltyn.

What he remembered took his breath away (not easily done to creatures that breathe fire.) It seemed so clear now, but he needed help from his Dragonkeeper to see the truth.

“Yes, of course!” roared Burrax almost to himself. “The Dragon’s Eye made whole by the final Dragonkeeper, it is believed that great power will be given to him, even the Evil One cannot withstand.” He then looked down anxiously at the grand advisor.

“Would not Hifearnan search for it? Prevent the final Dragonkeeper from getting his hands on it?”

The grand advisor’s head tilted, he realized Burrax did not remember all the details about the Relic – he decided not to mention them. Instead, he answered ironically, “Hifearnan believes

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what many others believe, the Prophecy and its elements are a myth. A ‘fanciful myth’ I heard it once called.”

The head dragon smiled at this veiled jab by baring his teeth and flicking his tongue. The grand advisor noticed the reaction.

“I apologize head dragon that was uncalled for.”

“No need to apologize Minh,” said Burrax, as he waved his tail back and forth. “I was blind to the truth, now I understand. Let us concern ourselves with Hifearnan and what to do about him.”

The Tighearn started coughing harshly, both man and dragon walked over to his bedside, a look of alarm on their faces. Several servants stepped forward but Jiro waved them off. He cleared his throat and winced in pain, he looked very old and very sick.

“Hifearnan never believed the Prophecy – he doesn’t know that the first three signs have been shown. As long as he doesn’t believe, it is to our advantage. This I hope will buy us – you – the time.”

“Go to the council, tell them about your experience, convince them of the truth.” said the grand advisor urgently to Burrax. “Tighearn Jiro cannot repeat the vision six more times.”

Burrax understood with a simple nod. They looked down at Tighearn Dragonkeeper Jiro, or rather the wasted body of the man. He had quickly fallen asleep, clearly drained from his recent activity. The sleep did not seem restful, he was breathing with a noticeable rasp. Dragon and man silently understood the Tighearn’s end was coming near. The age of the final Dragonkeeper was upon them.

“What will *you* be doing grand advisor?” asked Burrax.

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“I am leaving immediately to bring the final Dragonkeeper and his Protector,” he replied sadly, turning his face toward Jiro. “It is the only way.”

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CHAPTER 1: Someone's at the Door

“Alright people, you need to know your integrals from earlier this year for tomorrow’s final,” said the teacher pushing his glasses up higher on his nose.

Part of the advanced calculus class groaned, a different part glanced at the wall clock and rolled their eyes. It was the school year’s end and everyone was already thinking ahead to summer vacation. No one really cared about integrals or anything else school-related for that matter. The teacher knew this but still plodded forward hoping they would listen and become prepared for the test.

“Let’s go over it once more, we know a single integral represents the area under a curve. What does a double integral represent?”

Sitting three seats from the front of the class, wearing a blue t-shirt with a silk-screened white stylized dragon, sat a slim but athletically built boy with thick dark-brown hair. He raised hand raised while his nose remained pointed at the book he was reading – a cheat guide to an online game. The teacher looked at him and frowned.

“Drake, let someone else answer this.” The teacher scanned the classroom expectantly, “Can anyone else say?”

Another boy, sitting front and center and visibly nervous, cleared his throat and said, “Um, a double integral will find the volume under a surface?”

“Yes!” said the teacher at once with a hint of relief in his voice. “That’s it Sammy, thanks. Now, can anyone else tell me what a triple integral represents?”

You could hear a cricket calling. Several kids in the class by habit looked at the boy sitting three seats back from the front.

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“Come on folks,” chastised the teacher. “You’ll need to know this, the difference between definite and indefinite integrals, and the rest we’ve covered this year.”

Still no one raised their hand, except Drake. The teacher crossed his arms, shook his head in frustration, and then pointed at Drake with his chin.

“Okay, go ahead and tell us.”

“A triple integral will find the volume of a solid region, like that of a cube or sphere.” Drake said. “You know the space inside any three-dimensional object, stuff like that.”

“Correct as usual, Drake.” droned the teacher.

The bell notifying class was over began to ring. It sounded like music to the students ears. As they noisily picked up their belongings and exited the classroom, the teacher called after them.

“This and much more will be on your final. Don’t forget to study everything from the beginning of the year...!”

Drake quickly went outside the school building to where his friends all met. They wanted his help for studying; tomorrow being a big day for everyone taking finals. Drake had already spent most of the week helping every one of them; he was tired and just wanted the school year to end. When his friends asked to meet at Frank’s house, he declined.

“I have karate class tonight guys, I can’t miss it again. Anyway, we reviewed the advanced English Lit stuff back on Tuesday. Don’t sweat it, you’ll be fine.”

As he jumped on his bike and sped away, he knew he had no intention of going to karate or studying. He had a better thing to do on his mind.

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She had just finished tossing a student onto the mat and was helping him up. The students were surprised to see that someone so pretty would actually be so good at karate. What they did not know was that lying underneath that exterior of brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, soft features of an attractive face, and the tall lean frame – lurked a tough tomboy. She turned to the class of young karate students, unconsciously straightening her red Gi-top and adjusting her black belt while addressing them.

“That is how you throw someone if attacked from behind. Now everyone pair up and let’s practice the throw and landing five times each.”

As students began tossing each other the dojo’s owner appeared from a back room, he called the young woman over. She ran to him and bowed.

“Master Richards, what may I do for you?”

“Madison, I want to thank you for starting the intermediate class.” Master Richards said. “I’m here now, why don’t you go home and I’ll finish up.”

“Sir, I thank you for the opportunity,” said Madison formally. “If you don’t mind I’ll take you up on that offer. I’ve got finals tomorrow to study for.” She then thought to herself, *Thank goodness, I hate teaching these younger kids. I’d rather beat up on the adults.*

“Of course, school comes first, thanks again,” said Master Richards sincerely, as he watched her collect her gear and walk out the door.

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Dr. Candace Clark and Dr. Kenneth Wallace were driving home to their modest two-story house from work. Dr. Clark's light-brown hair and neck scarf waved from the wind of the opened driver's side window. Her hazel eyes imply intelligence and focus as they talked about a host of subjects. The subject engaging Dr. Wallace most, as he fiddled with the car radio and loosened his tie, was the university's archeological fundraiser they were going to attend this weekend. His blockish face and rough features – belonging more to a football player than those of a distinguished professor – expressed worry over not yet having rented his tuxedo for the event.

Pulling into the driveway, then not being able to park in the garage, reminded Dr. Clark of her ire over the situation – again. Both this car and the other, with a 'Lights Out for Turtles' bumper sticker, had to remain outside since there was no room for either one in the junked-up garage.

"Dear, when are you going to clean the garage?" chided Dr. Clark at her husband. "I'm tired of parking cars out here when we have a perfectly good garage to place them in."

"Yes, I know, I know." Dr. Wallace said weakly. "I'll do it one of these weekends, hon', I promise."

"Uh huh," she replied skeptically.

Walking into the house they talked about the virtues of either eating in or dining out. With the busy lives they led, being respected researchers in their field of archeology – specifically medieval archeology – time for mundane tasks such as making dinner was at a premium. They chatted some more, trying to convince themselves more than anything else that it was quite alright, and then they did what they do almost every evening – called for delivery.

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“Does Chinese sound good to you?” said Dr. Wallace looking at stacks of menus stored in their pantry.

“Chinese it is,” merrily replied Dr. Clark. “I’ll call.”

“Oh, don’t forget to order those fried Rangoon’s that I like so much, hon’,” he said as he went upstairs to change.

“I will, I will.” Dr. Clark said while laughing to herself.

Soon after placing the call Madison entered the house, she had already taken off her Gi-top and was showing the solid-red shirt underneath. Her mother looked at her and smiled.

“So how was your day dear?”

“Oh, okay I guess.” sighed Madison. Dropping her karate gear onto the floor she added, “I have a ton of studying to do tonight. What did you call for delivery Mom?”

“What makes you think we’re having anything delivered?” said Dr. Clark.

“C’mon, when was the last time we ate a home-cooked meal around here?” teased Madison as she hopped onto the center console piece of the newly remodeled kitchen.

Patting Madison’s thigh softly and grinning Dr. Clark said, “We’re having Chinese.” They both laughed.

The doorbell rang and they looked at each other in surprise.

“Cool, dinner’s here,” said Madison hopping down. “I’ll get the door.”

“Impossible,” said Dr. Clark, her brow lifted prominently as she reached for her purse. “I just called a few minutes ago.”

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Madison answered the door to find a short gaunt man of Asian decent with his hands clasped before him. The man wore a dark business suit with dark-blue tie and a white, buttoned up, collar shirt – somehow it looked strange on him.

“Hello?” asked Madison with a curious face. “May I help you?”

“Good afternoon,” said the man politely. “May I please speak with either Dr. Clark or Dr. Wallace?”

“Oh sure, wait a sec,” said Madison. She took a step away from the door then returned and added, “May I ask who you are?”

“Of course, please tell them it is Minh Chu,” said the man. “I am the representative of Tighearn Jiro that should help them remember.”

Madison returned to the kitchen to find her mother still searching her purse for money. Her mother was mumbling something about never being able to find what she wants when she needs it.

“Mom?”

“Give me a second, Mady.” Dr. Clark said irritated. “I’ll need to write a check since I can’t find any cash.”

“It’s not the delivery guy, Mom,” said Madison dryly. “It’s a guy called Mr. Minh Chu, he wants to speak to you or Dad.”

Dr. Clark turns around slowly and said, “What? Who did you say?”

“A guy called Minh Chu is at the door,” repeated Madison. “He says he’s a representative of Tighearn Jiro that you should know. Is that a person or last year’s dig?”

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Ignoring the question Dr. Clark headed to the front door, unease spreads on her face. Still standing with hands clasped before him is Minh Chu, when he saw Dr. Clark he straightened himself and bowed slightly.

Nice to see you once again, Dr. Clark. I trust you have been well?"

"Yes, yes...nice to see you...too," stammered Dr. Clark. "Its been...a long time."

"Almost a year," said Chu. He waited several heartbeats, looked past the door opening then added, "May I come in please, to speak to you and your husband?"

Dr. Clark blinked then noticed Madison was standing behind her. She looked at Madison then returned her attention to Chu.

"I'm sorry, where are my manners," said Dr. Clark ruefully. "Please come in." She and Madison parted from the door.

As Chu entered, Madison noticed he stared at her intently. It was as if he was studying her, like someone who stares at you because you remind them of someone. Her mother led Chu to the study – located off the family room and past a huge filled bookcase built into the wall – where both her parents have a home office each with their own desk. Dr. Clark then went to get her husband, she also asked Madison to check on Drake. Madison saw that her mother looked stunned, anxious.

The door to Drake's room was opened and the mess in its usual place. There was not only some clothes on the floor but books as well, books that normally would be on one of three shelves. Madison always found it strange the collection of her brother's books. A mixed bag of history, math, foreign language, technical manuals, and even one whole shelf devoted to dragons.

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She could not help but wonder what a geek he really was as she saw him playing on his computer.

“Hey smart one, shouldn’t you be studying?” Madison said as she entered the room kicking aside some jeans.

“Oh, advanced calc?” Drake said without looking back at her. “Nah. I can score something like a 70 and still end up with an ‘A.’”

“Must be nice,” said Madison viewing the computer monitor and noticing the manual laying beside. “So you’re playing *DragonKingdom* – and using the cheat-guide I see. You know, you’re not supposed to be on until after 7PM.”

DragonKingdom is an online game of witches, warlocks, good and evil creatures. Players choose an avatar, and their avatar must perform deeds, good and bad to earn points. The more points you earn the higher the level you reach. The higher the level you reach the more powers, possessions, and weapons you can obtain. The game has become very popular among computer geeks and role-playing fanatics, the online community consists of both dedicated and chronic players all around the world. It practically runs twenty-four hours-a-day. What makes the game so popular however, is not only are the human players good, but the computer players as well – especially the evil ones.

“I know, I know,” said Drake impatiently still staring at his monitor. “But I just got to Level 33 Warlock when I found the Sword of Fire – and I just met a dragon.”

“Sword of Fire? What’s that?” Madison said. She saw Drake’s avatar was holding a large flaming sword.

“I dunno,” replied Drake.

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“So why is it important?”

“Because everything you find in this game is important, stupid.”

“So what’s the deal with the dragon?” said Madison irritated.

“I’m trying to get him to fly me to his cave,” said Drake seriously. “These dragons have jewels and other valuable stuff hiding there.”

“Why don’t you just jump on his back and *make* him take you.”

“Cause you just don’t do *that*.” he said incredulously.

“Yeah, I see,” she said sarcastically, shaking her head.

“It would be cool, though,” mused Drake. “You know, to fly with dragons, awesome really.”

“I suppose so,” dead-panned Madison, remembering her brother’s obsession with dragons, “if they *actually* existed, fool.”

“No, no, that’s not what I mean.” Drake retorted. “Think about it. It would be awesome, wouldn’t it?”

“Whatever,” dismissed Madison with a wave of her hand. “Listen, I need to ask you something. There’s a guy downstairs called Minh Chu wanting to talk to Mom and Dad. Have you ever heard them use that name?”

Drake turned around to face Madison, “Nope, never heard of him.”

“The guy gives me the creeps,” said Madison as a shiver went through her. “He was just staring at me. It was as if he wanted to say something to me, but couldn’t because Mom was there.”

“Maybe he was shocked to see how ugly you were,” he snickered.

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“Idiot, shut up, I’m being serious.” Madison replied sharply. After taking a breath she added, “Have you ever heard of the word ‘Tighearn?’ He said he was the representative of a ‘Tighearn Jiro.’”

“Yeah, actually I have,” said Drake, staring out the room at nothing in particular. “I think it’s Gaelic or Welsh for ‘Master’.”

Madison rolled the words ‘Master Jiro’ in her mouth wondering what it all meant. Drake turned to view his monitor and slapped his thighs in anger.

“Aw, man. Dang it!”

“What? What happened?” Madison asked.

“Look!” exclaimed Drake. “I just got my head bit off by the dragon.”

“The dragon told you off?” she sounded confused.

“No, no, I mean literally bit off.” Drake said as he jabbed a finger at the screen. “I’m *dead!*”

Madison looked closely, pointing to his avatar she saw what he was talking about.

“Hey, the graphics are good. Nice touch with the blood...” She began to laugh.

“Not funny,” pouted Drake as he crosses his arms. He fumed for a moment then whined, “Oh, no – I forgot to save my spot from the time I found the sword. Now I have to find it all over again...”

Laughing a bit harder and making a face Madison said, “Well smart one, that’ll teach you to cheat, won’t it? And you’ll know for next time those dragons are tough cookies, huh?”

From downstairs Madison and Drake heard voices become raised, and then they clearly heard their mother’s own voice.

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“OVER MY DEAD BODY!”

Startled then looking at each other momentarily, they bolted down the steps to the study. Very rarely have they heard their mother’s voice raised and never have they heard it with such anger. This was serious.

In the study they found Chu calmly standing with his hands still clasped before him, their mother hugged herself rocking on her heels, and their father just looked dumbstruck. Dr. Wallace became aware they were watching and motioned toward them.

“Mady, Drake, please not now, go back up to your rooms.”

Chu raised his hand and said, “No, let them stay. I will leave.” He observed Drake with penetrating but gentle eyes. Facing the parents he added, “Please consider what I have said, time is short, I will return tomorrow evening to discuss the matter further.”

Chu turned and walked toward the front door. Dr. Wallace followed him with a grimace on his face.

“Mom, what was all *that* about?” Madison asked concerned. “Is it one of your digs? Is it your jobs?”

“None of *your* business young lady,” snapped Dr. Clark. “Don’t the both of you have finals to study for? Go to your rooms, we’ll call you when dinner gets here. Now go!”

Madison and Drake went upstairs without another word to their mother or each other. Their mother’s temperament was weird; they had never seen her act like that before. Drake got a strange feeling from Chu but certainly not creepy. He sensed a more genuine feeling of caring as if they guy were an uncle.

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The Chinese delivery eventually showed up and their father called them downstairs for dinner. They realized that Mom and Dad have taken their portions to the study, with the door closed. They were left alone in the dining room to speculate.

“Something strange is going on – there’s something they’re not telling us,” mulled Madison.

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José J. Amador

CHAPTER 2: The Truth Comes Out

It was a long day at school. Not only because of finals, but distracted over what might happen at home when the strange visitor comes calling again. Drake and Madison had a rough time concentrating on exams, Drake even became concerned whether he actually scored that 70 in advance calculus to still make the ‘A.’

After school Madison drove them to karate. Neither mentioned it, but both hoped a good training session would get their minds off the impending visit. It did not. Still speculating what the man called Minh Chu had said to their parents, making them so upset, was distracting. They were repeatedly yelled at by their sensei for their lack of focus and effort.

“Are you two alright?” Master Richards asked, halfway through the class.

“I’m cool, sir.” Drake said unconvincingly.

“Nothing’s the matter, sir,” agreed Madison.

Karate class ended and without a word to anyone they hurriedly picked up their gear and raced home. Much to their surprise they arrived finding their parents already in the house. Hardly ever were their parents home this early, now they were certain something was definitely up, something undeniably serious. Even stranger was the smell of dinner wafting through the house; Mom and Dad were cooking – together – a sight they rarely saw. Mom or Dad seldom cooked and they don’t recall when they last saw them cooking in concert. When one of them did Drake and Madison usually knew ahead of time, with the situation in the house as it were this was doubly weird. They wondered if Mom and Dad were making up for lost time with them, or maybe just feeling guilty instead. Their mother noticed them watching at the kitchen entrance

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from the dining room. She looked tired and her face glistened with sweat, their father was dirty with flour on his shoes and dried batter on his apron, they both looked tense.

“Oh, hi guys,” said Dr. Clark with forced cheerfulness. “Go upstairs and get changed for dinner, it’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

Drake and Madison looked at each other and trudged upstairs, Madison had asked why they were cooking, her father covertly replied that a family dinner once in a while would be nice, wouldn’t it? Drake had asked what was for dinner but their mother told them it would be a surprise, so just go now and get ready.

Drake used the time to change clothes and played his avatar in *DragonKingdom*. Unable to recover the Sword of Fire really bugged him. Reading through his cheat-guide trying to find something more than what he already knew, a knock on his door breaks his concentration, it’s his sister.

“Smart one, dinner’s ready, let’s go.” Noticing the book on his lap she adds, “Hmm, I thought you learned your lesson yesterday about cheating, little bro?” She turned away smiling, he followed her reluctantly, long faced.

Dressed in comfortable shirts and shorts they returned downstairs and found the dining room table ready with dinner – or better yet a feast. Their parents, now cleaned up themselves, must have cooked all day it was a spread rivaling Thanksgiving. *Yep*, they thought to themselves, *Mom and Dad are feeling guilty about something*.

The dining room table was grandly arranged before them with linen table cloth, their mother’s fine china they never saw, and the fancy silverware only used on special occasions. Dinner itself consisted of salad and bread, Cole slaw, Cornish hens, turkey roast, mashed

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potatoes, rice pilaf, mixed vegetables, and candied baby carrots. Wine was poured for the parents and iced tea for the kids. Dessert was a choice of either banana crème pie or a tall chocolate cake. The entire spread could easily feed 10 to 12 people; they imagined eating this as left-over's for days to come.

Starting quietly the dinner remained a silent affair for a rather long time. The tension in the air was thick; they could cut it as easily as the hens or turkey in front of them. Instead of speaking first, Drake and Madison decided to wait their parents out, to see if they would begin talking. During the long excruciating silence they watched each other sending those unspoken cues of facial expressions and body language that only close friends, or better yet, siblings can. Staring the other down, urging the other with shrugs, lifting and furrowing of brows, raising and lowering of chins, and pointing at their parents with their eyes to break the ice and start some dialog. Just as Drake finally decided he would talk, their mother spoke once more with forced levity.

“So, how did your exams go? Oh, and would either of you be interested in going with me or your father to the university? We’re going in tomorrow to prepare for the summer term.”

“Finals were okay, I got through my test in Advance Calc alright I suppose,” answered Drake casually. “I just had a hard time concentrating today with you know that guy coming back tonight and all.”

“Mady, how about you sweetie?” Dr. Clark said as she heaped mashed potatoes on her daughter’s plate while ignoring Drake’s last comment.

Madison’s eyebrows met tightly; she’s in no mood to play games with her mother.

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“Who’s Mr. Chu, Mom? Who or what is Tighearn Jiro and what was all the yelling about yesterday?”

“That my dear, is none of your business,” simpered Dr. Clark sweetly. “Do you understand?”

Drake had given Madison a look telling her to just stay quite. Madison either did not see it or rather simply ignored it.

“No, Mom,” retorted Madison. “I find it odd what happened last night. This strange guy comes from who knows where and you end up in a shouting match with him. What the heck is all that about?”

Dr. Clark shared her own unspoken words staring at her husband who simply shrugged. She fidgeted in her chair and became visibly red-faced. Glancing down at her dinner for an instant, she picked up her wine glass and drank from it with a noticeable quiver.

“Madison, I’ll say it once more, it is *none* of *your* business,” said Dr. Clark with emphasis on ‘none’ and ‘your’ as she lowered her wine glass slowly. “Now, why don’t you tell me how your exams went today?”

“Dad, why is Mom acting so strange?” Madison said irritated facing only her father deliberately. “What happened yesterday and what exactly is going on?”

“Young lady, you will not ignore me!” roared Dr. Clark banging the table with an open hand, the dinner plates and silverware rattled in protest. “This is something between your father and me and it’ll stay that way.”

Each of them looked at Dr. Wallace. Detecting that tempers were starting to boil over, he wiped his mouth and tossed his napkin lightly onto the table with frustration. Waiting on his

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words he noticed a very angry wife, a mad daughter, and a confused son. Taking a deep breath he blew it out loudly through clenched teeth.

“Candace, you know quite well it is their business,” said Dr. Wallace wearily, resigned to the argument about to ensue.

“Thanks a lot Ken for being on my side, greatly appreciated,” scathed Dr. Clark, as she began to roughly cut a piece of chicken on her plate. “The subject is officially dropped, eat your dinners.”

Dr. Wallace lifted his hand to the objection of his wife. She shook her head no and much to her dismay listened as her husband told the tale she did not want them hearing.

“Do you two remember the trip your mother and I had last year?” begins Dr. Wallace facing Drake and Madison.

Drake shrugged, Madison shook her head no.

“We were at the archeological dig of the Conimbriga Ruins near Coimbra, Portugal,” said Dr. Wallace. “It was our summer sabbatical at the Old University in Coimbra. We couldn’t take you guys, remember? You stayed with Grandma Wallace.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Drake, remembering how bored he was that month in Grandma Wallace’s condo. “She loves to run the air conditioner low, freezing us the whole time.”

“Go on Dad,” urged Madison.

“Very well,” said Dr. Wallace in his best lecture voice. “The ruins date back to about 500 BC. Conimbriga has the remains of fountains, walls, some gardens, ancient mosaics, and broken pillars dotted all around. The entire region is composed of walled square and rectangular areas where continual excavation reveals these and many more objects existing at the site. These

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walled rectangular and square areas are placed in such a way that a maze of walkways exists between them. You can spend days walking between these parts and of course, investigating a single area itself. One unearthed area exposes an artery of heating ducts made from stone and adobe laying underneath the missing floor for a bath. Since only ten percent of the ruins have been excavated, this makes it one of the most interesting sites in the world to make continuing return visits. What makes it most fascinating to your mother and me is that during the Middle Ages, Conimbriga was mysteriously transformed to a desert, humans have never lived there since.”

“Dad, this is all nice,” said Madison impatiently, “but can you get to the point, please?”

“Patience, little girl,” condescended Dr. Wallace making a face, then pausing to make his point. “Anyway, one evening we were enjoying a walk around a part of the dig we hadn’t yet investigated. It was a beautifully clear night, the stars were out on a dark cloudless sky and the moon was full and bright overhead. We were merely relaxing, enjoying the summer evening’s breeze when a *doorway* appeared.”

“A doorway?” interrupted Drake. “A busted brick opening or something?”

“Ken, don’t go on, say no more,” warned Dr. Clark.

“Hon’ they have a right to know, it’s more about them than it is about us,” sighed Dr. Wallace. “I feel they need to know the truth before this goes any further, I’m sorry.”

Dr. Clark remained seated, seething in anger. She pushed away her dinner plate making a clanking sound against the table. Dr. Wallace turned back to Drake and Madison and continued.

“It was a doorway, but it wasn’t like the ones you and I are used to,” said Dr. Wallace as if lecturing to a classroom full of students. “It was a large oval opening, suddenly materializing

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before a crumbled pillar, must've been about 6 feet high. You could see through it, translucent, but the view from the other side was distorted, warped. The doorway floated just a few inches off the ground with nothing visible holding it up; I picked up a rock and threw it at it. Instead of flying straight through and hitting the pillar, the rock *disappeared*.”

“Hold on, it just vanished?” said Madison shaking her head. “The rock didn't come out the other side, just poof, gone?”

“In fact, I found a stick and pushed it in, the stick entered with no resistance,” continued Dr. Wallace. “It went in and didn't jut out. When I pulled it out, the stick seemed fine. It did feel slightly cool to the touch, though.”

“So then what did you *do*?” asked Drake now captivated by his father's story.

“Well, I logically did the next thing to try,” replied Dr. Wallace. “Much to your mother's protest – I stuck my arm, upto my elbow, into it.”

Drake and Madison were astonished with their father. They each considered to themselves if they would have done the same – they didn't think so. Their father remained quite for a moment, letting what he said sink into their thoughts.

“Of course I was able to pull my arm out with no problem whatsoever,” said Dr. Wallace evenly. “It felt tingly and cold, yet soothing. Then I did the only other thing left to do...”

“You walked in,” said Drake finishing the sentence for him. He nodded aware of his father's expression suggesting he was correct. Drake added, “What did you see?”

Dr. Wallace then described how he entered and exited the doorway with no difficulty, only feeling the tingly, cold sensation every time passing through. He told them how he

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explained the amazing scene he found to their mother. After much coaxing he convinced her to go through the doorway as well, after doing so she became excited at what they discovered.

Drake and Madison sat there dumbfounded, completely at a loss for words. What could you say to your parents when they describe to you walking through a strange doorway into another place? It all sounded surreal, but this was not the end of it. There was much more.

“At first we noticed a pillar behind the doorway where we exited, it wasn’t crumbled or broken, it actually looked quite new,” said Dr. Wallace. “Initially this gave us the impression we had gone through a time tunnel of sorts – taking us back to Conimbriga hundreds of years earlier. But we recognized quickly it wasn’t the ruins restored, it was some other *place*. It wasn’t the Conimbriga of 500 BC or any other time we were familiar with. This place looked different, was built different.”

“So it was Conimbriga?” Drake asked trying to understand. “Just built another way, one you weren’t familiar with?”

Dr. Wallace shook his head no and explained. Different architecture, building materials, layout of the location – it was not Conimbriga. They had exited into a large open-air, partially roofed atrium held up by columns of vaguely Roman or Greek design. Noticing even the sky had changed as they inspected their new setting. The stars were in the wrong locations and the moon was in its last quarter, it looked smaller. The evening was now warmer, humid and sticky.

He told them how they began exploring the surrounding area, keeping the doorway within clear view, when they happened upon humans – people dressed in Middle Aged clothes. They were military or police, carrying different weapons, or they might have been guards of some kind for all they knew. Unfortunately these guards were perfectly unable to speak English.

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Visibly surprised to find them there these guards consulted each other and decided to take the Dr.'s Clark and Wallace to a nearby location. There at a large tent they met none other than Mr. Minh Chu, dressed in emerald-green Mandarin clothes. Chu stood beside a table piled high with books and scrolls. He was reading a scroll when they walked in, he quickly rolled it up and gave them his full attention.

“Whoa!” Drake blurted. “You mean Chu comes originally from the other side of this doorway?”

“There’s more son, let me finish,” said Dr. Wallace.

Dr. Wallace described how the guards, or whatever they were, talked to Chu in a strange language, sounding as if Gaelic or Welsh or maybe a mix of both. Chu acted like he was expecting them, he was not at all surprised with their presence. He observed them closely, inspecting them to a certain extent. Without saying a word he led them to another “doorway” outside and behind the tent, exactly like the first except rectangular in shape and before a wall. Passing through this doorway was different, the sensation was tingly and warm instead. This second doorway delivered them to what appeared was the inside of a Chinese palace. After noticing the long hallway and very high ceiling, they could not get their eyes off the dazzling interior decoration. The walls were paneled with glossy, dark-cherry wood while the intricately floral-patterned floor was made using different timbers. The walls also bore painted silk and tapestries with the corners protected by richly carved and gilded frames, shaped as palm-tufted columns. Many wrought-iron lanterns hung from the ceiling on long chains adding to the grandeur of everything they saw around them. The wealth and assortment of furnishings were magnificent.

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The more they walked and saw the more they noticed they were making numerous twists and turns down main hallways and side corridors. Realizing they were lost, Dr. Clark and Dr. Wallace silently panicked knowing they could not find their way back to the rectangular doorway. If they had any hope of returning home it would be with the help and mercy of their captors.

Following Chu, they passed more men and women that were guards, clearly there to protect the palace but from what exactly was not readily obvious to either of them. The guards were all dressed the same, man or woman. They wore a dark-blue, long-sleeve tunic of thigh length with an elegantly designed belt and belt buckle tied around the waist, an undershirt looked dark-blue as well. A red sash hung from their left shoulder across the chest. The pants were black and tucked into knee-length, dark-brown leather boots that were much worn and used. Most carried swords of different types and lengths, from a sheath attached to the belt, although some carried a flail while others carried a mace. Another group of men and women seen walking the hallways looked like servants. The men-servants were dressed in white, loose-fitting long- or short-sleeve shirts and billowy pants which were tied at the ankles. A brown colored rope-belt was cinched around the waist and they wore shoes, tight fitting as slippers made of bleached leather. The women-servants were clothed similarly, except all wore long-sleeves, and instead of pants they were dressed in a wide skirt. Servants also wore a sash but its color was light-blue. All the men and women, guards and servants, were from different races but with one thing in common, they were nicely tanned.

Arriving breathlessly at a room after what seemed an endless walk, they met another man. He had a bald, blotchy head with a small wrinkled face; he wore a heavy looking dark-

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purple cloak over a loose fitting, long-sleeve blue shirt. He was sitting on a chair with a tall, ornately designed back-rest, behind an old wooden desk that looked sticky around the edges. The room, furnished in the same rich designs of the palace, contained an entire wall as a bookcase overfilled with very dusty books and scrolls; it reminded them of their study. Pictures on the wall were faded, dim-lighting made it impossible to tell what was depicted in them. They noticed a couple of servants standing in wait behind his chair, patiently still. He was stooped and looked frail, but his eyes were attentive and intelligent. The Dr.'s Clark and Wallace knew immediately they had reached the person in-charge, the one who unquestionably would determine their fate. The frail old man introduced himself as *Tighearn Dragonkeeper Jiro*.

Drake's face beams at the word "Dragonkeeper".

"Did you see any *dragons*?" he said with fascination.

"None." Dr. Wallace replied shortly. "Now listen, there's more."

Tighearn Jiro speaks the strange language to Chu, they spoke to each other as Dr. Clark and Dr. Wallace stood waiting nervously. Much to their surprise, Tighearn Jiro speaks to them in perfect unbroken English. He asked them their names and where they came from. Did they know where they were? Did they know how they got here? Dr.'s Clark and Wallace were entirely forthcoming and gave him truthful answers, they explained how they found the doorway by chance and thought they were somewhere near the Conimbriga Ruins in Portugal, but were not totally sure. Tighearn Jiro watched them carefully as they replied, almost appraisingly. Dr. Clark and Dr. Wallace felt as if they were waiting for a ruling from a judge, they hoped their answers were good enough to avoid whatever type of punishment was handed out in this place. By the looks of the flails and maces they saw earlier, they were absolutely horrified what that

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punishment might be. Jiro finished contemplating; having decided what to say next, what he told them was astounding.

“Ken, stop there, don’t say anymore,” interjected Dr. Clark quickly. “You’ll confuse them and scare them. They’ll think you’re crazy.”

“Candace, they need to hear the rest,” implored Dr. Wallace. “It’s important for them to understand.”

Dr. Clark sat up in her chair even more so. She picked up her wine glass, crossed her arms, and put the drink up to her mouth incensed. Dr. Clark muttered to herself about making him regret this and then blew out a bullish sigh.

“Well, what was it?” insisted Madison, annoyed with her mother’s constant interruptions. “What was so astounding?”

Dr. Wallace explained what Tighearn Jiro had told them that night, almost a year ago. They were no where near the Conimbriga Ruins or Portugal or their world for that matter. He told them they were in another world, another *realm* – the *Realm of Faerie*. A sister realm to their own world, the *Realm of Grey*. The Realm of Faerie, created 1,500 years ago by very powerful magicians originating from the Realm of Grey. Tighearn Jiro did not disclose exactly why these powerful magicians created the Realm of Faerie, only to say they were unhappy with all the conflict that existed in the Realm of Grey. They originally gave these realms their names, since then the inhabitants of the Realm of Faerie have given it another name as Greylander’s have their own name for the Realm of Grey.

“What’s the other name this ‘Realm of Faerie’ goes by?” Drake asked curiously.

“I was told by Tighearn Jiro it’s also known as ‘Olden Terra,’” said Dr. Wallace.

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“Why’s it they call our world the ‘Realm of Grey?’” wondered Drake.

“I think it has to do with their view of our world not being simple,” replied Dr. Wallace thinking aloud. “It’s not black or white as their’s, but full of shades of grey. I’m not completely sure; it’s just an impression really.”

“What happened *next*?” Madison asked at once, pressing her father to keep going.

Tighearn Jiro and Chu exchanged knowing glances, Jiro then barked an order to the servants behind him. One servant promptly returned from the bookcase a beautifully carved box, on it was an engraving of a dragon with a light shining from behind. Inside are two rings. Jiro asked the Dr.’s Clark and Wallace to pick a ring and put it on. They asked what would happen if they refused, concerned the rings would harm them. They were assured quite convincingly the rings would not harm them; please do as they were asked. Dr. Clark and Dr. Wallace were not sure why but they believed him, even so the rings went on grudgingly.

The rings are wide hoops of gold holding a small crystal sphere, appearing pearly-white with a bluish tinge. The moment the rings were on – the crystal spheres brilliantly lit up. Shining like the sun on a clear, cloudless day, the dimness awoke vividly; the room was revealed larger and more decorated than it first appeared. Dr. Clark and Dr. Wallace shielded their eyes from the rings, marveling at the intense light, wondering what was happening. Tighearn Jiro and Chu gaped –speechless for a moment, awestruck by the glimmering crystal spheres. Jiro and Chu talked to each other in hushed amazed tones, the conversation sounded and looked urgent. Tighearn Jiro pointed at them and Chu spoke now for the first time, in English with a small accent. First he asked them to remove the rings, when they did the crystal spheres dimmed then stopped shining altogether. Taking the rings, he did so in a reverent manner with a great

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demonstration of respect. He placed the rings carefully back into their box while telling them he was the grand advisor to the Dragonkeeper. His job is to aid the Dragonkeeper in understanding problems, finding solutions, and recommending courses of action. Ultimately however, the final decisions rest with the Dragonkeeper. Tighearn Jiro decided to have them keep the rings; they asked why but were only told that someday someone will come to retrieve them. Dr. Clark and Dr. Wallace are given the box with the elaborate engraving of a dragon with a light shining from behind; it was heavier than it appeared.

“You still have the rings?” Madison asked surprised. “They’ve been here in the house all this time?”

“They’re in the box stored upstairs in our room, safe and sound,” answered Dr. Wallace with a sheepish grin.

“Obviously they let you come back, but how?” said Drake.

“Mr. Chu returned us, with palace guards in tow, after another long walk back to the first oval doorway through the second rectangular one.” Dr. Wallace said as he examined the dining room ceiling recalling their steps. “He told us specifically not to tell anyone about the *realm portal* that’s what he called the floating doorway, and reminded us someone would come back for the rings, keep them safe.”

“Just like that they let you came back, huh?” mused Drake, sitting back on his chair sipping on his iced tea.

“After going back through the – the realm portal – we heard colleagues calling for us,” said Dr. Wallace. “The portal disappeared right before they found us. Soon they were asking

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where we were and quickly we thought of an excuse. We told them we simply took a long walk around the ruins and got lost. Thankfully they seemed to accept this.”

Drake blew out a loud sigh and Madison stared out at nothing in particular, purposely ignoring her mother. Each considered the fantastic, unbelievable story their father just spun. A look passed between them expressing amazement and a bit of shock over the whole thing. Could this have *really* happened to them? Or have they gone mad and are now acting all weird?

“Let me get this straight,” said Madison slowly with edginess to her voice. She leaned onto the table with her elbows, resting one hand over the other. “This Mr. Chu, grand advisor, or whatever he is, has come back for the rings himself, and you don’t want to return them. Is that it? Is that what all the yelling was about? He told you someone would return for them, you should just give them back.”

“No...not exactly.” Dr. Wallace said glancing at his pinched faced wife; he began shifting uneasily in his chair. “We’re more than glad to give the rings back, it’s just...”

“It’s their property, give it to him,” said Madison bluntly, sitting back in her dining room chair raising her hands aggravated. “I don’t see what the problem is.”

Dr. Wallace searched for words while Dr. Clark glared at him with menacing eyes and a tighten mouth.

“Mr. Chu wanted...something else...in addition to the rings...” said Dr. Wallace clumsily.

“Oh, come on, Dad,” said Madison exasperated. “What?”

“You two,” said her mother at once. “You and your brother.”

Just then the doorbell rang.

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CHAPTER 3: Rings and More

“I’ll get the door,” said Dr. Wallace motioning for everyone to stay seated as he walked out of the dining room.

Madison and Drake remained silent, avoiding eye-contact with their mother while her glare bounced between them, daring them to say anything. They were not about to.

Moments later Dr. Wallace returned, gesturing Chu politely to enter first. If they didn’t know any better, it looked as if Minh Chu wore the same dark suit, tie, and shirt from yesterday.

Chu’s eyebrows rose from the amount of food on the table, keeping his face expressionless he thought to himself, *I have heard about it, but these Greylander’s can really eat*. Realizing he arrived during their dinner he said, “Maybe I should return later.”

“No need to, Mr. Chu,” said Dr. Clark quickly. “The answer remains, no.”

“Have you told the – your children what my presence here is about?” Chu said composed, trying to diffuse Dr. Clark’s hostile tone.

“Not totally we...” said Dr. Wallace.

“None of it matters, because they’re not going,” interrupted Dr. Clark bluntly. She stood from the table and crossed her arms.

Madison and Drake watched this exchange in rapt attention. There was more to the story than their parents have told them. Somehow, they were involved more so than their parents and this Mr. Chu was trying to secure Madison and Drake’s help. Neither of them wanted him to leave, at least not until they found out the whole tale.

“Mr. Chu?” Drake said trying to get his attention. “Our parents have told us quite a story.”

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Chu turned and faced Drake; once again Chu stared at him with penetrating but gentle eyes. He appeared tired, but his expression now was one of hope and relief. Not knowing what else to say, Drake turned away and looked to his sister.

“We know all about what happened last year,” said Madison firmly. She told him about the realm portal, the palace, the man named Tighearn Jiro, and the rings. The story was too fantastic to believe.

“Yet all of it is true,” said Chu solemnly. “What your parents have not told you is that you have a *destiny* to fulfill.”

Dr. Clark became incensed; dropping her arms she took a threatening step toward Chu and said, “No one is fulfilling any destiny. You should leave now!”

Dr. Wallace swiftly placed himself between his wife and the visitor. He tried to soothe her, but she brushed his hand away and took a step back.

“I’ve had enough of this,” said Dr. Clark talking directly to her husband as if they were alone. With a lower though intense voice she added, “Please tell him to leave, Ken.”

Before her father could escort Chu out the door, Madison reacted by matching her mother’s irritation and said, “Mom, I’m an adult...”

“...almost,” Dr. Clark interjected.

“...and *I* have a right to hear the rest that Mr. Chu has to say.” continued Madison defiantly.

“Yeah, I’d like to hear the rest too,” chimed Drake.

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Chu waited patiently as Dr. Wallace motioned his wife with outstretched arms, hands apart he pleaded, “What’s the harm hon’? Kids should hear the rest so they don’t think we’re nuts.”

“*You’re* the one that told them the story,” said Dr. Clark raising a palm and turning her head away, “don’t lump me in there with you.” She waved her palm dismissively and added, “Humph. Go ahead if you want to, makes no difference. No one’s going anywhere.”

Chu received Dr. Wallace’s drawn face and slow nod as approval to reveal the rest. Standing by the table with hands clasped before him, Chu directed his gaze at Madison and Drake, a gaze that unnerved Madison and one Drake accepted as kindness.

“To understand what is being asked of you both we must begin with some history,” said Chu in a commanding tone. Taking a few steps away from the table, he raised his arms straight out before him. Hands now cupped at chest level he spread his hands and arms apart, a bluish-white bubble began forming. Expanding his hands farther and farther apart the bubble grew to the size of a beach ball. Mostly transparent, it began spinning in all directions and glowed delightfully warm.

Right away Madison and Drake stood up from the table enthralled; their father was equally captivated as well. The three of them took a few steps closer staring at it unblinkingly. Dr. Clark in contrast was too mad to care, she held back an urge to throw a plate at it. With most everyone’s attention, Chu spoke to them, his voice sounded altered, resonant and more compelling.

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“Five hundred years after the creation of the Realm of Faerie, at a time about 1,000 years ago from today, one of the greatest dragons to ever live, the Eura Dragon, Glicemax, was directed by the Child of the Light to find the Dragon’s Eye crystal – what we also call the *Relic*.”

As Chu spoke wisps of light floated out of the bubble, they danced around the room like leaves in an autumn’s breeze. Some of these wisps floated into Madison’s and Drake’s mind, entering through their forehead carrying visions woven dream-like with pictures and sounds, helping them understand the message being conveyed.

In his mind Drake thought, *Who or what was the Child of the Light?*

A voice answered him, it came from somewhere and nowhere all at once, it said, *The Child of the Light is a being of the Light, from the Light, is the Light itself.*

This made no sense to Madison or Drake it was only more confusing. Before either could think further questions, more wisps entered their minds, directing their attention, focusing their thoughts. Minh Chu continued his accompanying narration.

“After being shaped by Glicemax’s own breath-of-fire, he was directed to entrust the dragon clan’s to its safe keeping. Before he did so he was told to cut two small pieces off the Dragon’s Eye, these were used as parts of rings, the rings were given to Glicemax for safe keeping. The reason for the Relic was not known, the Child of the Light had said its purpose would be revealed in its own time.”

Drake was bombarded with images of the Dragon’s Eye. The Relic was strangely fashioned –shaped like a slice of cake or pie as if someone cut a large quarter-size wedge from the whole. Instead of a flat top, its top was *rounded*. There was something familiar about this shape...yet he cannot quite express what it was.

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Vivid dreams flowed into Madison's consciousness: the Child of the Light, some 800 years ago, directed Glicemax to find the next Dragonkeeper, someone called Raiko; Raiko established a council entirely of dragons; the rings were passed from Glicemax to Raiko and were passed down from Dragonkeeper-to-Dragonkeeper until needed.

The voice from somewhere and nowhere told her, *This was the beginning of the Second Long Age of Peace.*

Madison thought, *When was the first?*

An answer was not given.

"Three hundred years later," Chu continued speaking slowly and simply, "Glicemax receives his final message from the Child of the Light. He was given the Dragonkeeper Prophecy. After delivering it to the Council of Dragons, Glicemax disappeared and was never seen again."

Wisps now poured into Madison and Drake, filled with pictures of another man, a Dragonkeeper called Arall, handed a scroll by Glicemax while other dragons of different shapes and sizes watched behind lecterns. Madison and Drake observed as Glicemax walked away from the council, never returning. Then they sensed his presence – somewhere.

They thought incredulously, *Could the dragon be alive after all this time? And where?*

Another presence revealed itself – this one much stronger, more potent. Radiating an awesome feeling of peace, great joy, and mostly pure love, this presence gently and lovingly opened their eyes to their destiny. Of course, Madison and Drake were both open-minded which helpfully guided their understanding. They were chosen to help; they were the only ones in the whole of two realms that could succeed. Their aid was requested, not demanded, both accepted

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the task graciously and humbly. Questions began forming in their minds, questions they wanted to ask, to understand, to clarify, when Chu forced more information for them to absorb.

“The Dragonkeeper Prophecy is simple yet complex,” Chu said reverently. “It plainly states there will be one *final* Dragonkeeper, in the times of strife, when the Father of the Marag and his Evil One grow strong. There will be signs to look for, they will show the way to the Final One. Only when the final Dragonkeeper makes the Dragon’s Eye whole can the Marag be defeated.”

Quickly Drake formed queries to these images, he thought, *Marag? What’s a Marag, what’s an Evil One?*

The voice answered partly, *Evil, the greatest evil you or anyone has ever known.* Without asking, the signs were given to him vibrantly, *The final Dragonkeeper will be born of Grey parents, the rings will shine for them; the final Dragonkeeper will be a young man, younger than any other before him; he will require a Protector, a guardian, of his own blood.*

Drake sensed there were more signs – these would not be given. *Why?* He wondered. *Tell me all of it, please.* Instead he heard more history.

“Nearing the end of the Second Long Age of Peace,” said Chu methodically, “nearly 350 years ago, Tighearn Dragonkeeper Shafie as a show of good faith ends the long exile of Cennuds in Aphrike. However some believed his intentions were misplaced to prove the Prophecy wrong.”

Wisps entered Madison’s psyche presenting a collection of imagery depicting different malicious races, she realized with fear these were the Cennuds. Some were bird-like yet featherless creatures with wicked faces; others were snakes of different lengths, some of them

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living in water; scaled frogs of different sizes and shapes were included, some of them working closely with the bird-like creatures; most mysterious were formless beings of blackish liquid.

She was frightened by this monster, and especially the snakes – *I hate snakes. Of all the things to deal with, why snakes?*

History was replayed in her mind, an event that happened after the time Chu spoke of. A sea faring ship was attacked by an enormous and fearsome sea serpent, the imagery and sound of what occurred was horrible. Madison wanted to turn away, shut her eyes, plug her ears, but could not. Then she heard the voice from somewhere and nowhere, it soothed her, helping her to forget the worst of the pictures and sounds, replacing them with one thought, *The Second Long Age of Peace now ends...*

“Two hundred years ago the Cennuds once again requested inclusion into the Council, it was denied.” said Chu. “Attacks on dragons and other races of Olden Terra are reported shortly thereafter, in great numbers and at an alarming rate. The Cennuds form their own Great Cennud Council. A year later it disbands because of discord and disunity, there is no *integrity* among the Cennud.”

There were so many questions racing through Drake’s mind he could not focus on one. He was hoping everything would be answered, instead he was now more confused than informed. Without warning he began to feel sad and lonely, he wanted to cry uncontrollably from despair.

The voice called to him, it said, *Do not worry Final One. This is only a passing presence of the Marag.*

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Drake was flooded with wisps of light, so many they began to blind him, all racing into his brain. The wisps were bearing images, words, and phrases. He tried frantically to understand it all.

Drake sensed a large man with the strange ability to connect to the Cennuds; those around the man were amazed and believed he would become the greatest of all Dragonkeepers. Attacks by Cennuds ended suddenly, in part by this man's doing. *The Third – False – Age of Peace begins*, the wisps carried. This man reestablished the Great Cennud Council, becoming very popular among the Cennuds and other strange and deviant races.

“As the health of Tighearn Dragonkeeper Jiro worsened over a year ago,” said Chu with hostility, “by force the Evil One called Hifearnan attempted to become Dragonkeeper before Jiro's death. This is *not* how we crown our Dragonkeepers...” Chu paused to reflect and added, “willingly.”

The pictures and sounds now flowing into Madison's and Drake's awareness relived very serious events. The Evil One and his Cennud allies attempted a hostile rebellion to become *Dragonslayer* not Dragonkeeper. Fortunately this was thwarted by Jiro with help from Chu and the Council of Dragons, in particular, the very independent dragon clan of the Wyverns. Jiro was greatly weakened by this, and the Council discovered how Hifearnan was in league with the Father of the Marag and his Dark Magic for a dreadfully long time. The seeds of discord and disunity were planted as the Council argued over whose at fault for the second traitorous Dragonkeeper.

Chu waved his hand with a grand gesture and caused the bubble to stop spinning. The wisps all around the m shrank then disappeared in short flashes of light. It was as if paparazzi

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were taking pictures of them in the dining room. The bubble then slowly dissolved vanishing with a harp-like tinkle, breaking the trance Madison and Drake were under causing them to take a sideways balancing step. They reached for a chair-back to stop them from falling. Both of them and their father were rubbing their foreheads and eyes, they felt a pounding headache; it reminded Dr. Wallace of a hangover.

“Are we happy now?” sneered Dr. Clark, arms still crossed defiantly. “Did we get the answers we were looking for? Can he leave now?”

“Hifearnan, after being defeated,” continued Chu urgently, ignoring Dr. Clark, “escaped from the Dragonkeeper Palace to whereabouts unknown. We believe he’s hiding somewhere in Eura or Assuwa where he continues to grow strong with help from the Father of the Marag. He has proclaimed himself Tighearn *Dragonslayer* Hifearnan. Instead of governing with the dragon clans he wishes to enslave them to his will and become the supreme ruler of Olden Terra.

“We now know that the Third False Age of Peace has ended and we believe the times of strife predicted have begun. Even worse still are creatures of the Marag, long since thought eradicated or banished from Olden Terra are reappearing. These Dark Magic creatures are horrific and terrifying, we fear their numbers will grow and soon they will become more widespread.”

Madison and Drake were still dazed and overwhelmed, having virtually lived through the history just presented to them, it was all too much to comprehend.

Drake had more questions than he could recall, he tried to order them, *What’s the Father of the Marag? Why’s a Dragonkeeper even needed? How does the final Dragonkeeper make*

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the Relic whole? Where's the Dragon's Eye? What are the other signs? What are the Dark Magic creatures? There were so many more, but one question he believed was answered.

“I’m a Dragonkeeper?” Drake asked, not entirely sure of himself.

“And let me guess,” said Madison rubbing her eyes still woozy, “I’m his ‘Protector,’ right? You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me.”

“Once Hifearnan failed and escaped,” said Chu with disgust. “Jiro realized the beginning statements of prophecy were coming true. He had always believed and privately expected its fulfillment would happen during his tenure.

“Together we studied the Prophecy and all its elements. We studied different interpretations and came to realize if more of the foretelling was to come true it would be with the First Sign – the rings would shine for the final Dragonkeeper’s parents, the very same rings your parents now possess.”

“That’s why you had them wear the rings,” exclaimed Drake thinking aloud, “it proved the Prophecy true. I bet you let them have the rings so you could find them later when you needed, right?”

Chu remained stoic and said, “We sent palace guards to watch all the realm portals, waiting for the day, the moment, Greylander’s would appear. We believed only the final Dragonkeepers parents would come through and as it turned out we were correct. Even with all this expectation the guards patrolling that evening were still surprised. It was fortunate happenstance I was there; otherwise your parents would have been detained longer.”

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When hearing this revelation Dr. Wallace made a face in surprise, his mouth opened slightly. Dr. Clark remained indignant, standing away from them. She simply rolled her eyes, unimpressed.

“The Prophecy has yet been fully proven true,” continued Chu. “There are still *four* more signs to be shown.” Taking a step toward everyone, he centered himself like a teacher allowing pleading students to surround him, he added, “Drake, have you not always been interested in dragons, fascinated by them?” He pointed with his eyes and nodded at the dragon t-shirt Drake wore.

“Ah, sure, yes,” said Drake self-consciously rubbing a hand on his shirt. He shrugged, then added unconvincingly, “But not as obsessed as when I was a kid.”

Madison snorted a short laugh and made a face at Drake’s shirt.

“You have no doubt studied them, learned about the different types,” said Chu motioning a hand toward Drake. “You have even speculated if any information was based on truth, have you not?”

“Well, I – yeah, I guess so.” Drake replied fumbling over words. He thought, *How does he know this about me?*

“This alone doesn’t make him a Dragonkeeper any more than I’m the Queen of England,” scoffed Dr. Clark.

“Indeed, it most certainly does not,” said Chu in earnest calmness. “May I ask for the rings, please?”

“I’ll go get it,” said Dr. Clark acidly as she motioned her husband not to move. Stomping out of the room, she muttered, “You can have those accursed rings then leave.”

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Heavy footsteps were heard going up the stairs. Doors and dresser drawers were roughly opened and slammed shut as Dr. Clark searched for the box containing the rings.

Dr. Wallace smiled weakly and shuffled his feet as they waited, he called upto her, “The box’s on my side of the closet, behind the luggage!”

Madison was embarrassed for her mother, acting like a child throwing a tantrum; Drake was only worried about what punishment would be doled out, later. Chu remained the picture of perfect coolness, hands clasped, waiting tolerantly.

Eventually Dr. Clark returned, heavy footsteps preceding her. She walked upto Chu with eyes averted handing over the heavy box without waiting for him to take it. Chu securely handled the box then simply bowed in response. Placing the box respectfully onto the dinner table he opened it slowly revealing the rings safely tucked inside. The bluish-pearly white spheres held by prongs from wide golden hoops swirled and tinkled in the dining room light. A sense of déjà vu overwhelmed Dr. Clark and Dr. Wallace – they’ve been through this once before. Removing the rings, Chu offered one each to Madison and Drake.

“Place them on the ring finger of your right-hand, please.”

Apprehension passed between them as they put the rings on. Nothing happened; they were relieved and disappointed in the same heartbeat. Then all at once something amazing occurred. Both spheres on the rings lit up brilliantly, more dazzling than when their parents wore them, but it was not only the spheres shining – Madison and Drake were illuminated as well. An aura of glowing light emanated not only from all around their body, but from their *skin*. They were literally shining light, casting shadows throughout the dining room. The scene was

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beautiful and eerie; their parents looked at them horrified, through hands used to shade their eyes. Wanting to comfort them, they tried to come close but could not, the light was too intense.

Dreams started forming in Drake's mind, pleasant visuals of his reign as Dragonkeeper. He saw himself uniting the dragons, becoming honored, becoming great. He perceived in awe the responsibility and authority given to a Dragonkeeper. It was immense and absolute.

"Wow, this is so cool," said Drake distantly.

The visions that entered Madison's mind were less pleasant. Hard and difficult times were expressed to her through feelings of weariness, fear, and despair.

Desperately she wondered, *Why?* More vague images expressing the same depressing feelings were forced upon her.

You must protect... was all she was told.

Without really knowing how it happened, she understood her role, important as it was – not in the least bit easy. Dawning on her was an awareness that her parents knew, they knew all along that it must be done this way. Madison did not like it, she felt angry and betrayed.

Removing her ring as if it were burning, she smacked it into Chu's waiting hand and walked away from everyone. Noticing this Drake also removed his ring, reluctantly. The glowing skin and bright aura dimmed, then extinguished, Madison and Drake were back to normal. Strangely the dining room now appeared faintly lit to everyone.

"This is the fourth sign," said Chu plainly. "Both final Dragonkeeper and his Protector will be illuminated by..."

"Why didn't you tell us about this?" interrupted Madison, directing the question furiously at her parents.

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Dr. Clark's demeanor changed instantly to concerned and caring mother. She reached out to Madison, who wanted nothing of it, stepping away rejecting her mother's advance. Dr. Clark stopped, she placed a hand up to trembling lips and pleaded with her daughter.

"I was only protecting you, Mady," said Dr. Clark as tears welled up in her eyes. "I didn't want you or your brother risking your lives for someone else's problems."

"*What?*" Madison riled, she could not believe what she heard. "You taught us to respect others and be concerned for them. You and Dad have built your careers, your *lives*, around learning how others lived and died. Always sounding genuinely concerned for those you learned about in your digs. And what about all the fundraisers and causes, Mom, what about those? I guess as long as you don't actually have to do something, it's alright."

"Madison," said her father firmly, "I don't appreciate that tone, we're only looking out for your well-being. Don't you understand?"

Watching the exchange unfold, Drake realized his sister had made an excellent point about their parents. Emboldened from his visions he knew what was happening was bigger than everyone present.

"Mom, Dad, I think Mady's right. We have an opportunity to help a whole world of people and animals. I understand you're afraid for us but those same people will help us." He looked at Chu hopeful and asked, "Won't they?"

"As Dragonkeeper and Protector they will be the closest thing to royalty we have as humans in the Realm of Faerie." Chu responded facing the Dr.'s Clark and Wallace.

"Why did you specify 'humans?'" Dr. Wallace queried. The study of medieval royalty was one of his research interests, his curiosity was peaked. "What other kinds could there be?"

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“Olden Terra has royalty not only of dragon decent,” replied Chu matter-of-factly, “but also from the races of gremlins, some of the Cennud, and...”

“NO ONE IS GOING ANYWHERE,” exploded Dr. Clark, she had finally had enough. Turning to her children she raged, “CAN’T YOU SEE THIS IS NONE OF YOUR CONCERN? END OF DISCUSSION.”

The aftermath was a few seconds of silence. Dr. Clark caught her breath and turned away from everyone. Putting a hand to her forehead and an arm hugging herself she failed to hold back sobs. Madison and Drake uncomfortably remained where they stood, keeping their expressions neutral.

“Mr. Chu, I’m sorry but I must ask you to leave, *now*.” said Dr. Wallace, he looked over to his wife apologetically.

“I express sincere regret for any grief I have brought to your home, Dr. Wallace,” said Chu bowing. “Please remember that the help of this young man and young woman is desperately needed.”

“This *young man* is 15 years old, and this *young woman* is only 17,” retorted Dr. Wallace. “They are only *children*. Good night, sir.”

Madison and Drake were intently watching Chu. Everything Madison experienced implored her to become involved, even though she understood the risk was great. Drake’s experience conveyed the importance of being involved, Olden Terra was at risk. Standing there, both afraid to say anything to anger their mother further, they watched as Chu was no doubt about to leave them forever. Whatever destiny was before them would remain unfulfilled.

“Mom, Dad, it’s the only way!” They blurted together.

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Chu's head turned around in surprise, he thought, *They understand...*

Their mother ran out of the dining room crying, straight upstairs to her bedroom. Dr. Wallace guided Chu toward the front door while he glared at Madison and Drake ominously. They knew they were both in real trouble now, neither dared to tag along. They strained to overhear what Chu reminded their father.

“I will be at the hotel near the university for another day or so. Please reconsider and find me there. Thank you for your time, Dr. Wallace.”

Hearing the front door close rather loudly, they knowingly looked at each other, barely nodding. Without being told and before their father returned they quietly went up stairs to their rooms.

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CHAPTER 4: Through the Realm Portal

The next morning Drake heard his parents getting ready for work. He heard the monotonous and tedious sounds coming from their daily morning ritual. The showers running non-stop, the thumping in their room as they dressed, and the clanking of bowls, cups, and silverware as they ate their breakfast and drank their coffee. The same droning steps every morning except this morning was special, summer had started – he did not have to get up.

Drake heard his mother approach the room; quickly he turned on his bed facing away from the door and faked sleep as she entered to check on him. He had no desire to talk to her or his father and continued the act until one car pulled out of the driveway and departed.

After peeking out the window making sure they were gone, he went in search for Madison to talk to her. Not in her room, he headed downstairs and found her in the kitchen, at the center console piece having a bowl of sugary sweet cereal; also in her pajamas, she looked like she was thoroughly enjoying breakfast.

“Hey, did you eat the rest of that?” Drake asked accusingly, nodding at her bowl.

“Yeph,” replied Madison with a mouth full of cereal, by accident a piece spit out.

“Aw, man,” moaned Drake. “Why’d you wolf it all? There’s nothing else to eat.”

Madison turned in her stool and glanced at the pantry, its door was still open. The pantry was full with several different kinds of cereal, many of which were as good if not better than what she was eating.

“Waph d’you me therph no c’real?” said Madison incredulously. Pointing at the open pantry with her spoon she added, “Therph a hole bunph to shoose fom.”

“Yeah, but that’s the one I really wanted to eat.” Drake pouted.

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Madison simply rolled her eyes and kept on eating – making sure to chew loudly.

Drake spent some time searching through the pantry for a different cereal to eat. He huffed and sighed moving boxes grumpily out of the way trying to choose one. Finally he settled on one similar to what he liked, but of course, it was not as sugary sweet as the one his sister finished off. He poured a huge, almost overflowing serving into a bowl and added milk. Sitting next to Madison and eating silently he pondered how to approach her about what was wordlessly passed between them last night.

“So,” – Drake took a spoonful of cereal, chewed it then swallowed – “were you ignoring Mom and Dad too?”

“Yeah...” replied Madison slowly, staring out into the dining room. “I was just gonna ask you the same.”

“I played possum lying in bed when she came in to check on me.”

“Me, too. I didn’t want to talk to her. The way she blew up yesterday – and *they’re* the ones keeping secrets from *us*. You know how mad they get finding out we’ve lied to them – they come down on us hard. But when they do it, oh, no, that’s okay. Uh-uh, no way, not as far as I’m concerned.”

Slouched over his cereal Drake simply bobbed his head, lazily in agreement, as he put another spoonful in his mouth.

“What burns me the most,” continued Madison, “is for all their ‘Save the Turtles’ and ‘Plant a Tree’ talk they sure weren’t willing to help in this cause.”

“Well, of course,” said Drake, pouring out more cereal. “Think about it, they never expected they’d have to put up their own kids.”

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“Even so,” brooded Madison, “they could’ve heard the guy out, see what else we or they or all of us could do to help.”

Drake gave Madison a knowing smile, one that implied she should know better, he said, “C’mon Mady,” – he shrugged with his hands and arms apart – “you know from everything we experienced yesterday *our* involvement is the only way.”

“I know, I know,” said Madison defensively. “I just hate the way it all ended last night. I wish they would’ve just *listened*.”

They sat silently finishing their breakfast. Once done, they washed out their bowls and silverware placing them into the dishwasher. Drake was closing the dishwasher when he decided to voice the thought bouncing around in his head.

“Mady, I really want to know more about everything we learned yesterday. If only we could talk to Chu...” He trailed off looking at her expectantly.

“I’ve been thinkin’ the same thing, little bro,” Madison said thoughtfully. “I mean we learned a lot yesterday, but there was so much force fed into us. You’re a Dragonkeeper, I’m a Protector, and we have this task to perform. I just *feel* there’s much more to it than we’ve been told. Don’t’cha think?”

Drake shrugged but smirked, he thought he could see where his sister was leading to.

“Well,” she continued, trying to stop a smile from forming, “there’s only one way to find out.”

“You’re thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’, aren’t ya?” grinned Drake. “You know, you’re not as dumb as you look.”

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“Oh, shut up twerp,” replied Madison walking out of the kitchen. “Get dressed. Let’s go talk to this guy – by ourselves.”

After choosing his favorite dragon t-shirt (he paused and thought of picking something else but he couldn’t help himself) and worn jeans, Drake met Madison by the car where she decided to make this outing in comfort. With her hair pulled back in a ponytail she dressed in her favorite workout sweats, a pink-terry track jacket with pink knit capris, both with white-trimming.

Drake looked at her and noticed she wore flip-flops.

“Why’re you wearing those things?” said Drake pointing at her feet. He looked down at his own feet then added, “Tennis shoes are the way to go. Doesn’t it get tiring to walk around in those after a while?”

“Dude, it’s the only way to travel.” Madison replied smoothly. She then got into the car.

Driving towards the campus they realized there were several hotels “near the university”, they decided to visit each one in order starting with the one farthest and then moving closer and closer to the school. At each check-in desk they had asked if a Mr. Minh Chu stayed there. They fibbed saying they were a niece and nephew that wanted to visit their uncle. One of the check-in clerks questioned them dubiously.

“You two have an uncle called ‘Chu?’”

Drake and Madison exchanged a quick glance and Madison said, “Yeah, sure, he’s really my mother’s, ah, great Uncle, yeah. But we call him Uncle Minh anyway.”

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Clearing his throat suspiciously the check-in clerk then sniffed, he returned to looking at the computer monitor and said, “No, we do not have a Mr. Minh Chu staying here. Your *uncle* must be staying somewhere *else*.” He stared at them with pursed lips.

They thanked him courteously and quickly departed without looking back.

At other hotels, Drake put on his best expectant and happy face while Madison literally batted her eyes and smiled pretty. All was for not, so far every hotel they visited had not heard of a Mr. Minh Chu.

As they approached the last hotel, anticipating they wouldn't find him there as well, by chance they saw him getting into a taxi. Wondering where he was going, quickly they decided to follow him. The taxi led them to the local recreational area called Crystal Park, with a beautiful centerpiece fountain and cement walkways, it was located near downtown in one of the oldest and most historic neighborhoods. This park was largely positioned on original land where the town's founders first settled, hundreds of years ago.

The taxi let Chu out at the sidewalk adjacent to the park, he then made a beeline toward the fountain. Madison frantically tried to find a parking spot without losing sight of Chu. Luckily the park was not busy, they raced into the parking lot and grabbed the first spot they saw. Drake and Madison ran after Chu trying to keep him unaware of being followed. Catching up to him at the fountain they hid from view and noticed him approach a cement pillar (one of many) used as decoration around the park's centerpiece attraction. Chu looked over his shoulder furtively then quickly waved his hand before the pillar – it began to shimmer. Without wasting any time he walked through the gleaming opening and disappeared. The shimmering stopped as soon as he was fully through.

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“Did you see *that*?” said Drake with a rising tone to his voice.

“Shh...,” whispered Madison motioning Drake to be quiet. “Keep it down. Let’s not attract too much attention, smart one. It’s just like Mom and Dad described, let’s go.”

They quickly ran over to the pillar and began touching it everywhere, nothing happened. Drake then decided to mimic Chu’s hand wave and suddenly the shimmering realm portal materialized. Both jumped back slightly as a point of light became visible, their mouths gaped as it grew to its full size.

“Hot dog!” Drake said clapping his hands once.

“Shut up,” said Madison nervously. She looked behind her to see if anyone was watching.

Standing there gazing at the realm portal they looked at each other unsure what to do next. The oval opening floated mysterious and purposeful, melting away all their youthful bravery. They each thought hard; did they actually want to step through. Knowing deep down inside once they did it would change the course of their lives. They have experienced so little, learned only so much, and sensed a gain rather than a loss by stepping through, but fear of the unknown kept them bound standing there. Staring at each other they both saw fear and excitement in the other’s eyes. There was a destiny to fulfill, there were people and animals that needed their help, but what motivated them was a much simpler thought: *It was the right thing to do*. Without a word, they walked through together and noticed the tingly-cool feeling their parents had mentioned.

They stepped into a foyer, large and rectangular lit by firelight from lanterns attached high on the walls. The foyer was richly decorated with mahogany paneling and smooth wood

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floors, the ceiling was held high by baroque-styled buttresses oppressive in size nonetheless grand.

What grabbed their attention was not only finding Minh Chu, but a gaggle of other people, and most shocking of all was the sight of a great big dragon. They watched as Chu used a strange language and spoke directly to the dragon.

“Burrax, please wait a moment,” said Chu. With palms facing him at chest level, he moved his hands down toward his thighs. The dark suit he wore magically morphed into emerald-green Mandarin clothes with cap, inspecting himself he added, “Much better, those Greylander garments are stiff and uncomfortable.”

Chu noticed the dragon was intently watching something behind him. Turning around he’s surprised to see Drake and Madison, he realized instantly what they had done.

“I see you followed me here.”

Drake and Madison were too stunned to move. They noticed two men in particular, dressed differently than the group of servants and palace guards present. These men stood among the servants and guards, away from Chu and the dragon, pointing and watching with great interest. Observing with greater interest was the dragon.

“We – we wanted to talk to you,” said Madison self-consciously, everyone was looking at them, “but when you left the hotel we decided to follow instead.”

The dragon stepped forward, Drake and Madison felt the ground rumble under their feet. Burrax talked to Chu in Dragon Runes.

“Grand advisor, is this them, is this *him*?”

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Drake understood every word, in the same strange melodic language he answered, “If you’re asking if she’s the ‘Protector’ and I’m the ‘Dragonkeeper’, then yes, we are them.”

Madison had not understood a single word and Drake had not realized he spoke in a different tongue. Chu and Burrax stared at Drake in surprise. The two men and group of palace guards and servants remained unaware of what happened.

“What the heck did you say?” said Madison nonplussed.

“What?” replied Drake quizzically. “What’d’ya mean?”

“You spoke in that strange language Mr. Chu used with that – that...” Madison shrieked somewhat.

“...dragon.” finished Drake simply.

“Yeah,” said Madison exasperated, “that dragon. What was it you said?”

“You heard what he asked,” said Drake shaking his head. “I told him you’re the ‘Protector’ and I’m the ‘Dragonkeeper’. Didn’t you listen?”

“Of course I listened, geek,” snapped Madison. “You just didn’t speak *English*.”

“This is the fifth sign, head dragon,” said Chu interrupting their dialog. “The final Dragonkeeper will know the dragon language and speak it freely.”

“What did he just say?” said Madison, motioning a hand to Drake then slapping her thigh frustrated.

“Didn’t you understand?” replied Drake, tilting his head, confused.

Chu walked toward Drake and Madison almost placing himself between them, in English he said, “No, Drake, your sister did not understand. You spoke the language of dragons, Dragon Runes. This is yet another sign foretold by prophecy, the fifth.”

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“Great, can’t wait to find out the others.” Madison said dryly.

Walking toward them with a purpose, one of the two men previously standing with the servants and palace guards approached Chu in an overly prim and proper manner.

“Grand advisor, may I *please* ask who exactly these two *children* are?” The man’s voice sounded high pitched.

“Ah, yes, *Straddleham*,” said Chu evenly, “some introductions are needed. Let us include your assistant as well. Please call him over.”

Straddleham stiffly beckoned for the other man to come forward. The second man approached casually, he flashed a wide toothy smile at both Drake and Madison, and Drake thought he just saw him wink.

“Drake, Madison, before you we have Vinmor Straddleham, chief clerk to the Council of Dragons” – Straddleham stoically nodded – “next is his assistant, Ped Leemstey” – Leemstey flashed his friendly smile once more – “and of course this is the head dragon of the Council, Burrax of the Eura Dragon clan.” Burrax smiled and smoke floated up, out of his nostrils.

Drake and Madison got the impression the dragon wanted to say something, they looked at him anxiously, but the dragon simply stared back.

Facing away from Drake and Madison, Chu spoke to the group in Dragon Runes, he said, “Burrax, Straddleham, Leemstey, this young woman is called Madison Wallace, she is the sister to this young man, Drake Wallace, our *next* Dragonkeeper.”

Madison only caught a few words but essentially understood she and her brother were being introduced. Drake noticed Chu did not inform these men that Madison was the ‘Protector’ and he was the ‘final Dragonkeeper,’ Drake was puzzled by why, but decided best not to ask.

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Vinmor Straddleham had a severe appearance permanently etched on his face. His attitude was serious and his eyes expressed a snobbish demeanor that perpetually gave others the impression he was constantly judging them. Straddleham wore a floor length dark-blue surcoat with a white rampant dragon centered on the chest, underneath he wore a puffy-armed black shirt and loose fitting black pants. The surcoat was held tight to his waist by a studded ring belt, the excess of the belt hanging down toward the floor. As richly dressed as he was Madison could only notice one thing, it almost brought her to laughter – Straddleham had a bad comb-over.

Introduced as the chief clerk's assistant, Ped Leemstey could not have been someone more opposite in personality or looks. Leemstey was younger than Straddleham, healthier-appearing, and had a full head of thick black hair. His round face showed prominent creases at the corners of his mouth, no doubt they thought from constant smiling. Leemstey was clothed less extravagantly than his boss, he wore a gold-colored sleeveless long vest overtop a collarless long sleeve white shirt. His black pants were tighter fitting and his boots were spotlessly shiny.

The dragon called Burrax interested Drake the most. More daunting than he had ever imagined, the creature was leaning back on the base of his long spiked-tipped tail, his large head stared down from about 8 feet high with his bat-like ears flapping involuntarily. Burrax's skin was gold in color which contrasted with his bright-green eyes, each almost on opposite sides of his head. The dragon's wings were pressed against his back, allowing them to see the sharp horn-fins protruding down to his tail. If the wings were not so large they could have easily been overlooked. Drake wondered if all "Eura" dragons looked like Burrax, if so, they were impressive creatures to be amongst.

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“Now, the both of you must return,” directed Chu to Drake and Madison sternly. “You must return to your parents, they must understand that I had no intentions of...” He hesitated while thinking of the correct term to use then added, “*stealing* you from them.”

“I think the word you were looking for was ‘kidnapping.’” Madison said straight-faced.

“Regardless of the Greylander term,” said Chu seriously, tilting his head down and glancing at Madison, “your parents must freely and willingly let you go, to come here. Until that happens you must return.”

Drake recalled from his experience of yesterday, visions of the authority given to a Dragonkeeper, surely even a grand advisor must adhere too.

“Um, Mr. Chu,” said Drake timidly, “if I remember correctly, as Dragonkeeper I have a certain amount of authority. I can make some decisions and give some orders, is that right?”

“Yes you can, but you must understand...” started Chu.

“The young Dragonkeeper is correct, grand advisor,” interrupted Burrax. “As with all new Dragonkeepers if he has a reasonable order, we must carry it out.”

Contemplating a response Chu observed the men and dragon around him. Straddleham, as he does with many people he meets for the first time, looked disdainfully down on Drake and Madison. *No doubt*, thought Chu, *a suggestion that another sign is becoming true.*

Watching Leemstey he noticed him as relaxed as ever, *He will no doubt side with the head dragon, and of course Burrax has already voiced his opinion.*

“Straddleham, what is your judgment in this matter?” Chu asked.

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“If he *is* the next Dragonkeeper,” said Straddleham with doubt in his voice, “then you have no choice but to follow his orders.” Pausing to critically size up Drake with bored eyes, he added, “He’s *young*, but he looks old enough not to *abuse* the authority.”

“And you, Leemstey?” asked Chu politely, knowing the chief clerk would not ask his assistant himself.

“I agree with the chief clerk,” replied Leemstey in a bass tone. “If he’s Tighearn Jiro’s successor then he has authority almost equal to Jiro himself.” He winked at Drake when he finished.

“Then it is settled,” rumbled the dragon at once in his sonorous language. “We have no choice but to follow his orders.” Looking down squarely at Drake the dragon added, “May I suggest young Dragonkeeper that we lead you to the palace so you can become...acclimated?”

With everyone now staring at him, Drake felt his face get hot, he sputtered, “I, um, ah – I get to make the decision?” Waiting faces blinked as the dragon smiled and nodded. Drake understood and said, “Yeah, of course. Let’s go to the palace.”

Madison did not know what the dragon had said or what Drake had replied, but she could tell stuttering in any language. She smiled, shook her head, and chuckled.

Straddleham blew out an impatient sigh and looked up to the ceiling annoyed.

More blood rushed into Drake’s face, causing his ears to glow bright-red. .

Leemstey approached Drake; in a brotherly fashion he placed an arm across Drake’s shoulder. Then he pulled Drake aside and talked so low only Drake could hear him.

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“Don’t worry young Dragonkeeper, Straddleham’s like that with everyone.” Flashing a clever smile he looked over his shoulder at Straddleham and added, “You should’ve seen how he treated me on my first day.”

Drake was thankful for Leemstey’s kind words, they greatly reassured him. Leemstey was someone, Drake felt, he could become good friends with.

Chu politely came between Drake and Leemstey and moved Drake back beside his sister. Drake thought he was pulled away rather rudely by Chu, but looking back at Leemstey he could tell the man was not offended. The chief clerk’s assistant merely smiled, motioning with his hand for Drake to return to Madison’s side.

“Mr. Chu, all we want to do is help, really.” said Drake with sincerity.

“It’s what our parents truly deep down inside would want us to do.” agreed Madison.

“Very well then,” said Chu as he began to lead them, along with Straddleham, Leemstey, and Burrax to a wall at the far end of the room. “You are the Dragonkeeper and your choice is to stay, then you will stay. We will take you and your sister to the palace where we can begin to prepare you for your duties.”

Drake noticed Chu and Burrax exchanged almost imperceptible nods. Even now they hid the truth about him and his sister from Straddleham and Leemstey, Drake still wondered, *Why?*

Although Chu was concerned over having them arrive to Olden Terra in this manner – without their parents consent – deep down he was relieved. He knew that without their involvement all would be lost. *We must now be careful with them*, he thought, *we must guard them and help them as much as possible*. At the first opportunity back in the palace, he would set the plan in motion aiding the final Dragonkeeper and his Protector on their quest.

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They stopped walking when they reached the far wall. There were no decorations, no markings, they were just facing a paneled wall.

“Is it just me,” said Madison sardonically, “or isn’t the exit over *there*.” She pointed behind them to heavy-looking, double wooden doors.

“To exit this room, yes,” replied Chu unaffected. “But to reach the palace we must go through *here*.” A showy display of his arm caused something to blink into existence and then grew rapidly floating inches from the ground, stretching by two long vertical and two short horizontal sides – it was a rectangle. Drake immediately recognized it from his parent’s description.

“It’s another realm portal!”

“Not exactly, young Dragonkeeper,” said Straddleham condescendingly. “Notice its *quadrilateral* shape, this is a *palace portal*.”

“Realm portals are oval shaped connecting our realm with yours,” Leemstey interjected lightly while frowning at Straddleham for his tone with Drake. “These rectangular ones connect different locations across Olden Terra to the palace.”

“Normally realm and palace portals are paired together,” continued Chu. He watched the chief clerk and his assistant closely and added, “However, there are some locations where there are...no...pairings.”

Drake and Madison noticed how Chu carefully selected his words; he was holding something back about the portals. Glancing at each other silently they speculated, *What could it be?*

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Burrax was first through the palace portal followed by Straddleham and Leemstey. Chu extended a hand and bowed courteously for Drake and Madison to proceed. Madison entered the portal uneasily wondering what Chu was not telling them. Drake became less concerned at the moment – excited over what was happening. With a wide grin stretched on his face, he stepped through.

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CHAPTER 5: The Dragonkeeper's Gifts

The palace portal delivered everyone into an enormous reception hall, lofty and beautifully decorated as the area they just departed. Only here the ceiling seemed much higher, the lanterns, of beautifully wrought-iron design, were hanging from high on long chains. Waiting for them with mixed expressions of boredom and surprise were another throng of servants and palace guards.

“Grand advisor, I will take leave from you now,” said Burrax hastily.

The head dragon told Chu he would proceed to the Council, urgently calling Straddleham and Leemstey to follow. Straddleham and Leemstey both bowed slightly as each stared appraisingly at Madison and Drake, Straddleham's gaze was critical as Leemstey silently said goodbye with a wink and a smile. As the two men and dragon lumbered away, Drake wondered aloud.

“Why are they heading to the Council, now?”

“As head dragon,” replied Chu, “Burrax will prepare the dragon clan assembly for your upcoming arrival in the Council's chamber.”

Drake's heartbeat rose at the thought.

“Is the Council's chamber somewhere else?” Madison asked. “Do we need to go through another portal?”

“No,” said Chu at once. “The Council is nearby, it is part of the palace compound.”

Looking around, Madison noticed the interior's overwhelming size, she shuddered with the inkling thought that they were inside a vast structure. Suddenly she felt small and insignificant.

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Chu escorted Madison and Drake down the long, fire-lit hallway, their footsteps resonating loudly on the polished wood floor. Servants and palace guards scurried in all directions, several of each following them along.

“Um, may I ask where we’re going?” said Drake, boggling at everything he saw around them.

“Since you have decided to stay,” said Chu, “we must move swiftly to prepare you and your sister to recover the Dragon’s Eye. But in advance, there are two other matters of importance. First, we must meet with Tighearn Dragonkeeper Jiro, he has something to – to give each of you. Then we will go see the Council.”

Madison and Drake noticed Minh Chu’s hesitation and wondered, *Now what is he keeping from us?* Madison heaved a sigh and Drake shrugged to himself, soon enough they would know. They were willing to wait instead of pressing the grand advisor for an explanation.

“Okay, so after meeting the old man and seeing the Council,” said Drake trying to sound confident, “it’s off to recover the Dragon’s Eye, make it whole – whatever that means – and defeat Hifearnan, right?”

“Young Dragonkeeper! Do *not* address Tighearn Dragonkeeper Jiro, your predecessor, as ‘old man’ that is disrespectful,” said Chu furiously. “*Never again.* Are we clear?”

For Madison and Drake, this was the first time they ever saw Chu upset. In fact, he’d been incredibly cool and collected from the very moment they met him. Clearly Minh Chu had undeniable respect for Jiro, unfortunately, Drake just realized it poorly.

“I’m sorry,” said Drake in a low voice.

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“And it would do *you well* to understand, *young* Dragonkeeper,” Chu growled, “the plans we make rarely work out the way we expect them. Indeed, they always end up occurring in ways we seldom imagined or wanted.”

He turned his back on them and pushed ahead crisply down the hallway. Madison and Drake walked a tad bit faster just to keep up.

“Nice going, smart one,” whispered Madison critically while frowning.

They walked what seemed an endless march, living through similar twists and turns of hallways and corridors their parents experienced a year ago. Both realized gravely there was no way to tell which way they had come, and if they wanted to return, there was no manner of doing it on their own.

Madison saw during their walk servants performing different duties. Some cleaned floors, others dusted tapestries, and yet others carried items such as tools or materials for unknown reasons. What she asked next was as an honest question of curiosity.

“Mr. Chu, are these servant’s *slaves* for the palace?”

“These are *free* men and women performing jobs within the palace compound,” started Chu indignantly. “We are *not* some ‘third-world country’ as you Greylanders coin the phrase. They are *well* compensated for what they do.”

“Good job, sis,” muttered Drake under his breath. Obviously Chu was still upset and this statement did not help matters.

He walked even faster.

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They approached two large wooden doors with thick metal hinges; elegant engraving implied this was an entrance to an important room. Chu stopped without warning before reaching the entry way, he turned and faced them, they looked at him nervously.

“Young Dragonkeeper, Protector – Madison, Drake,” said Chu calmly, returning to his normally cool self. “I apologize for my unpleasant behavior.”

Madison and Drake stepped over each other’s words.

“No, you don’t have to – ” blurted Drake.

“You have no reason for – ” said Madison right away.

“– to apologize for anything – ”

“– it’s us who should apologize to you.”

Chu raised his hand and they both stopped rambling. His smile told them he accepted their apology but implied none was expected. Instead of apologies he wanted to speak about the differences they just encountered between each other.

“Drake, although I *meant* what I said about Tighearn Jiro,” said Chu lightly. “My reaction was far too stern. Please understand I have served Jiro for a very, very long time. He is the only Dragonkeeper I have ever known.” Turning to Madison he added, “Our culture in Olden Terra is vastly different from what you are familiar with in the Realm of Grey. There will be many...aspects each of you will see and experience, and find unfamiliar to your understanding.”

“Still, I’m sorry about calling him an ‘old man,’” said Drake remorsefully. “I should know better and I do. It won’t happen again.”

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“Mr. Chu, I think I’ve learned not to jump to conclusions and assume I *know* something as fact.” Madison said ruefully. “Please accept my apology.”

“And I promise you both, as grand advisor, to understand and allow for our cultural differences.” said Chu solemnly. “When these differences become obvious, to teach you rather than becoming offended, both of you deserve that and more.”

Chu bowed deep and ardently, more so than ever. Madison and Drake realized this was a fresh start so they returned the bow equally as deep, not knowing what else to do. To their surprise Chu offered his hand. They grinned happily and shook hands faithfully, even Madison and Drake jokingly exchanged rough handshakes.

The posted guards opened the elegant doorway as they neared, hinges squealed faintly under the heavy weight. They entered a bedroom, very large, circular, with high ceilings. Decorated in brighter colors than the hallways, the room was lit with eerily glowing, white burning light from lamps attached to the walls. The lamp’s glow reminded Madison and Drake of a Roman candle. This peculiar light gave the room a cheerful quality, but the look of long faces among servants implied there was nothing to cheer about.

Against the curved wall rested a very old man on a king-sized bed, his head lying on large, overstuffed pillows. The man looked dead, but they noticed he was still breathing – it appeared labored. Chu walked softly to bedside and tried gently to wake Tighearn Jiro.

The Dragonkeeper roused with a startle and snort, the fog one has when done sleeping lifted quickly and soon Jiro was wide awake and alert. His intelligent eyes immediately locked on Madison and Drake staring at their faces, their hair, and their clothes. Jiro shifted his eye-

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contact between them making Madison and Drake unsure of themselves, they looked away timidly.

“Tighearn Jiro, before you I present the final Dragonkeeper and his Protector,” said Chu loudly, speaking in Dragon Runes. “Their names are Madison and Drake Wallace, brother and sister from the Realm of Grey, as foretold by prophecy.”

“How many signs have shown so far?” croaked Jiro weakly, in the same language.

“Five,” said Chu, “with indications one of the remaining will show itself before long.”

“Ask them to step closer.” Jiro rasped, motioning them with a thinly skeletal hand.

Stepping toward them, Chu firmly guided Madison and Drake closer to the bed. Standing uncomfortably near Jiro, they noticed how truly old he was, maybe over a hundred years. His skin was stretched on his face reminding them of a tight mask placed over a skull. Madison was creeped-out by the sight and a chill shook her body.

Lifting his head with difficulty, Jiro stared at them again, his eyes filled with tears. Unable to hold up his trembling head any longer, he relaxed back onto the pillow closing his eyes. Tighearn Jiro then muttered something melodically about the Prophecy being fulfilled.

“I thank the Light for allowing me time enough to see them.”

Several moments passed silently and Jiro, with eyes closed, breathed heavily and stirred his body on the bed. He propped himself higher by exerting great effort, rejecting help from Chu and the servants when they advanced to aid him.

Taking a deep raspy breath then letting it out slowly through his mouth, Jiro opened his eyes – they seemed to shine. He suddenly appeared less frail as his bony expression turned grim focusing his attention on Madison and Drake.

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“What I will do now,” said Jiro in English, “is an act no other Dragonkeeper in the fifteen hundred year history of Olden Terra has ever done. I will relinquish my title and *power* as Dragonkeeper.” He paused taking another harsh breath and added, “However, before I do so I have something to show you...”

Waving a tired hand, the Dragonkeeper made something appear magically before them. Madison and Drake were startled, they took a step back before noticing the something, a man, was not real. They saw he was simply a picture, a three-dimensional one – a hologram, transparent with washed out colors. Drake realized who it was without being told.

“This is the Evil One of prophecy, his name is Hifearnan.” said Jiro with loathing.

Hifearnan was tall and big, but not fat, just thick and strong looking. Dressed in a hooded black cloak over black tunic and pants, his image wore a wide dark-brown belt with large buckle around his middle. His teeth seemed oddly pointed and his eyes were black with white pupils adding to his crazed appearance. There was malice in his eyes and cruelty in his smile.

Drake thought with dread, *I definitely do not want to meet this guy alone.*

“Hifearnan was my supposed successor,” said Jiro sadly, “but is now a self-proclaimed Dragonslayer, using dragon blood to increase his evil powers – you can *see* how it’s changed him physically. However, the effects are only temporary, he must constantly attack if he wishes to consume.”

“Dragon *blood*?” exclaimed Madison, she made a sickened face. “That’s just gross.”

The shine in Jiro’s eyes grew brighter as he explained. Dragon blood was endowed with astonishing properties. Those who used it could regenerate from injury faster, the greater the injury the more that must be consumed, but with enough dragon blood there was no limit to its

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healing abilities. Consumed for its own sake, bestowed unto the user was greater strength and magical powers. How the powers were exercised, for Light or Marag, was upto the user – whichever one chosen grew greater. Then there was the greatest property of all – as long as it was continually consumed – it would grant its user *immortality*.

“But – to get dragon blood – that means you have to –,” said Drake stunned, thinking aloud.

“– harm or even kill a dragon,” said Chu completing Drake’s thought. “Dragon’s are not willing to give up their blood any more than you or me are willing to give up our own.”

“No wonder this Hifearnan guy wants to enslave the dragons,” said Madison, “he could be the ruler around here, forever.”

“Hifearnan became a traitor when he listened, then consorted with the Father of the Marag,” Jiro continued. “He now controls the Cennud races, the on-again and off-again enemies of dragons for centuries. As you realized Madison, he wants to become supreme ruler of the Realm of Faerie, where the Marag would reign unmatched and the Light would be extinguished for all time.

“This man, the Evil One, and the powers behind him, the Father of the Marag and the Marag itself are what you are up against. To combat him and those evil forces you *must* recover the Dragon’s Eye, only *after* recovering the Relic can you defeat him.” Focusing his gaze only on Drake, ominously he said, “Otherwise, without the ‘Eye your powers will equal his and all that remains’ is a stalemate.”

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What's he talking about? Powers. What powers? I don't have any. Drake thought nervously. He wondered if Jiro was senile. *If we can't find this Relic, how do I stalemate him with powers?*

“Madison, *Lady Protector*,” said Jiro hoarsely, “please come here.”

Drake stepped away allowing his sister to move next to the dying Dragonkeeper. Jiro's expression was one of seriousness, but Madison was not intimidated in the least bit. On the contrary, she felt privileged, the Dragonkeeper called upon her before Drake. Madison tried to meet Tighearn Jiro's gaze with the same intensity. She found it quite difficult to stare down those shining eyes.

“To aid each of you in your struggle you will be bestowed with powers,” said Jiro. “Your powers and abilities are tailored to your roles, yours *Lady Protector* are tailored for the protection of your brother. The Protector of foretelling is expected simply to do just that, *protect*. You must *always* watch over your brother, keep him close and keep him from harm. Only through him can the Evil One be vanquished.” The shine in Jiro's eyes dimmed, suddenly he looked very old once more. After another moment's pause he firmly added, “Come closer *Lady Protector*.”

Tighearn Jiro stretched a shaking hand toward Chu who handed him a small object. The Dragonkeeper then took Madison's right hand and gently placed the object, a ring, on her finger. She was shocked at how cold Jiro's touch felt, he was colder than the room air around them. The ring was one of the very same rings from yesterday – only this time she did not glow.

Without asking permission, Jiro grabbed Madison's forearms and held her tightly. His hands instantly became warm and a joyful feeling coursed into her senses. Madison understood

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her role even further – simply protect her brother at all times and at all cost. The powers she sensed being given made her feel certain she would be capable.

“Use the Child’s ring cut by Glicemax as a source of light or power.” Jiro said decisively, releasing Madison from his grip. “I have given you the power of protection, the grand advisor will teach you how to effectively use this ability. For now we will help you with a short display.”

Raising his hand heavily, a point of light lifted from Jiro’s palm into the air. Dust particles drew nearer to the light, gathered, then solidified an object that slowly materialized, floating above the bed. It was a bowstaff. He tried to reach for it but could only grimace; he looked at Madison and nodded.

“Take it.”

The bowstaff was beautifully carved, six feet in length, and made of dark oak wood tapered at the ends. Clutching it, she was amazed at how impossibly light it felt yet appeared undeniably strong.

“The bowstaff you now possess is enchanted as a weapon of defense or attack.” said Jiro. “You’ll only need to *think* or *imagine* how to use it and it will work in that manner.” Another pause, another dimming of his eyes, Jiro took a deep breath holding back pain. He exhaled then added warningly, “Greater power will be given to it as long as you *wear* the ring.”

Madison stepped away from the bed swaying the bowstaff in martial art kata-moves for feel and balance. She thought, *The bowstaff is perfect and it’s my favorite weapon of choice.*

“Imagine a shield, Lady Protector,” said Chu, stepping closer to Madison.

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Madison smiled and looked at the bowstaff, she chuckled at the request. She thought, *This is getting way too bizarre.*

“Go on, create a shield,” pressed Chu.

Focusing on the bowstaff, Madison sighed and then concentrated on a shield. She stared at the stick keenly – nothing occurred. Madison then looked at Drake for encouragement only to receive a smirk in return. Straightening herself, she stuck the bowstaff farther out and stiffened her arm, this time closing her eyes and imagining a shield, one like she’s seen in the movies. The bowstaff vibrated, a blue light glimmered through the carvings then flashed intensely. Once everyone’s eyes adjusted, Drake noticed the energy field generated by the bowstaff –it was formed as a medieval-style shield. The shield was heater-shaped, curved to three points along the top, covering Madison from her neck down to her knees. Electric-blue in color, it pulsed between a deeper and lighter hue. The energy field was not entirely opaque, Drake vaguely saw the outline of his sister through it.

“Wow, that is absolutely cool,” said Drake, gawking at the energy shield. Wanting to reach out and touch it he added, “Did you do that?”

“Well done, Lady Protector,” said Chu briskly, “now shoot a *fireball* at *me*, from either end your choice.” Chu walked away several steps then turned around facing her, crossing his arms inside opposite sleeves he stood waiting.

“*What?*” said Madison taken aback. “Shoot a fireball at you? Are you crazy?” She looked at the stick and muttered, “I’m not sure I could anyway.”

“Do not to worry, just go ahead and *try*.” Chu urged.

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Madison turned one end of the bowstaff hesitantly at Chu, this did not feel right. She thought, *Why in the world would he want me to do this? What's the point?* She aimed then closed her eyes almost tight, still peeking, more as a wince than anything else.

Madison imagined a fireball.

The bowstaff quivered in her hand, the shield blinked off from existence, and Madison felt the stick recoil in her grip. A fireball emerged with a burst, about the size of a volleyball. It sped scorching toward Chu as he calmly waved a hand – the fireball fizzled then dissolved from reality. It never got close.

“No way!” Drake exclaimed. “That was awesome, Mady.”

Madison opened her squinted eyes and looked where the fireball came out. Her mouth gaped and she shook her head in disbelief.

“Dude, I have mad skills now.”

Holding the bowstaff with both hands she let her arms drop tiredly, a wave of exhaustion came over her.

“I feel beat, like I need a good night's sleep,” said Madison.

“The feeling will subside shortly, Lady Protector,” said Jiro reassuringly. “With further training you will learn good use of your powers and your stamina will grow in the process.”

Drake was bouncing on his heels with excitement, hastily he interjected, “What are *my* powers, hmm?”

“Your powers, young Dragonkeeper, will be great.” said Jiro intensely. “Greater than your own Protector, but you must be *patient*. Please come closer.”

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Drake walked over to where Madison previously stood, leaning over the bed getting as close as possible to Tighearn Jiro. The Dragonkeeper struggled to sit up further while closing his eyes to concentrate. Tighearn Jiro then placed icy hands on Drake's forearms which quickly warmed adding to Drake's anticipation. The hands grew hot, feverish hot, and then so much so a searing heat of pain worsened where the Dragonkeeper held him.

Drake tried to pull away but was seized in the unbelievable iron grip of a feeble, dying, old man. The heat continued to grow becoming almost unbearable, it felt as if hot coals were being pressed onto his arms. Drake cried out in pain.

Rushing in horror to her brother's aid, Madison was blocked by Chu.

"Tighearn Jiro is transferring his powers to your brother, let it be." said Chu at once.

"Can't you see he's in pain?" yelled Madison. "You need to stop this, now!"

"Wait, Lady Protector. You will soon see." Chu replied.

Drake struggled to pull away from the Dragonkeeper to no avail. The hot pain continued to grow; he felt his flesh start to melt away. Drake closed his eyes, grimaced, and cried out once again in agony.

Why isn't Madison or Chu helping, he thought bewildered, Someone please help me...

Jiro's eyes popped wide-open – light now beamed from them – as this happened Drake's eyes opened and the beaming light connected both their gazes. Instantly, the awareness of pain was not there. In its place, Drake experienced through moving pictures and sounds, the life and times of Tighearn Dragonkeeper Jiro. The visions were presented in jumbled order, from Jiro's birth until present day. Drake watched astounded at the powers given to a Dragonkeeper, how they were used, and how important it was to remain honest, to have *integrity*.

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Drake wondered, *Could I ever use these powers as good as Jiro? Will I ever be able at all?* He began to doubt himself...

The light connecting Drake's and Jiro's eyes peaked to a brilliance then abruptly it stopped. Tighearn Jiro sunk into his bed, unconscious, Drake collapsed to the floor in a heap.

Servants came rushing to Jiro while Madison reached her brother first, cradling his head on her lap.

"Little bro, are you okay?" asked Madison worriedly. She noticed a knot where his head bounced off the floor.

Drake mumbled he was okay and was helped to his feet by Madison, Chu, and a couple of servants. Embarrassed from fainting he blushed, strangely enough this reminded him of his arms. He looked at his forearms expecting to see charred skin, instead, he saw nothing – not even red finger marks from being gripped tight.

"How do you feel?" asked Madison, relieved to see her brother awake and alert. She noticed he was favoring his arms and added, "Your arms look alright."

"Yeah, huh...they're fine." Drake said distractedly, rubbing his forearms. "I'm surprised, really. I mean, it felt like he was burning my arms off to the bone." He paused rubbing his arms some more and began idly walking around the room, he continued, "I got to see Tighearn Jiro's life, learned about his powers, it was...interesting. You know, I don't feel any different." Facing Chu he sternly said, "I *do not* want to go through *that* again."

"There will never be a need, *ever*." stated Chu matter-of-factly. There was a hint of sadness or loss to his voice. "What is done is now done; Tighearn Jiro has turned over his powers to you, it has never been performed this way. We did not know you would suffer with a

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sensation, this was a complete surprise to us. We apologize. But it had to be this way; we must begin the recovery of the Relic as quickly as possible.”

“What d’ya mean ‘it had to be this way?’” asked Drake irritably. He was still rubbing his forearms without thinking.

“The transfer of power to a succeeding Dragonkeeper,” said Chu, “normally happens *after the death* of the current Dragonkeeper, not beforehand. The act is magically visible, yet a painless experience. This was the first time *ever* power was transferred while the reigning Dragonkeeper was alive.”

“You’re tellin’ me this was the *first* and *only* time, in what, fifteen hundred years?” Madison quizzed skeptically.

“Indeed,” replied Chu. “Which is why we deeply apologize, we did not know the transfer of power would be so discomforting.” Chu faced Drake and bowed solemnly, rising he continued, “Tighearn Jiro understands time is against us. This is why he was *willing* to relinquish his power, to his younger successor, the final Dragonkeeper, in expectation the Prophecy’s fulfillment will bring victory to the Light over the Marag.”

“So...he’s transferred his powers to me?” mused Drake. Glancing at Madison he tilted his head, smiled and nodded, then said, “I think I saw most if not all the powers, some of it was actually cool.”

“There will be time later to review your abilities,” said Chu, “for now take *this*.” Minh Chu walked to the far corner of the bed and retrieved a stick previously out of sight. The stick, a short-staff about chest-high to Drake, was smooth with no engravings or decorations. It was

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unremarkable except for its pleasingly dark, reddish-brown glossy color. Chu lifted the short-staff to head-height, placing it in Drake's hands while bowing respectfully.

"Young Dragonkeeper," said Chu moving back, "this is the Dragonkeeper's short-staff. The staff serves a purpose similar to the Protector's bowstaff. Let us show, please conjure a shield."

Following his sister's lead, Drake closed his eyes and imagined a shield exactly like she made appear – nothing happened. He closed his eyes tighter, crinkled his nose, and pinched his brows between his eyes, still nothing materialized. Drake concentrated so hard he began holding his breath. He held it as long as he could, unable to hold it any longer Drake released his breath loudly flustering at Chu.

"I *can't*. What's wrong?"

"Nothing is the matter, young Dragonkeeper," said Chu calmly. "Be patient and concentrate. Try a fireball."

Pointing the short-staff at Chu, he focused again. Still nothing developed.

"Think about a ball of fire, imagine it flying at Chu," said Madison encouragingly.

"Shut up, geez," growled Drake frustrated. "I'm trying as hard as I can." Drake became worried he was incapable of using the powers.

Chu placed a comforting hand on Drake's shoulder as a slight look of concern spread on the grand advisor's face, trying to sound positive he said, "Do not worry, Drake. We will work on your powers. Keep in mind these powers were just transferred to you, and remember, it has never been done this way. It may take some time before your new abilities fully blossom."

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Outwardly Drake shook his head in grudging agreement. To himself he thought with dismay, *Why was Madison able and not me?*

The bed chamber's doors creaked opened, in entered Leemstey walking rapidly.

"The Council is ready to receive you."

Madison, Drake, and Chu looked sadly at the unconscious Dragonkeeper. They each thanked Jiro silently for all he had done, realizing he had given everything away for their sake. Without looking back, they followed Leemstey out the door.

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CHAPTER 6: The Evil One

A large, darkly cloaked figure sat brooding in silent contemplation upon a granite throne. He wore a newly formed golden breastplate overtop his black tunic. An elaborately designed black serpent was painted on the breastplate's center, coiled with menacing red tongue flicking from the mouth. The room he sat within was thinly rectangular, small, and uninvitingly lit. The lanterns hung low on rough walls casting weak light with long, looming shadows. A sickeningly sweet odor hung in the room, an odor the man found pleasing because of what it reminded him – his source of power.

On a pedestal beside him was a caged animal, cute and mostly harmless, it was a monkaat. Thin and long as a ferret, it stood and walked on hind legs but moved with lightning quickness on all fours. Around the room stood his personal guards, frogs, scaled and able to stand on two very powerful legs, they were of the Anura race. Pupils slit like a cat and green in color, these frogs stood four feet high, and were very smart and very quick. Although their hands had only three fingers, matching the number of toes on their feet, these frogs were able to nimbly manipulate weapons of all kinds. The personal guards stood quietly around the room's perimeter, a shield in one hand held tight by their side and a barbed-tipped spear in the other.

The large man was deeply meditating, brows furrowed, his head was held up by forefinger and thumb at tightly closed eyes. He was always nervous when he spoke to the Father, whose mood was fickle and quick to turn.

Father, please continue to help strengthen me, soon our plans will come to fruition.

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A reply was given, none too kindly, *Our plans? Foolish servant they are my plans you will make come true. If not, once again I will find someone else more worthy of the Marag's power.*

Yes, forgive me Father, I spoke out of turn, I just thought with the ideas I have given you... the man trailed off in thought.

Servant slave, I do not need you to think of anything! Do as I command and all that I have planned and foreseen will come to pass.

Thinking hastily of a humble response, the man was interrupted by the piercing voice of a servant-advisor, an old and sickly looking cockatrice.

“Tighearn Dragonslaver, we have received a message from our palace spy. Greylanders have arrived and...”

“HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I TOLD YOU *NOT* TO DISTURB MY MEDITATIONS?” Hifearnan roared, leaning forward on his throne. He sat back taking a deep breath, and then let it out noisily, he added, “Foolish, stupid creature!”

“Please forgive me, Tighearn Dragonslaver,” shrilled Iseen, he cowered bracing himself for a smack.

Iseen, the cockatrice advisor to Hifearnan, was only one of two private advisors loosely trusted by the Dragonslaver. Although old by cockatrice standards, Iseen was sharp of mind and very sneaky with his dealings when it came to Hifearnan. The cockatrice regarded his position

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as one of Hifearnan's advisors with pride, jealously protecting his role against others who were better suited for the station. Everything he did was to please Hifearnan, anything or anyone that happened to prevent him from doing so became instantly hated, an enemy.

Cockatrices were mean-spirited creatures. They were small, but somewhat strong and fast. Although scaled, they mostly resembled chickens with a terribly vicious face. A long neck ended in a small head with pale-yellow eyes on opposite sides, its mouth full of undersized sharp teeth. The males sported a spiny crest that was up to a complete-foot of their five to six foot height. They had two legs ending in sharply taloned feet, and leathery wings, bony in structure, with a single claw at the first joint from the body. A lizard-like tail also had talons, protruding evenly spaced down its length. Cockatrices were mostly red in color changing to a grayish-red as they grew older; Iseen distinctly had a grayish tinge to his scales.

Still trembling from Hifearnan's rage, Iseen screeched softly while bowing and keeping a wary eye pointed at him.

"Tighearn Dragonslaver, please recall you wanted notified of *any* late breaking news from the palace. I bring you just that: Greylanders have arrived, a young woman and a young boy. The boy seems to be the *next* Dragonkeeper."

The message caught Hifearnan by surprise, he thought, *Greylanders in the Realm of Faerie? How unusual.* There was something *familiar* about this – he could not quite grasp. Then the thought was displaced immediately from his mind as he realized this meant Jiro *must be dead.*

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“If only my power were fully consolidated,” bemoaned Hifearnan furiously, “I could easily defeat the young Dragonkeeper and become supreme ruler of Olden Terra.” Looking down at Iseen, Hifearnan harshly asked, “Well, what’s the rest of the spy’s report?”

“Yes, my Tighearn Dragonslaver,” said Iseen meekly, “the palace spy reports that not only are they Greylanders, arriving earlier today, and that the boy is the next Dragonkeeper, but he will be meeting shortly with that laughable Council.” Iseen bobbed his head anxiously, eager for approval.

“I wonder if now would be a good time to destroy the young Dragonkeeper?” Hifearnan said. He lifted his thick eyebrows and gazed at Iseen, who shuffled his feet nervously trying to decide what reply the Dragonslaver expected. With no answer forthcoming, Hifearnan placed a hand up to his chin glancing at the ceiling indifferently, he softly sighed and added, “This way the dragons will become disunited, be easy prey for my take over.” He motioned the same hand toward Iseen tilting his head down, “We could use the spy to go kill the boy...” Hifearnan trailed off making the statement sound more like a question.

At the exact moment Iseen opened his wickedly shaped mouth to speak, the monkaat began shrilling and jumping wildly within its cage, almost knocking itself off the pedestal. A dark formless mass of purplish-black, syrupy liquid approached silently, leaving no mark of its path toward the throne. Reaching Hifearnan, the glob morphed rapidly into the form of a big snake.

“Tighearn Dragonslaver, may I humbly make a suggestion I hope you will find pleasing?” said the snake in a menacing tone.

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“Cruthlum, how many times have I asked you to announce yourself before entering my throne room?” chastised Hifearnan, shifting unnervingly on the stone chair. Hifearnan did not fully trust this servant-advisor because of its changeling abilities. He was glad and relieved all-in-one to have the captured monkaat; the monkaat’s had the innate ability of knowing when the mysterious and dangerous viperinor’s were nearby.

The viperinor was shaped as an Australis Severo snake, the most poisonous of all in Olden Terra. It was reddish-black in color with a large, thickly scaled body tapering to a pointed tail. Cruthlum glanced around the throne room arrogantly, flicking its tongue; it was clearly neither impressed nor fearful of the Dragonslayer.

Very little was known of these secretive and extremely treacherous shape-shifters. What was known was they could keep a long catalog of shapes to fashion into – one viperinor was known to change into 30 different figures. These creatures, thankfully, could not shape-shift into inanimate objects, flowers, or plants. However, once it did shape shift, it had all the abilities of the modeled form.

Cruthlum moved closer and placed itself between Hifearnan and Iseen. The changeling transformed itself smoothly into a young cockatrice, dark-red in color, cackling sharply. Iseen was angered by this display, he knew it meant Cruthlum had most likely killed his kind before. He tried to keep a straight face, friendly even, struggled not to let the viperinor know how enraged it made him.

Briefly it sneered at Iseen, Cruthlum then turned to Hifearnan and changed into a human, older with a beard, dressed in the clothes of a lead palace servant with white striped sash and

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high black boots. This was one of a few shapes Cruthlum changed into most often, arguably his most favorite.

“Tighearn Dragonslaver,” started Cruthlum in a deep throaty voice, “I submit to you for consideration, this latest report may be related to the Prophecy.”

“*The Prophecy*, what Prophecy?” asked Hifearnan, shaking his head dismissively.

“The Final Dragonkeeper Prophecy, my Tighearn Dragonslaver,” said Cruthlum evenly. “Signs have shown themselves, the young boy as Dragonkeeper, the young woman is either his mother or sister, clearly the ‘Protector’ as foretold.”

“Ah, *that* Prophecy,” said Hifearnan sarcastically, “it’s simple nonsense, a myth. No, I see what’s going on, with Jiro dead and no replacement the grand advisor has done the only thing he could do. Unite the dragons against me by reviving the myth, convince the Council of its truth, and then gather their forces to defeat me.” He stood up from his throne distracted, speaking almost to himself, he added, “Of course, they won’t defeat me, it can’t happen.”

Hifearnan looked down at Iseen and Cruthlum. The viperinor watched him with veiled frustration, clearly displeased the Dragonslaver rejected its say in the matter. The Dragonslaver smiled to himself noticing Iseen glaring at Cruthlum with disguised hatred. Although Cruthlum was more valuable to Hifearnan than Iseen, the cockatrice served a worthwhile purpose as his loyal toady – another set of eyes to mind the shadowy viperinor. Anyway, it was good leadership practice for the Dragonslaver to keep them both opposed to each other, rather than focusing on him. As soon as his power was secured Hifearnan knew he would have no further use for them, with their focus on each other he would dispatch them quickly and easily.

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“There is *no* Prophecy,” said Hifearnan decisively. “I always thought it was just an idiotic story. A *Greylander* as Dragonkeeper, absurd...”

His eyes glazed over and his face appeared lost in deep thought, somewhere else. The Father of the Marag spoke to him and told him exactly what to do next. Hifearnan snapped back into the moment looking self-consciously about the room, he noticed the curious face of puzzlement upon Iseen and the strangely stoic, slightly smiling face on Cruthlum’s human form.

“What we will do next is seek him out and destroy him,” said Hifearnan as if reciting a written message. “We do not want to use the palace spy; undoubtedly the spy would fail and be caught. The boy would then be guarded even more closely. We’ll wait for a time when he’s been installed and begins making his appearances. Then we’ll find the right place and time, and destroy him. Oh, and we’ll also terminate the young woman too, for good measure.”

Hifearnan composed himself and tried to sound once again commanding and in control. He glared at Iseen imposingly.

“Iseen, have the spy watch the boy’s movements and report them back to us.”

The cockatrice bowed obediently and walked hurriedly out of the throne room.

Hifearnan then scowled at Cruthlum with no visible effect upon the viperinor.

“Cruthlum, ready your best colleague for the job, hopefully to send out soon, very soon.”

The viperinor changed back into the Severo, keeping his defiant smile fixed in place.

Cruthlum slithered away slowly and deliberately.

The Dragonslaver pursed his lips watching the changeling leave the room. Once alone, he relaxed and sat back upon his cold granite throne. Hifearnan closed his eyes and meditated.

As you commanded, Father, just as you commanded...

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CHAPTER 7: The Dragonkeeper's Cloak

Trudging towards the Council's chambers, Drake and Madison slowly realized much to their chagrin, they'd been walking for an awfully long time. Madison thought, *Dude, what I'd do for a bike or rollerblades right now*, as she pushed herself along with the bowstaff.

"This palace's way too big." Drake grouched, shaking his head exasperated and trying to take his mind off from his feet hurting.

"The palace itself is part of a much larger compound," said Chu as he continued walking unaffected, showing no signs fatigue. "The compound consists of a large, central, rectangular building, which is the palace, surrounded by four smaller buildings located at each corner.

Facing the compound from above, we are headed to the top-left hand corner, in a west-southwest direction."

"Where'd we start?" asked Madison breathlessly.

"We started more or less north of the palace center at the Dragonkeeper's bed chamber." replied Chu. "After a few turns we are now on the main hallway leading to the Council. It is a long walk from where we started" – they were following behind Chu as Madison exchanged a dry glance with her brother and sarcastically mouthed 'no kidding' – "but we should be there shortly."

Leemstey also seemed oblivious to the endless walk as he led them down the wide, fire lit hallway. Minh Chu suddenly realized the chief clerk was not among them. Straddleham always took personal interest and responsibility with any matters regarding the Council, his absence was odd.

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“Where is Straddleham?” Chu asked as he walked faster, catching up to the assistant clerk.

Leemstey stopped and turned around facing the grand advisor, after a slight but noticeable hesitation he said, “I don’t know exactly. The chief clerk told me he had an errand to run, but would be at the Council anteroom when we arrived.” He nodded toward Drake and Madison and added, “Straddleham wants to make sure the young Dragonkeeper and his sister are presentable to the Council.”

“*Presentable?* What does *that* mean?” said Madison huffily.

“Well...it means he wants you dressed in a certain manner,” said Leemstey surprised having to explain the meaning of the word, he sounded somewhat condescending. He added, “The chief clerk wants to also make sure—”

“I *know* what ‘presentable’ means,” interrupted Madison annoyed. “I want to know what’s *wrong* with how we’re dressed.” She placed a hand on her hip defiantly.

“The chief clerk is a stickler for the rules and protocol,” interjected Chu. “Do not be offended by what he says or tells you to do. Dragon’s are very independent and proud creatures. They will treat you with respect, but anticipate the same if not more in return. Straddleham knows this and will have you ready to the best extent possible.”

At long last they reached an outer door, sunlight brightly seeping in through the bottom of the entryway. It would be the first time Drake and Madison were outside in the Realm of Faerie, a wave of excitement washed over them anticipating what they would witness. They were greeted with a magnificently sunny day, a few clouds in the sky, slightly cool, and a scent of sweet jasmine filling the air. Jagged mountains jutted into the air from a distance, snow

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capped and brownish-green they looked imposing and impassable. At their feet a very long flight of steps stretched leading down before them, superbly carved from clean, white stone.

Halfway down, Madison turned around curiously and stopped. Drake continued walking tapping his short-staff on each step and then noticed his sister was not beside him, Drake turned looking for her. He found Madison staring, mouth opened, at the colossal structure they just exited. The largest Chinese palace Drake had ever seen, easily twice as large if not even larger than the Hall of Supreme Harmony in Beijing, China, which he visited once with his parents during one of their research trips.

The Dragonkeeper's Palace was a magnificent sight to behold. Although Drake and Madison were unable to see the entire structure, what they were able to set eyes on was astounding. White marble parapets with wall facings of bright-red, glazed terra-cotta made up the exterior fortifications. The enormous lawn-green roof, recognized easily as a hallmark of Chinese architecture, was graceful and tiered, sweeping, with upturned eaves. The roof rested on sturdy wooden brackets, supported by other brackets set on columns. Woodwork was finished with paint, lacquer, and trimming uniting the base to create an effect of outstanding splendor. Decorations were realized in colorful inscriptions and painting of brackets with elaborate portrayals of man and dragon alike.

Minh Chu then noticed Drake and Madison was neither next nor directly behind him, he turned about and saw them staring at the palace. Chu smiled, walking back up the steps toward them.

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“Leemstey, please hold a moment, we seemed to have left behind our charges,” said Chu with a humorous tone. The assistant looked back seeing Drake and Madison fixed in placed, he grinned as well.

“Are you impressed with the architecture?” asked Chu. He already knew the answer.

“That—this building—is easily the largest—I’ve ever seen,” stammered Drake pointing at it with a wagging finger.

“It needs to be, with dragons walking around,” said Chu nodding at the palace approvingly. “You will find all the architecture on Olden Terra, if it includes dragons, must be large. They prefer buildings to be big and airy, very open.”

“Was this palace made entirely by men?” quizzed Madison, spreading her hands and arms apart motioning to the structure.

“No, not entirely,” replied Chu, “dragons helped with this and the entire compound. That is why it seems so much larger than it needs to.”

Drake noticed Leemstey stride back up and place himself next to the grand advisor. At the word ‘dragon,’ Drake believed he saw Leemstey make a vaguely sour face – or maybe he pursed his lips instead, Drake was not sure.

“They’ll be time later, for how do you say it, ‘sightseeing?’” said Leemstey hurriedly. “Let’s please go, Straddleham may be a bit irritated by now.”

They walked down the remaining steps, it seemed like hundreds of them. The landing was a wide slab of apparently seamless marble that Chu mentioned stretched around the entire palace proper. Leemstey pointed toward a much smaller building (which still looked massive to Drake and Madison) at the top of another flight of countless steps facing them, shaped similarly

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to the palace. The building was located at the west-southwest corner of the compound, they saw in the distance identical buildings at the far east-northeast and south-southeast corners as well. Chu verified for them there was a matching fourth building at the opposite corner from where they stood.

Once reaching the top step leading into the smaller building, and after giving Drake and Madison a chance to catch their breath, they entered through an imposing stone doorway with the carving of a large dragon, reminding Drake of Burrax, standing behind a cloaked man with hands clasped under his chest. Following another series of twists and turns evidently heading towards the center of the building, they came upon Straddleham – he did not look pleased.

“*Finally*, you made it,” groused Straddleham sarcastically, his heavy-lidded eyes betrayed his true feeling of annoyance. “I was just about to send some palace guards in search for all of you.” The chief clerk lead them to the Council anteroom – a small room decorated similarly to others they have seen, but large enough to be Drake’s and Madison’s living room back home. Barely furnished, the anteroom contained only two tables placed opposite to each other, one of which contained a smattering of papers and books.

“Straddleham, may I please step away, sir?” asked Leemstey politely. “I have other Council business to attend.”

What business?, wondered the chief clerk briefly, but pressing matters of the next Dragonkeeper and the imminent Council meeting were forefront in his mind. Straddleham simply waved his hand distractedly and said, “Go ahead.”

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“Good fortune to you, Drake,” said Leemstey with a wink and a smile. “And to you as well Madison, I hope you enjoy your stay.” He walked away hastily in the same direction they came.

Crossing his arms by habit, Straddleham frowned as he assessed both Drake and Madison from head-to-toe. He looked at Chu with a disapproving face.

“What they are wearing is *absolutely* unacceptable.”

“This is who I am.” Madison snarled, becoming irate once again about comments on her clothes. “I’ve agreed to come here and now I’m not dressed right?”

“Be reasonable, Mady,” said Drake appealingly, reaching hands and arms out toward her, “we’re about to meet dragons.” He looked at Chu for help.

The grand advisor firmly said, “It is important that your brother be accepted as the – ” he glanced at Straddleham briefly “ – *next* Dragonkeeper. He will need our assistance and yours. You *must* do everything you can in support.”

There he goes again, keeping the truth from this guy – he must have his reasons, thought Drake warily.

Madison shifted her glare slowly from Chu to Straddleham, and then reluctantly sighed, “Okay, what do you want me to wear?”

With a wide, circular gesture, Straddleham magically produced a dress in his arms—medieval in style, like that of a princess or duchess.

“Does everyone around here do magic?” Drake blurted incredulously.

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Straddleham held up the golden colored dress to Madison, it looked like it would fit her quite nicely. He snapped his fingers and matching shoes appeared in his hands, Straddleham handed the dress and shoes to Madison, who took it while trying to suppress a smile.

“You can go there to change in private,” said Straddleham pointing to a door across the anteroom.

Madison leaned her bowstaff against the wall and set off with the dress, pressing it against her body she nodded happily in approval.

“Now, *you* need to look the part of Dragonkeeper,” said Straddleham directly at Drake. A different flourish of hands and arms conjured a medieval tunic with vest and pants, the clothes appeared floating before them. The tunic was bluish-white and the vest was earthy-brown, the pants were dark-blue and made of rough cowhide. Another snap of fingers and matching boots materialized that would tie just above the ankle. Straddleham snatched the entire ensemble, shoes and all, handing it brusquely to Drake. He immediately turned his back on him and addressed the grand advisor.

“I imagine Tighearn Jiro has transferred his powers, relinquished it, as we spoke about days ago?” said the chief clerk with obvious contempt. “This is where you came from, what you were doing earlier?”

Chu nodded courteously in agreement.

“Grand advisor, I’m sorry, but I must voice my displeasure again at the unusual manner in which this *boy* is taking over.” said Straddleham irritably. “Normally we wait for a Tighearn Dragonkeeper to die, what we’re doing here is unheralded.” He looked at Chu for a reaction.

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The grand advisor remained motionless, returning his stare silently back to the chief clerk.

“But...I suppose these grave times call for unique actions,” continued Straddleham. With disgust on his face, he loudly clapped and suddenly a cloak popped into existence, hovering and faintly spinning.

“What is it?” asked Drake noting the rich embroidery on the garment.

“It’s a *cloak*,” replied Straddleham, answering as if it were a stupid question, “the Dragonkeeper’s formal cloak, worn by every Dragonkeeper since Trevelyan.” The chief clerk clasped his hands and gazed at it admiringly, he added, “This was given to Trevelyan by Glicemax, some say through Glicemax by the Child of the Light, as a reminder to all Dragonkeeper’s that they’re of the Light as well.”

The hooded cloak was thick and heavy, it looked to Drake as if it would be hot to wear. It was dark-purple with what appeared to be golden colored threading, a silver-dragon cloak pin at the neck. Floating, it spun its backside into Drake’s view; a symbol was vividly embroidered of a three dimensional, stylized man with light shining from within the figure. Drake marveled at the symbolism and beauty of the picture.

“The cloak’s image is a representation of the Dragonkeeper,” said Chu, aware Drake was mesmerized by the symbol, “or it represents a future action by the Dragonkeeper himself.”

“What does *this* symbol mean?” asked Drake oddly intrigued.

“It was unknown and not even understood by Jiro himself, until today.” Chu replied.

“Obviously, with recent events that transpired it depicts Jiro giving over his powers.”

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Drake stared at the cloak with a deeper understanding. The young Dragonkeeper pondered the implication of what he just learned.

“So—how do I—get my symbol?” said Drake thinking out loud.

“By wearing the cloak, of course,” replied Straddleham intolerantly, “*it* chooses the symbol.”

“The first Dragonkeeper, Trevelyan,” said Chu glaring at Straddleham warningly, the tone toward Drake was unacceptable, “had a rising sun on the cloak. This represented the first reign of a Dragonkeeper.” The chief clerk’s face softened instantly at the sight of Chu’s displeasure, yet Straddleham was still able to convey a pompous attitude. Chu continued, “Then there was the emblem for the only Dragonkeeper to become traitorous, Meltyn, his was a large knife image. Many believed it symbolized an eventual fight for one cause or another. Instead, it was a forewarning, a figurative ‘knife-in-the-back’ that came later through his actions.”

Drake became visibly focused when he realized what was going to happen next.

“Please young Dragonkeeper,” said Chu somberly, “put on the cloak.”

The clothes Drake held were placed on the one uncluttered table, which he then leaned his short-staff against. He returned watching Chu and Straddleham curiously before grasping the cloak. Chu smiled confidently but his expression gave away a peculiar sense urgency, Straddleham’s bored eyes implied slight contempt. Drake then observed the floating cloak intensely, he considered how best to put it on.

In one swift instinctive move, he flung the cloak across his shoulders and clasped it securely around his neck.

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Surprisingly, it did not feel as heavy or as hot as it looked, it actually felt quite comfortable. The cloak trembled as if blown in the wind, shimmered, and then crumbled into a million floating pieces. The pieces glittered like golden confetti twisting and falling in the sun. Then suddenly the pieces began reassembling themselves, solidifying, and bringing weight once more to bear on Drake's shoulders.

The cloak had changed color and texture.

It was now a deep and beautifully rich royal-blue with distinctive bluish-white threading noticeable along the edges. The Dragonkeeper's cloak looked and felt velvety soft, yet it also felt sturdy as cotton.

Chu simply smiled and even Straddleham appeared fairly awed.

"Huh, wow," said Drake surprised, as he looked at and touched the cloak. He turned round still amazed at the cloak's light feel and fit. As his back came to face Chu and Straddleham, he heard the chief clerk gasp.

"Preposterous!"

"What's wrong?" said Drake startled.

"It is the *symbol*—the cloak's symbol – " stammered the grand advisor trying not to sound astonished " – *your* symbol."

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CHAPTER 8: Council of Dragons

Drake turned round facing Chu and Straddleham wondering what they saw. He could not help but begin feeling a tad embarrassed.

Did the cloak put up some vulgar picture? Drake thought with mortified concern.

Taking the cloak off hastily, Drake turned its backside to face him. The symbol had changed. It became a lavishly embroidered white dragon with colorful accents of red, yellow, and green. Radiant light was portrayed shining brightly from behind the dragon – the light sparkling as he moved the cloak. The whole embroidery was somehow three-dimensional in appearance, it was stunningly beautiful.

Something was familiar about the symbol...Then he remembered! This same image was carved on the box containing the rings from yesterday. Drake thought, *What could it mean?*

“So what’s wrong with the symbol?” demanded Drake, as he turned the backside to face Chu and Straddleham.

“It – just *can’t* be – *your* symbol,” stuttered Straddleham. “It’s the *Council’s* symbol, has been for over five hundred years.”

“This is the *sixth* sign,” stated Chu quietly, “the *final* Dragonkeeper will be covered by his symbol.”

Straddleham gave the grand advisor a perplexed sideways glance, “A sign? You aren’t babbling about that fairy tale regarding the...” He trailed off pensively. Straddleham primly moved a hand to his chest walking away idly from Drake and Chu. Everything he’s learned and witnessed began to dawn on him: The boy was a Greylander; the girl was his sister; the symbol

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on the cloak; Jiro relinquishing his powers– it couldn't be...No wonder Burrax's behavior suggested a desperate sense of urgency.

Chu interrupted the chief clerk's stupor and said, "Yes, the Prophecy is *true*. You have witnessed more of it revealed." Straddleham gaped at the grand advisor, the arrogance washing away from his face as Chu continued, "Drake Wallace is the final Dragonkeeper of the Child's Prophecy and his sister, Madison Wallace, is his Protector."

"Can someone please explain the whole Council-symbol thing?" griped Drake.

"Before Glicemax disappeared," started Chu, "he gave the Council of Dragons a sign to represent the final Dragonkeeper – a dragon with a light shining brightly from behind. But the Council over the last hundreds of years has taken and adopted it, wrongly, as their own. They have forgotten the symbol's original purpose. Instead the dragons revere it as *their* symbol, bestowed upon them by the Child of the Light."

Straddleham gestured limply while staring at the ground, he mumbled, "Drake – the young – " he looked up at Chu, his face contorted disbelievingly and added " – *final?*" The chief clerk wiped a hand across his sweaty forehead placing the other on his hip, then continued, "The young Dragonkeeper's meeting with the Council – it will not go well. Walking in with *their* symbol on *his* cloak...Burrax must be having a difficult time convincing them with the unusual nature of the visit and now *this?*" He slowly brushed a hand toward Drake.

Madison returned from changing, adjusting her dress around the shoulders, arms, and waist. To no one in particular, she said, "Dude, do you know how hard it was to put this dress on?" Madison recovered her bowstaff from where she leaned it against the wall. Twirling it

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effortlessly from one hand to another behind her back, Madison came to stand next to her brother and said, “So wha’d I miss? Hey, baby bro, nice cape.”

“I’ve been told it’s a cloak,” replied Drake, sending Straddleham an understated glance.

Both the grand advisor and chief clerk became speechless, the strikingly gorgeous sight of Madison in the medieval duchess dress instantly captivated them. The floor-length, golden-colored, crushed velvet gown was cut in the courtly traditions of the late-Middle Ages. The bell-shaped sleeves and square-cut collar were trimmed with a silver floral pattern encrusted with bright jewels. The neckline and cuffs were lined with a dark-golden lame while the laced-up back ensured a smooth fit. She had removed the ponytail holder allowing her hair to lay attractively thick and wavy past her shoulders.

Straddleham stood dumbfounded, still at a loss for words. Minh Chu tried holding back a grin and stammered, “You – you look beautiful – Lady Protector.” Quickly composing himself, he cleared his throat, then added, “You are *more* than presentable for the Council.”

Madison looked at herself then leaned on the bowstaff in an unconscious response to her sudden awkwardness. Rarely did she ever get dressed up, she was a t-shirt and jeans kind of girl. When she did it was never as elegant as this, she felt gawky and uncomfortable. Although she noticed boys her own age look at her, Madison really never gave it much thought. It’s what guys do, right? But being stared at by these men, in this dress, was a bit unnerving. Madison though could not deny that it was all rather flattering and deep-down inside she felt quite empowered.

“Alright guys, I appreciate the looks and comments, but it’s still just *me*,” said Madison with conviction. She exchanged a muted chuckle with her brother and glanced in turn at Chu and Straddleham, then said, “Seriously, what’s up?”

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Drake proceeded to tell her what happened while she changed, the events regarding the cloak, its transformation, the new symbol (which they've seen before), and its meaning. The entire time Madison gazed at the magical embroidery with subdued awe.

“Dude, *really?*” said Madison simply to all she heard.

“Really,” Drake responded bobbing his head.

The chief clerk at last composed himself and returned to his normal prudish behavior. Straddleham had his faults, but he accepted change like any other task – to perform quickly and efficiently.

“Well, we can't talk about this all day. We've kept the Council waiting long enough.”

“Whoa, hold on,” said Drake at once, “don't you want me to get dressed?” Quickly he cinched the cloak around his neck then reached for the clothes lying on the table.

“No,” said Straddleham firmly. “There's no more time. How you're dressed will have to do.”

“Wait one moment, chief clerk,” said Chu holding up a hand. He promptly extended his arm toward the table – the clothes disappeared. Then repeated the same movement with his other arm toward Drake – a slight whoosh of air, the cloak billowed, and underneath, clothes emerged on Drake replacing the ones he wore. The young Dragonkeeper was startled to find he was holding the short-staff, no longer was it leaning against the table, and his feet wore the boots tied on comfortably.

“Hey that's way cool!” said Drake, observing the clothes on his body and changing the short-staff from one hand to the other. “You need to teach me that sometime.”

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“Why didn’t you do that for me?” asked Madison slightly irked, seeing she did not have to go through all the trouble of getting dressed herself.

Chu responded by tilting his head and making a curious face.

Madison got it, coyly she said, “Ah – I guess your right, I probably would have gotten mad that you dressed me – my bad.”

“Exactly,” said Chu.

“I’ll go into the chamber and prepare them for your entrance,” interjected Straddleham becoming stuffier. He strode to a huge set of intricately carved, wooden double-doors, turned round with hands behind his back, and continued, “When these doors open again, Lady Protector, you will enter and place yourself before the first pillar on your right.” Facing Drake sternly he added, “Young Dragonkeeper, you will enter to the center of the chamber, the grand advisor will tell you what to do next.” Straddleham turned sharply and entered, the tail to his surcoat fluttering as it tried to stay behind him. Ponderously, the huge doors closed.

The grand advisor explained at length what they would see when entering the Council’s chamber. One representative from each of the seven clans of dragons was seated, from their point-of-view, left-to-right across the room. The leftmost position belonged to the fastest of all flying dragons, the Amphithears, the next position moving right was occupied by the irascible Gurgolas, followed by the cold blasting Frost dragons. In the center sat the head dragon, the position held currently by the sociable Euras. The remaining Council members included the old and wizened Lungs, the matriarchal Marsagons, and finally the reserved and massive Wyverns.

Chu counseled Drake on how to properly show respect. He reminded the young Dragonkeeper to enter the chamber to its center, kneel down to his right knee with head bowed,

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and wait – do not stand until told to do so. The grand advisor also instructed Madison to follow her brother’s lead.

“You will need to convince them you are what we say you are,” said the grand advisor decisively, “prophecy fulfilled.” His demeanor softened and he added, “Answer their questions, do not get angry with them. They understand they *need* a Dragonkeeper, even though they *are* independent creatures.” Chu took a step closer to Drake and focused on him intently, “Without *you* discord and disunity *will* prevail. Hifearnan and his allies would grow strong and then all would be lost.”

Madison and Drake exchanged tense looks. *What have we gotten ourselves into?*, they both thought. Madison stretched her neck in an attempt to calm herself; Drake blew out a loud, forceful breath, it didn’t seem to help, he was only getting more nervous.

After waiting anxiously for what seemed like an hour but was actually only a few minutes, without warning, the large, wooden doors to the Council’s chamber opened slowly and silently.

In Dragon Runes, a deep, melodic voice rumbled, “Enter!”

Madison looked at Chu panicky for help, having not understood. The grand advisor urged Madison on with a brush of his hand toward the entrance and a curt nod. Madison straightened herself and entered the dark walled but well lit chamber. She carried her bowstaff tightly in her hands as if comforting her. Drake followed right behind, gripping his short-staff with white-knuckled fingers, his legs trembling almost uncontrollably.

Walking between two pillars, Madison placed herself as told directly before the right column. She stood rigid and tall appearing as confident as possible, her left arm behind her back,

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her right arm still holding tight to the bowstaff, and making a brave face for all to see. Using a shaky hand to brush hair aside from her face, Madison tried very hard to conceal the uneasiness growing inside.

Drake passed her and continued to the center of the very large room. He noticed an odor hanging in the air of mixed ozone and sweat and wondered if he smelled himself. The chamber became oddly familiar to him as he quickly scanned the surroundings...He remembered now, he *saw* this place yesterday – the vision of Arall receiving the Final Dragonkeeper Prophecy from Glicemax.

It happened here, in this very room! thought Drake, excitedly aware.

The room was circular with grey, rough-stone walls. Drake counted seven pillars spaced equally apart around the chamber. There was a single banner hanging high from each column, all were colorful and illustrative, it reminded him of a coat-of-arms. Above the banner a medieval lantern with leaf-shaped accents also hung, it burned an enchanted bluish fire casting long dancing shadows as the unusual flame sparkled behind the lantern's clear horn glass. Hanging from the ceiling, over the chamber's center, was an enormous, lighted chandelier. The fixture appeared conjured, magical, yet broken cobwebs dangled limply, swaying in an unfelt breeze.

Opposite the chambers entrance stood seven large figures. As Drake's eyes adjusted to the light, he saw them more clearly – *dragons!* They sat in a semicircle arrangement spaced equally apart from one another, a center dragon with three others on each side. Each dragon stood behind a dais or lectern, relative to their height, and an emblem attached to each dais had a matching banner hanging on a pillar.

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Advancing toward the center, Drake observed each dragon carefully amazed at how much different they were from one another. Starting on his left, he first spotted the Amphithear delegate called Halian. The Amphithear had enormous wings with hand-like appendages, and legs that seemed too small for its body. Halian's wide mouth was curved into a smile that grew even larger as he watched the young Dragonkeeper approach. Standing behind its own smaller lectern was a Gurgola called Marin, smallest of all dragons in the chamber, he looked about the size of a grown man. Marin stood on two very muscular legs and leaned on his lectern with human-like mannerisms. The Gurgola's head was unusually large for his body with a face illustrating its ill-tempered nature. The Frost dragon representative, Fridgir, had what appeared was a charmed field surrounding him. Frost dragons were accustomed to very cold conditions, inside the sharp-cornered, coffin-like field the air was clearly being kept at a freezing temperature. The dragon's breathing was visible through his large nostrils and except for its pink-tinged white color, it looked similar to a Eura dragon. The Head Dragon Burrax, who they have already met, stood at the center lectern in the curved row of dragon delegates. Burrax's kind green eyes met Drake's but with worrisome concern on his face. The Lung delegate called Tai was coiled behind her dais, writhing slightly and looking agitated, her smooth skin glistened in red and yellow coloration. Tai had four sharply taloned appendages with a body tapering to pinky-thickness and ending in a very feathery tail. A red forked tongue flicked regularly, the same color as two thick, fleshy feelers wagging on either side of her large nose. The next dragon was a Marsagon known as Gentle-Thinker. Her expression betrayed an appearance of displeasure; she looked as if she wanted to be anywhere but here. Gentle-Thinker had a thick torso with a pouch similar to a kangaroo's. Two strong legs ended in large feet that looked more

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effective for jumping, and a pair of wings that were weirdly small, useless really, as though someone attached them as an afterthought. The Marsagon stared back at Drake flapping her tiny wings restlessly at him. Somehow, Drake was not entirely sure how, but somehow he knew these two dragons were females without being told. He could just tell by their size, aside from the Gurgola, this Lung and Marsagon were noticeably smaller than the other male dragons. Nearly completing his march to the chamber's center, Drake gazed upon the Wyvern dragon called Gahiji, easily largest of all dragons present. The Wyvern stood at least 15 feet high and though his head was small the rest of him was not. Massive in girth, Gahiji had a long, thick tail and two immense wings. Even though they were pressed against his back, it was not difficult to imagine how incredibly long his wingspan would be. Gahiji sat very still keeping a straight face, a big hand rubbed his chin as his alert black eyes carefully studied the young Dragonkeeper. This gave Drake a shuddering impression that the dragon was very intelligent and calculating.

Finally reaching the center, he noticed the Council of Dragon's symbol – his cloak's symbol – tiled into the floor. He smiled nervously and made certain to halt short of standing on top the emblem.

Without pretense, Burrax lifted a strangely shaped mallet with a spherical glassy head and tapped it loudly on the dais. In Dragon Runes, he called the Council to order and asked those in attendance to state their names. Each dragon then in order called out their name and their clan.

Drake surprisingly understood each dragon, even though several of them, the Frost, Lung, Marsagon, and Wyvern spoke in a dialect distinctly different from Burrax.

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“Introduce yourself, young Dragonkeeper,” said the head dragon, still speaking in Dragon Runes.

Before replying, Drake knelt down to his right knee, bowed his head, and waited.

“Thank you for your show of respect, young Dragonkeeper,” said Burrax, he sounded very pleased. “You may now stand.”

Once upright, a slight quaver to his voice revealed his nervousness, in Dragon Runes he stated, “My name is Drake Wallace and I am from the Realm of Grey.” He was pleased with himself for remembering for their benefit (as well as his) what they called where he was from.

The delegates began murmuring among one another, Drake could only pick out a few words – “...*Greylander* as Dragonkeeper?...”, “...spoke in Dragon Runes so *well*...”, and “...Burrax, you *are* serious...” It died down as quickly as it started. The look on their faces ranged from mild surprise to shock, only the huge Gahiji remained impassive.

Burrax pressed on with introductions now focusing on Madison, he melodically said, “Young woman, please introduce yourself.”

Drake quickly glanced to where Madison stood, forming a reply for her when he heard Chu answer from behind.

“The young woman is called Madison Wallace, brother to Drake Wallace,” said Chu just as sonorous and melodically as any dragon. “I ask the Council to please excuse her, she does not yet comprehend your language. We did not want to delay our arrival to this distinguished Council, as a result, we did not have prior time to place a *trafod*-spell of understanding upon her, we will soon afterwards.” Chu bowed respectfully.

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Drake never saw or heard Chu enter the chamber, but there he was, standing with hands clasped at his waist alongside Straddleham, at the pillar opposite from Madison to Drake's left. The chief clerk carried a partially opened scroll attached to a clipboard in one hand and an absurdly long, bizarre-looking writing instrument in the other. Straddleham's serious, business-like expression and heavy-lidded eyes were attentively focused on the proceedings, evidently the chief clerk was responsible for taking notes.

"I am Minh Chu, the grand advisor to the Tighearn Dragonkeeper of the Realm of Faerie." He looked to Straddleham.

"Head dragon, I am Vinmor Straddleham, the twenty-third chief clerk to the Council of Dragons," he said on cue. Straddleham nodded curtly, wrote something down – mostly likely what was said recently– and then poised his strange writing utensil ready.

"Very well," said Burrax, "this Council comes to order on the issue brought before us by the grand advisor. The topic is the final Dragonkeeper, as prophesized by the Child of the Light and passed to our fore bearers by the great dragon Glicemax. I open the Council to questions..." He looked left and right along the row of delegates.

"We've gone over all this," said the Marsagon, Gentle-Thinker, impatiently. "Glicemax may be remembered by your clan as a 'great dragon'" – she motioned the universal quote sign with her short arms and taloned claws – "but to the other clans he's simply remembered as a crazed doomsayer."

The heads of the Amphithear and Gurgola bobbed in agreement, the Wyvern Gahiji, remained unreadable.

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“Not all of us do, Gentle-Thinker,” interjected Tai, the Lung raised herself to her hind legs. “My clan remembers him as great. Do we forget that he helped find and install the *first* Dragonkeeper, Trevelyan? Why would it seem so unusual he would be given the prophecy of the *final*?”

Burrax leaned over to either side of him gathering mutters of agreement from the Frost and Lung. Still, Gahiji remained reserved.

“Grand advisor, please repeat the Prophecy for the Council and its record.” Burrax said.

Minh Chu touched the fingertips of his hands together as though preparing to open a scroll, a white covering grew from his wrists, up his palms, then up each finger – the covering formed gloves, the kind a historian would wear when handling old, priceless documents. Pulling his hands apart an ancient, scrolled parchment twinkled into existence, scraping dryly as it stretched open. Drake realized by how old it looked and how Chu handled it this was no doubt the actual Prophecy. The letters on the parchment were strange line shaped symbols, the kind that could easily be drawn by a sharply pointed claw. Although faded, the symbols were still recognizable to Chu:

Anywho reads this understand that these words...

The grand advisor began reading and what Drake heard was specific and profound...

*Any who reads this understand these words shall
come to pass in a time of their own, without aid, and
without hindrance. There will be one final Dragonkeeper
in the times of strife. When the Father of the Marag's*

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*Evil One begins to grow strong. Behold and look for
these signs, for they will show the way to the Final One.*

The final Dragonkeeper will be born of Grey parents

—

“Oh, please, we all know the rest,” interrupted Gentle-Thinker. “Born of Grey parents from their realm, a Protector of his own blood” – she brushed a hand dismissively at Madison – “knowledge of our language, rejected by our realm – my fellow delegates, do any of you actually believe this as truth?” The Marsagon looked up and down the row defiantly, ready for a fight of words.

Rejected by our realm? thought Drake. *That must be the seventh sign!* His thought process continued, discouraged, *It's definitely showing itself here. Oh, man, how is this going to play out for me?*

“Any Greylander boy with a mother or sister or whatever that female is,” said the Gurgola Marin dismissively, “can fit these obscure descriptions of the foretelling. It’s no surprise he would be rejected, the Prophecy has always been pure fiction. He could have easily been taught our language by now, no big surprise either.” Marin paused and eyed the grand advisor skeptically, he grimaced, flashing his surgically sharp teeth then added, “We understand the urgency posed by the traitor Hifearnan, but really grand advisor, why go through all these theatrics? Can we not just search patiently about Olden Terra and find the *real* Dragonkeeper?”

“Distinguished representative of the Gurgolas,” said Chu unfazed, “I have seen the rings illuminate for his parents and the Protector, the first and fourth signs. More importantly, the

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sixth sign has shown itself, which I respectfully submit, you nor your fellow delegates have seen either.” Becoming obvious he no would longer need it and with clear disappointment on his face, he moved his hands together closing the scroll. In doing so, the Prophecy and the gloves he wore disappeared with a distant twinkling sound.

Marin quickly glanced at Drake looking at him from head-to-toe. After flashing a wicked smile, he laughed heartily and said, “I don’t see him covered by his symbol or any other. Do any of you?” He snorted and shook his head expressing amusement.

“Young Dragonkeeper, please turn around,” said Chu in Dragon Runes. “Turn your back to the Council, now.”

Drake realized what Chu was asking. He smiled sheepishly and replied, “Okay, here goes...” Drake turned slowly round.

Dragons do not gasp when surprised, instead, their throats emit a low, resonating rumble sounding much like a deep burp.

Drake heard a whole lot of burps.

Instantly the chamber was outraged and surprised all at once.

“Burrax, grand advisor, what’s the meaning of this?” Marin exclaimed.

“This is appalling!” shouted Gentle-Thinker, a small flame grew to life in her mouth.

“By the Light of the Child – the Prophecy is *really* true!” said Fridgir, shocked.

“Remove that cloak at ONCE!” shouted Halian and Marin together.

“We know what this means, head dragon,” said Tai urgently. “What must we do *now*?”

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During all this commotion, Burrax tried to calm the delegates and call them to order – it was in vain, none of them were listening. The Wyvern remained notably silent, simply using one claw to scratch his cheek staring at the young Dragonkeeper lost in thought.

The grand advisor walked swiftly to Drake and turned him around facing the Council. Chu loudly clapped once above his head and a burst of light blindingly pulsed, much like a strobe, followed by a shower of sparks. This caught the dragons' attention and they quieted down right away.

“May I kindly remind this most distinguished Council that the cloak chooses the symbol for the Dragonkeeper, *not* the other way around,” said the grand advisor as coolly as ever.

“Obviously the cloak was tampered with,” shrilled Gentle-Thinker, the flame in her mouth subsiding. “There's no other way to get the symbol – *our symbol* – on there.”

“The symbol was never ours,” said Burrax quickly, taking advantage of everyone's attention. “Five hundred years ago it was given to Glicemax for this very purpose, for this very day, to *know* when the final Dragonkeeper was among us. Our fore bearers took it upon themselves to take the symbol as their own – a grave mistake.”

“The Council should easily recall what happened when the cloak *was* tampered with,” added Chu. “How the disgraced Meltyn tried to change his symbol after turning to the Father of the Marag, how the cloak shunned him and never allowed him to even touch it again. I respectfully submit to this distinguished Council – there is *no* tampering with this gift or any other from the Light itself.”

A long period of resigned silence ensued from the doubters and pensive thought by the believing dragons. Chu waved Madison over, next to Drake.

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Walking over to them, Madison said, “Dude, I don’t know what was said but it looked heated.”

“It sure was,” said Drake. He looked at Chu, “Why’ve they gone quite all of a sudden?”

“The doubting clans of the Amphithears, Gurgolas, and Marsagons now have undeniable proof the prophecy they denied for so long is true,” replied Chu. “They are most likely contemplating what this means to their clans, and to themselves.” Nodding toward the center lectern he said, “The believing clans of the Frost, Eura, and Lungs now have undeniable proof as well, they know the times of strife are ahead – ” he paused momentarily looking at Drake, deciding whether to share some information, he decided not to and continued, “ – surely they are wondering what will happen next.”

“What about the Wyvern?” Drake asked. “He seems...undecided.”

“Yes,” agreed Chu, “they are the ‘wildcard’ as you would say. The Wyverns have always been the most independent of all dragon clans and least sociable. Little is known of how much they believe in the Prophecy.”

The Wyvern cleared his throat loudly, disturbing everyone’s thinking by surprise.

“My fellow delegates, it is clear we see before us the fulfillment of prophecy,” said Gahiji solemnly. “Whether we believed before today no longer matters. The final Dragonkeeper stands before us and as foretold with a Protector.” He stared at Madison as though sizing her up.

Easily swatting his lectern aside and moving faster than a creature of that size possibly could, Gahiji attacked Drake.

Drake was stunned motionless, like a deer staring at headlights. He watched the lectern tumble across the room and crash forcefully into the far curved wall, loudly splintering apart into

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a thousand pieces. Then he noticed, with petrified detachment, the giant dragon bearing down upon him.

Madison instinctively placed herself between Drake and the raging Wyvern. She willed a shield from her bowstaff, similar to what she created earlier only this one was much larger and thick, curving around their sides almost encasing them. Bracing herself only a split-second before impact, Madison used her strongest karate stance not giving it much hope. She closed her eyes tight in terror anticipating the collision.

The massive Wyvern hit the blue, pulsating field with a buzzing thud, the shield bent but held, knocking Gahiji back into the air landing on his thick tail several feet away. He rolled almost all the way back to where he started his charge. Shaking his head trying to get his bearings, Gahiji looked around somewhat embarrassed as he flopped back onto his feet. Nodding to himself in approval the Wyvern straightened to his considerable height, beating his wings and brushing dust off his arms and abdomen.

Madison was astonished she barely felt the impact, it was as if a small child had come up and kicked the shield. She made the shield turn off by shrinking it back into the bowstaff then stepped beside her brother, looking around warily and visibly shaken.

“Uh, thanks,” said Drake dumbly.

“Yeah,” replied Madison. She cleared her throat nervously, “No prob.”

“Well done, Protector,” said Gahiji in Dragon Runes. He turned facing the Council and continued, “As you can see she has the skills and basic knowledge of how to use her powers – she will safeguard the young Dragonkeeper well” – motioning toward Drake – “it seems *he* will need time, precious little that we have, to prepare for the strife ahead.

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“Head dragon, I suggest we close this meeting and each of us without delay return to our clans. There we can report what we have witnessed here. This will also provide the grand advisor with further time to train the young Dragonkeeper and his Protector – ” Gahiji glared critically at Drake “ – besides, he needs as much time as possibly to build up his integrity among us.”

“An excellent suggestion, Gahiji,” said Burrax. “Let’s meet again when each of us has returned with what our respective monarchs, or chosen leaders” – the head dragon tilted his head toward the Wyvern – “have voiced on this matter. Any questions?” Burrax looked expectantly down each curved row and waited, with none coming, he added, “We are now adjourned.” The head dragon closed the meeting by tersely striking the mallet’s spherical head once against the lectern.

Dragons began to leave, the doubters with a low grumble of resigned discontent. The Amphithear, Gurgola, and Marsagon representative each walked out glowering at Drake, disgust and disbelief on their faces. Drake clearly saw they did not totally believe or worse yet, accept him, *Just like the Prophecy said it would happen*, he thought.

The believing delegates of the Frost, Eura, and Lung came to Drake wishing him good fortune. Unlike the doubters, they actually seemed sincere and genuinely friendly towards him. This buoyed Drake into believing (or at least hoping) things might work out good between him and the dragons after all. Curiously enough, Gahiji was the first to leave without saying another word. The Wyvern did not even glance at Drake, completely ignoring everyone on his brisk exit out the door.

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Burrax furtively watched over his shoulder as Fridgir and Tai exited themselves, he then spoke with obvious relief.

“The Lady Protector performed *amazingly* against Gahiji. Apparently she’s received crude training in the Realm of Grey that serves her well.” Burrax nodded favorably at Madison and without waiting for anyone to reply, he continued, “Chief Clerk, I have two orders for you.”

“Yes, head dragon,” Straddleham said.

“Please make a note to fabricate another dais for the Wyvern representative.”

“Already noted head dragon.”

“Oh, and please send Gahiji *another* friendly reminder asking him to *stop* damaging his lecterns.” Burrax rolled his eyes, shook his head, and sighed. Looking at everyone he explained, “The wood used to make them is becoming scarce.”

“Also done, head dragon,” said Straddleham formally. “The note will be in his quarters before days end.”

“Very well...” said Burrax. He turned heavily on his tail and proceeded out the chamber.

Once the head dragon was gone, Madison directed her still somewhat ashen face to Chu, and said, “That was an interesting display put on by the Wyvern, wasn’t it?”

Chu placed his arms in opposite sleeves and replied, “How so?”

“Well – the Wyvern, Gahiji – he ran at Drake – made this big demonstration out of attacking him, you know, to help show he’s the real deal.”

“He did no such thing,” interjected Straddleham matter-of-factly, his nose pointed toward the scroll while taking notes. “Wyverns *don’t* make demonstrations.”

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“*Huh?*” Drake said. This made no sense to him, he rambled, “What d’ya mean? What else could that’ve been? I mean, really, he looked like he was gonna run me over, but I’m sure he would’ve stopped, with or without Madison. Anyway, obviously he let up on her.”

“Gahiji did that for himself,” said Chu. “He needed physical proof that at least the Protector was real. If the Protector was real and could actually protect the Dragonkeeper, then clearly the Prophecy was also real. He can go back and report this to his clan as unquestionable truth. And knowing the Wyverns as I do – I am certain they will believe him. However, what they will do with this revelation is anyone’s guess.”

“What if – Madison hadn’t stopped him – then what?” asked Drake confused. “He would have still let up. *Right?*”

“No,” answered the grand advisor gravely, “if the Lady Protector had been unable to even slightly repel him both of you would now be – ” he pursed his lips briefly and furrowed his brow, and then with great discomfort he said, “ – well...dead.”

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CHAPTER 9: It's a Huge Palace

Chu's statement had shaken them. The notion that dragon would have harmed them, or worse yet – killed them – was upsetting. More troubled than anything else, they questioned their involvement with the Prophecy and quest, but Chu assured them since *they are* the Dragonkeeper and Protector of foretelling there was nothing the Wyvern could have done anyway to harm them. This brought them little peace-of-mind, the picture of the massive Wyvern bearing down upon them was something they would not soon forget.

After last night's somber walk back into the palace, the grand advisor and chief clerk took leave from Drake and Madison while servants led them to their quarters. From what they could tell, their quarters were farther in distance from the Council than the Dragonkeeper's but happily side-by-side to each other. They noticed Drake's room was beside someone else's with Drake's bed chamber between this person's and Madison's, but at the moment, were really too tired to care, they just wanted to get some rest for whatever events laid ahead the next day. Drake and Madison trudged into their own chambers each collapsing on a large and very comfortable bed, they were asleep within seconds.

Drake awoke to a soft rasp on his chamber's door and the muted sound of someone requesting entry. Noticing he was still in the Dragonkeeper garb from yesterday he called out while wiping his face and scratching his scalp with his hands.

"Please, come in!"

Entering swiftly were two male, palace servants, one carried towels and a fresh change of sheets, the other a large bucket with hot, steaming water pulled on a wooden wagon. They explained to him, surprisingly, in English, they were here to wake him so he could begin today's

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activity. Drake recalled what Chu had said last night, today was an opportunity for them to explore the palace and greater compound, so they could become more accustomed to their surroundings. Yes, he remembered everything now: Today would be a fun day; tomorrow they'd get right to work on their training, in preparation to go recover the Dragon's Eye.

Before anything else, the servants walked him around the room. Although no where near as large as the Dragonkeeper's bedchamber, it was definitely bigger than his bedroom at home, in effect, a large sized studio apartment. Decorated in the same richly paneled designs he's seen throughout the palace, it was well lit by several lanterns using the same peculiar light he saw in the Dragonkeeper's bedchamber. These lanterns were not all lit last night; suspiciously he wondered how they all were lit now. They showed him the bathroom area with tub and crude looking commode, a small cooking area stocked with fresh fruit and nuts, and a living room area they called a study with soft, stuffed chairs and a desk. The bedroom area had a small walk-in closet which unexpectedly contained quite a few clothes to choose from – he was happy to see however, his t-shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes also inside. Drake shook his head wondering, yet knowing, how his clothes ended up there, he suspected they were there much like the lanterns were lit, by magic.

The servants filled the tub with his bath water, told him food would be waiting in the kitchen area, and politely reminded him another servant would remain outside for anything else he needed. After thanking them, he took a long bath, somewhat uncomfortably since he was only used to taking showers. He then brushed his teeth finding the toothpaste tasteless but was amazed at how white they looked afterwards. Breakfast piled on the small kitchen table

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consisted of breads, muffins, fruit, and funny smelling milk, not sour, just *different*. Though when he cautiously tried the milk he could not deny it was very refreshing.

Drake spent considerable time in his closet trying to decide what to wear. He preferred his dragon t-shirt and jeans but if he was the “final Dragonkeeper” then he should probably start, at least, looking the part. Drake put on a white, long-sleeved padded shirt with dark blue pants and the same boots from the day before. Overtop the shirt he wore a short-sleeved, collarless, suede jerkin buttoned up to the neck, choosing a studded ring belt to complete the attire.

With no door connecting his room to either one beside, he decided to leave his chamber and give Madison a visit. Drake waved away the servant lingering outside and before he could reach Madison’s chamber she exited, apparently looking for him. Dressed in white swordsman shirt with flowing sleeves tapering to cuffs, it contrasted nicely with the loose-fitting black treads tied at her ankles. Madison completed her ensemble with a belt similar to Drake’s, a buttoned up burgundy vest, and dark lace-less shoes like those used by dancers.

“Let me guess. You had your own servants?” asked Drake smiling.

“Yeah, little bro,” replied Madison, “and they spoke *English*. Imagine that.”

“Nah. Nothing around here surprises me anymore.” Drake said looking around in wonderment, bobbing his head with eyebrows arched. “Well, I guess I’ll see ya. I’m gonna look around this place.”

“No way dude, you gotta stay with *me*,” said Madison with relish.

“*Wha’?*”

“Did you forget? Last night. What Chu said...?”

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Drake looked down concentrating – he remembered: The only restriction for today, he must remain with his Protector at all times. He recalled Chu talking: *You may be the Dragonkeeper but with your sister, she's the boss.*

“Oh yeah...” he trailed off frowning. In monotone, he continued, “So what’re we going to do?”

“Don’t worry little bro, I’ll let you decide. But remember, *I’m* in charge.”

This is just like being at home, thought Drake annoyed. What he did not realize was they would experience much on this day of running around, things Drake and Madison had never before seen or believed really existed.

From their rooms at about the northeast corner of the palace they decided to explore in clockwise fashion. Moving roughly southeast, Drake and Madison eventually came upon two rooms, one labeled “Library” and the other “Museum”. They entered the library, not only because it was first they encountered, but more importantly, Drake especially liked libraries – he was an avid reader. Drake was particularly interested in reading more about Olden Terra’s history and even more interested in learning further about the Relic.

Wandering half-disinterested around the library was Madison, who noticed it wasn’t used much. The books and shelves were so covered in dust she could not read what was written on the spine of many books. In fact, there was so much dust she saw millions of the tiny particles softly floating in the air around her, obviously kicked up by their intrusion into the room.

Walking around sniffing, and rubbing her nose with her wrists, she happened upon a map. Fully unfurled and attached to a table, it was covered in a thick film of grime; she sneezed just looking at it. Holding her breath Madison wiped off as much dust and grime as she could. The map

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revealed an old and worn parchment, it was Olden Terra, the Realm of Faerie. Madison knew this as she could read the title written across the top, even though it was Dragon Runes. As promised by Chu she was given the *trafod*-spell of understanding last night, after their meeting with the Council. They talked to her afterwards and to her surprise, she understood, and with a greater appreciation for the melodic sound of the language. She could speak it as well but didn't expect she'd be able to read it. Madison thought that would need another crazy spell or incantation, but go figure.

The dusty, old parchment of a map depicted a world eerily familiar to their's, but much, much smaller. Olden Terra consisted of seven continents, each misshapen in comparison to the ones recognizable to them. The western hemisphere contained two continents connected by a thick isthmus. The northern continent was called Vesperik and the southern was named New Vesperik. The eastern hemisphere showed four other continents called Eura, Assuwa, Aphrike, and Australis. Two major oceans existed; the smaller Sea of Caslis located between the eastern and western continents, while the larger ocean, Sea of Heddylow, bordered the western coasts of Vesperik and New Vesperik. The seventh continent was at the bottom of the world and called Terra Australis, while the top of the world was known as the Frozen Lerg – an enormous ice-covered plain.

Madison looked for, and found, where the Dragonkeeper's Palace was located, on the western side of Assuwa bordered by a large area of land to the north. Like with much of the smaller details on the map, she was unable to read the bordering area's name from the dust and dirt collected. The only letter she could make out was maybe a 'D', the ones that followed were basically worn away.

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Drake in the meantime found a listing of previous Dragonkeepers, seven in all, not including him. He beckoned Madison to show her not only how long they reigned as Dragonkeeper, but drew attention to how unbelievably long they each lived.

“Look at this – how long these guys were alive,” said Drake incredulously. “Right here” – with a finger he stabbed the bottom of the list – “Jiro’s supposedly *244 years old*? No way!”

“Yeah, really,” replied Madison taken aback, skimming the list. “Of course, it could be because this world’s so much smaller.”

“How d’ya know?”

Madison waved a hand over her shoulder and said, “I found a map of Olden Terra and it shows this world is really little compared to ours. Maybe the years are also shorter here.”

“Hmm, maybe so,” said Drake crossing his arms. He then tapped his chin lazily with an index finger and added, “Or maybe – they really do live longer lives.”

Drake examined the list further, recognizing names of past Dragonkeepers from what he’s heard over the last few days. He noticed the first Dragonkeeper, Trevelyan, reigned about 500 years earlier than the time of Meltyn and Raiko. The grand advisor had spoken about the history of Olden Terra, but his history began only 1,000 years ago. Drake wondered guardedly what happened during these earlier 500 years Chu had not told them. The list showed Trevelyan had reigned about 1,500 years ago for almost 180 years. This was followed by Dueal who lasted 119 years. The Dragonkeeper everyone referred to as a traitor, Meltyn, followed Dueal, and only reigned two years but lived for 217. There was a very long gap in time between Meltyn’s reign and the next Dragonkeeper, Raiko – 331 years. Drake recalled this was the time of Glicemax, the Dragon’s Eye crystal, and the Prophecy. The grand advisor described it as an era when

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dragons stopped cooperating with each other and the Realm was in disarray. The list finished with the more recent Dragonkeepers, in order they were Arall, Shaife, and of course Jiro – ending with a question mark as the last date of his reign.

I think that day will soon be printed, thought Drake sadly.

There was another gap amid Dragonkeepers, this time smaller at 62 years between Arall and Shaife. Drake knew this was during the Second Long Age of Peace. Discord and disunity, even during this short time, grew between the dragon clans. Little to no progress was achieved and there were so many struggles not overcome.

Drake wondered, *How do dragons act with a strong Dragonkeeper, with integrity, someone they will follow without question?* This he did not really know. Certainly he saw how quickly they squabbled amongst themselves without one in place – or at least, without one they believed in.

Unlike her brother, the list did not keep Madison's interest riveted. Once more she idly toddled about the library; she pulled books and re-shelved them, flipped pages on some without really reading, and she even found a large wooden cabinet – the small drawers stuffed full with note cards, all written in Dragon Runes. It reminded Madison of an old cabinet in her hometown library with index cards listing where books were located. That cabinet was kept in a corner, as a museum piece, since now all searches for books were done with the help of a computer and search engine.

Why would they need this? Couldn't they make the book they wanted just appear in their hands? thought Madison dubiously. She shrugged.

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Beside the cabinet was a table, set in plain view was a simple line drawing on parchment of the Dragonkeeper's Palace and compound. If distances were measured here anyway similar to back home, then the palace itself was huge! She recognized it because of Chu's description yesterday of the compound from outside. Picking up the chart slack-jawed, Madison realized they've seen almost nothing of the compound, and very little of the palace itself.

The map showed a centrally drawn, large rectangular shape representing a building, the palace, with four smaller rectangles at each corner. The rectangle or smaller building at the top, left-hand corner they had already visited. This housed the Council of Dragons.

"May I see that, Mady," asked Drake. He snuck up behind, completely surprising her. She jumped slightly, gasping.

"Don't do that, smart one." She placed a hand to her heart.

"Sorry...Can I have it now?" smiled Drake guiltily.

Madison scowled and handed it over.

The instant Drake touched the map a flame-like shine burst alive at the center and quickly spread outward. Startled, he dropped the chart believing it had erupted into flames.

The map fell to the floor still intact.

They looked at each other wordless for a moment; Drake then picked it up and noticed details that were not there previously. The building at the top-left was now labeled in Dragon Runes as

DRAGON COUNCIL MEMBER BUILDING

COUNCIL OF DRAGON CHAMBERS

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Which Drake and Madison easily translated to “Council Members Building” and “Council of Dragon’s Chamber”. They also noticed additional lines indicating living space for each of the dragon representatives. The building directly across at the top-right was named “Palace Servants Quarters” while at the corner directly below the building was called “Palace Guards Quarters”. Suddenly knowing this gave them a sense of security, it was like having a police officer nearby, only in this case, it was the whole police station.

The building at the bottom-left corner was labeled “Dvergar Armory”. They did not know what ‘Dvergar’ meant, but Drake knew the word ‘armory’ – a place where weapons are stored – and he definitely wanted to visit there.

Drake held the map in one hand while the other pointed to a square outline centrally located in the palace, he wondered what this was. Directly above his finger letters began forming, then words, and finally a phrase became visible. His mouth was about to speak it aloud when...

Madison snatched the map and said, “Dude that’s cool! Lemme see.”

“Hey!” protested Drake.

The map in Madison’s hand flashed like a camera bulb and instantly all the writing was gone. Madison touched the chart where Drake had touched – nothing happened. She touched other spots – nothing.

“Aww that’s just not right,” said Madison dejectedly.

Gently, Drake took the parchment back from her grasp and the map repeated its earlier process, a flame-like shine spreading from the center.

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“I guess it only works for *me*, huh?” smirked Drake. Now smiling widely, Drake pointed to the square and continued, “Now, let’s see what this said...”

Once again, directly above his finger letters formed, followed by words, and finally a description appeared. They translated it as “Palace Garden & Aviary”.

“Now that sounds interesting,” said Madison.

Drake pointed to different spots and other descriptions emerged. One labeled “Dragonkeeper’s Training Room” was situated inside a large circular area at the opposite corner of the palace, another surfaced as “Dragonkeeper’s Bedchamber” – they were there yesterday, and right beside was the “Dragonkeeper’s Study”. Additional descriptions appeared for the four buildings at the corners, nothing enticing. Even the Dvergar Armory only added a description that said, “Contains assortment of helmets, swords, & hammers”. They even saw where the palace’s main entrance was located, off-center on the south side, closer to the armory.

As tempting as it was to take the map, it belonged to the library. Drake was about to return it when his finger brushed the words “Main Entrance”. In place, an image surfaced much like a video feed, remaining visible for about ten to fifteen seconds presenting a scan of an area which, of course, they figured was around the main entrance.

“This chart’s full of surprises, isn’t it?” Madison said half smiling.

They were *really* tempted now to take the map – but still – it belonged to the library. They just couldn’t and didn’t. After taking a long look and dedicating as much as they saw to memory, Drake returned it to the table beside the wooden cabinet.

“Let’s go to the garden,” said Madison.

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“Listen, I’d like to learn more about the Dragon’s Eye and Prophecy,” pleaded Drake.

“Since we’re here let’s first look around, then we’ll go. How ‘bout that?”

“Sure.”

Drake and Madison spent an hour perusing the library for information regarding the Dragon’s Eye and Prophecy. In fact, all over the library where information should have been found looked as though someone had removed it. All books and references to these two topics were just not there – plainly missing, gone. They made every effort to enter the museum but it was locked tight. Nothing Drake or Madison tried would open the doors.

“I guess it doesn’t work for *you* either, huh?” Madison said particularly smug.

They had walked for what seemed like forever, trying to find the garden at the center of the palace. Arguing constantly they were lost, complaining about the endless halls– and doubling back more than a few times – they finally happened on the garden. It was magnificent. The garden was an immense 5000 square yards of beautifully manicured grass, cultivated plants and trees, and an assortment of bugs and beautiful birds, some of which they’ve never before seen. The birds glided and swooped lazily above them, unaware to their presence. Their noses were assailed with a sweet hint of plum, the spicy fragrance of hyssop, and the woodsy aroma of sandalwood. Together these scents made them feel warm and soothed, adding to the grandeur of the garden around them. Catching their attention was the huge open ceiling directly above, casting in another sunny, almost cloudless day. However, the hole in the roof confused them. Neither Drake nor Madison noticed it yesterday when they gazed upon the palace on their way to

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the Council. A hole of this size should have been noticeable; they wondered if the ceiling was magically made to look this way, or was the roof conjured to appear as though there was no hole?

Silently walking around and gawking at the garden and its ceiling, they were unexpectedly startled by a creature jumping out from behind a bush. The furry little thing was three foot tall and walked on stubby, bowlegged legs. It had large, cat-like ears and wide, soulful eyes with a clearly mischievous smile. The fur was colored in stripes of white and light-brown, silkily smooth to the eyes and hands.

“*What* the heck...” said Drake.

“...is *that*?” finished Madison, suddenly regretting she did not have her bowstaff in hand.

“Did I scare you?” said the creature, it laughed naughtily. “I’m sorry, I just *love* to do that to visitors.” Looking at Drake from head-to-toe and regarding Madison closely, it then grinningly added, “Oh, you’re the Greylander of the Prophecy” – the creature pointed to Madison – “and you’re the Protector.”

Drake simply gaped in disbelief at the little animal.

The creature regarded Madison once again and said, “Shouldn’t you have a weapon or something? I mean, you *are* the Protector, *right*?” It smiled wryly at her.

“Who and what are you?” asked Madison irritated, plainly ignoring its question. She suddenly felt bare and exposed without her bowstaff.

“I am Trilly,” said the little creature straightening herself, “and I, young Dragonkeeper and Protector, am a gremlin. My kind comes from the continent of Vesperik, not to be mistaken with our boorish cousins from Eura.” She giggled. Trilly then leaned toward them as if sharing

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a secret and softly spoke, “I’ve been called here for a special meeting with the grand advisor, something to do with the Dragon’s Eye.”

“What about the Relic?” Drake asked at once. “Why has Chu called you?”

“I *can’t* say, I’ve been sworn to silence,” said Trilly with mock sadness. “Sorry, too bad.” She giggled.

Madison looked at Drake then directed a glare at Trilly and said, “Is there anything you *can* tell us about the Dragon’s Eye?”

“All I know is from the Prophecy,” replied the gremlin modestly. “If we are to defeat the Evil One we will need the Relic, and you” – she pointed at Drake tittering – “will make it whole for it to happen.”

“Yes, all that jazz, what does it *mean*?” asked Drake impatiently.

“How should I know?” chuckled Trilly. “I didn’t write it.” The gremlin looked around and said, “Well, gotta go – see ya!”

In a blur the gremlin was gone. Bushes and trees rustled showing which direction the creature went and how incredibly fast it moved.

Drake and Madison spent time exploring the garden, experiencing firsthand trees and plants they’d never seen before – and by the strange shape of some of these – most likely no one else from their world has either. Along their hike they met palace servants tending to a small portion of the garden. The servants in turn tended to Drake and Madison as if they were royalty, it was rather embarrassing. They offered the young Dragonkeeper and Protector food and drink,

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all of which they were told came from the garden around them. Madison particularly liked a sweet drink reminding her of tangerines but bright-green in color, while Drake was satisfied with the water he was given, poured straight out of a clear flask containing no ice, unexpectedly cold.

They came upon another group of servants caring for several young dragons and gremlins, leading them along as though they were on a field trip. They witnessed more animals of a variety familiar to them, such as cats, dogs, and even rabbits. One animal they found most interesting was a creature that looked crossed between a merkaat and mongoose –very friendly and cuddly, Madison wanted to take it but Drake convinced her otherwise.

Even though they had only seen a very small portion of the garden, Drake persuaded Madison it was time go to the armory, or rather, he bothered her enough that she gave in. Regrettably, they were trying to make their way from memory and soon were lost – again.

“*I knew* we should’ve taken that map,” griped Madison.

By chance, they came across Straddleham and Leemstey. Straddleham was now more respectful toward them, yet, he still acted primly. Leemstey remained as laid back and relaxed as ever, greeting them with a sly wink and a quick smile.

“Has your day exploring the palace and compound been...*fun*?” said Straddleham with forced cheerfulness.

Madison wondered if he even knew what the word ‘fun’ meant, she looked at Drake with rolled eyes and said, “Yes.”

“*Actually*, we’re trying to reach the armory,” said Drake pleasantly. “May we ask you to point us in the proper direction?”

Straddleham and Leemstey exchanged quick looks with each other.

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“I have – business to attend,” said Straddleham huffily, “Leemstey, take them – ” he tried to soften his face then spoke directly to Drake and Madison “ – it will be easier this way, rather than directing you. We wouldn’t want either of you lost now, would we?” He strained a smile then abruptly turned and walked away.

Leemstey began ushering them to the armory – Drake and Madison shook their heads noticing they were originally headed the wrong way.

“Is your boss always so uptight?” Madison asked, making small talk.

“Uptight?” replied Leemstey.

“Humph, never mind.”

“I get it,” said Leemstey chuckling. “So formal, right? Yes, but he does his job very well.”

Another long, grueling walk followed as Leemstey led and Drake and Madison trudged right along. Drake decided to make some small talk of his own.

“Leemstey, what do you know about the Prophecy and Relic?”

“What everyone else does,” said Leemstey laughing nervously, “it’s just a story, not true.”

“Your boss doesn’t tell you much, does he?” deadpanned Madison.

“I’m not sure I understand,” said Leemstey.

“Are records kept of all Council meetings?” Drake asked. “Stuff like details on what was said and what happened.”

“Yes,” replied Leemstey.

“Well, look up what happened yesterday at the Council,” said Madison.

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Leemstey shrugged and snapped his fingers, a scrolled parchment appeared in his hand.

“Can *everyone* around here do magic?” said Drake throwing his arms up incredulously.

Leemstey reviewed the Council’s record from yesterday. He began by skimming through it clearly bored, and then he began to read it more quickly, his eyes darting back and forth across the parchment. He looked at Drake and Madison with disbelief then returned to the parchment and continued reading feverously. Leemstey re-read different portions of scroll, shaking his head and muttering to himself.

“Did Gahiji actually attack?” Leemstey asked Madison directly.

“Dude, never been so scared in my life,” replied Madison, shaking her head slowly.

Closing the parchment into one hand, Leemstey waved the other distractedly, the scroll flickered then disappeared.

“So – the Prophecy – it’s *true* – you’re not just the next Dragonkeeper you’re the – the *final* Dragonkeeper,” stammered Leemstey.

“Yep,” said Drake, noting the assistant chief clerk’s laid back attitude had suddenly left him, he became anxious.

Pointing at Madison, Leemstey croaked, “And you’re – the Protector.”

“Yeah, dude,” said Madison. She made a face at Drake as if asking what was wrong with this guy.

“Now you’re both after the Dragon’s Eye – to defeat the Evil One,” said Leemstey. He looked like he was getting sick.

Drake and Madison did not answer, instead they watched him curiously.

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Becoming aware of his behavior, Leemstey waved a hand lazily and laughed, then said, “Ah well, forgive me. I’ve never been one to believe predictions and prophecies. But it certainly does come as a shock, and I imagine both of you can easily understand when they are proven true.” Collecting himself further, he inspected Madison carefully and added, “You’re his Protector, where’s your weapon? The bowstaff.” He smiled widely, “You shouldn’t be walking around without it.”

“I know, I forgot it, the stick’s in my quarters,” muttered Madison, irritated all over again at being reminded.

“And you, young Dragonkeeper,” continued Leemstey grinning, “you should have your staff here as well.”

“Yeah, I forgot mine too,” said Drake guiltily, looking at the floor. “I guess I was all excited about today, you know, just wasn’t thinkin’.”

“Yes – I see,” said Leemstey.

At long last they reached a side door leading out and began treading down the smooth white steps. Drake and Madison used this opportunity to gaze at the palace at length. Positioning themselves at different angles, they scrutinized the roof looking for any indication whether it was real or not. In the end, they convinced themselves it must be camouflaged from the outside – there’s no other way a sky and sunlight could be faked, could it?

“What do you think it is?” asked Leemstey.

“Huh, what?” replied Drake. He then instantly realized and thought, *Of course, stupid, Leemstey probably knows the answer.*

“The roof, is it real or conjured?” Leemstey said. “What do you think?”

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Drake and Madison looked at each other, in unison they answered, “Conjured.”

“Hmm...” said Leemstey, he began leading them up to the armory building.

“Well – what is it?” pressed Madison. “Are we right or wrong?”

“Oh...I really don’t know,” said Leemstey. “I always thought the roof was real and the view inside was magically created. Sorry.”

“Thanks anyway,” said Drake with a touch of sarcasm.

After reaching the armory’s top step, once again, Drake and Madison needed time to catch their breath. Meanwhile, Leemstey used a huge, ring-shaped door knocker making their presence known to whoever or whatever was inside. The double wooden doors to the armory were not as tall as the Council’s building, but it was as decoratively carved. The main inscription, split between the two doors, depicted a diagonally crossed sword and hammer underneath a Nordic helmet with nose guard and horns, all three encircled completely by a ring.

The door creaked open. Greeting them with a firmly implanted scowl was a short man. They noticed he was between four and five feet tall, husky, but strongly built and tough looking with a curly head of long, sandy-blond hair and thick beard to match. He wore a green long-sleeved woolen shirt over top his tan leather trousers, a sheathed sword dangled on his right from a leather band strapped diagonally across his chest. A dark-brown belt was cinched tight around his waist and his reddish-brown boots were tied with wide leather shoelaces crisscrossed around his calves and shins to his knees.

“Hello master-at-arms, I present to you our – um – *next* Dragonkeeper, Drake,” said Leemstey, approaching the small man cordially.

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The short, husky man pursed his lips sourly, then said, “No need to lie to me Leemstey, I would expect that from Straddleham, but not you. I’ve already spoken with the grand advisor – ” he looked at Drake unimpressed “ – I know he’s the *final* one.” His expression relaxed slightly when he looked at Madison, “And I know this one’s his Protector.” Becoming serious, he decisively placed his right fist flat against his chest giving Drake and Madison an apparent salute, “I am Master-at-Arms Dwaner, from the race of Dvergars. Welcome to our armory, in service to the Tighearn Dragonkeeper and the great dragon clans of the Realm.”

In the spirit of cooperation, Drake extended his arm for a handshake which Dwaner simply looked at, confused.

“Stick out your hand,” said Drake, “this is how we, ah, Greylanders greet each other.”

“Aye, indeed,” said Dwaner, slowly shaking Drake’s hand, “very peculiar custom.”

Drake and Madison briefly smiled at each other.

“Your presence here means you’re interested in seeing the armory” said Dwaner, more as a statement than a question.

Drake eagerly shook his head ‘yes’.

Madison shrugged stone-faced.

Leemstey simply nodded toward Drake and Madison.

“Follow me and we will begin the tour,” he said. Guiding them inside, Dwaner recalled the history of the race of Dvergars.

Fifteen hundred years ago, the Dvergars served the Norse gods of the Realm of Grey, particularly Freya, Odin, and Thor. They were the makers of artifacts for these gods: Spears, rings, hammers, and even a sea-faring ship once. Then one day, inexplicably, the gods were

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gone, and in their place there was nothing – at first. War and pestilence then appeared, the Dvergars were on the brink of extinction when something miraculous happened, they were offered a chance, an opportunity to leave the Realm of Grey and save themselves in a new world, the Realm of Faerie. In this world, Olden Terra, they prospered and served a Dragonkeeper and his dragons, in order to prevent what happened in the Realm of Grey from ever happening here.

“We have faithfully served in this capacity since those times,” said Dwaner solemnly. “Today we are the makers of many weapons and armor for the Tighearn Dragonkeeper, the dragon clans, and their allies.” His gaze shifted between Drake and Madison, boring into them with his piercing gray-eyed stare, he added, “We made the rings for those pieces of the Relic cut by Glicemax, the same rings that illuminated your parents and yourselves. The Dvergars have always believed in the Prophecy and the rings have always been our proudest achievement.” Turning away while placing his hands behind his back, he spoke almost to himself, “I only wish I could have seen the rings work, or at least lay my eyes upon them – ” he turned back round facing them and continued “ – not a single Dvergar has seen the rings in almost a thousand years.”

Madison looked down at her hand, unconsciously making a fist. She lifted her arm to Dwaner’s eye-level and said, “You mean this thing?”

“What is this?” said Dwaner at once.

“It’s the ring, one of the rings you just spoke about,” said Drake.

Dwaner reached for Madison’s hand tactfully, gentlemen-like, and stared skeptically at the small crystal sphere held by golden prongs. Mesmerized by the mysterious swirling inside the little piece of bluish crystal, he became lost in thought...He snapped back into the moment.

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“Aye! By the Light of the Child, this *is* one of the rings!” exclaimed Dwaner excitedly.

He looked at Madison keenly and said, “This ring, it illuminated you, did it not?”

“Like a light bulb,” replied Madison.

“What did you feel? What did you *see*?” asked Dwaner quickly.

Madison pulled her hand away and turned her back to him, as though insulted. The worst memories of what she experienced yesterday seeped back into her mind.

What’s up with her? thought Drake.

“I apologize, Lady Protector, I did not mean to – ” said Dwaner stepping back and straightening himself.

“No – no need to apologize,” interrupted Madison. She turned around slightly distressed and added, “It’s not about the ring, I – I just don’t want to talk about it. Some of the things I – saw – were disturbing...But I’m okay now, really.”

Drake had assumed the visions he encountered were the same his sister had experienced. Obviously, he was wrong. He decided he would ask her later, in private.

Dwaner led them and Leemstey to a storage room – one of many – where different items constructed by the Dvergar were stocked. They were told that several of the items were on display such as, swords, helmets, hammers, shields, and even rings. All of different shapes and sizes, some of which seemed only partially completed.

Leemstey began nosing around very interested and fascinated; he left their side to inspect the various weapons more closely.

The master-at-arms explained the different uses for the objects they saw. Helmets, for example, some were used for dress while others are specifically employed for battle. Similar

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descriptions and additional facts were given on all the others weapons. The young Dragonkeeper hung on every word of Dwaner's, captivated by what he learned. Meanwhile, the Lady Protector was almost bored to tears. She welcomed Leemstey's interruption when he returned with only a sword hilt in hand.

"Why's there no blade to this hilt?" asked Leemstey approaching, pointing it harmlessly at Drake.

"Be careful Leemstey," said Dwaner sternly, "it's not just – "

A blade shot out of the hilt at lightning speed – straight to Drake's heart. Dwaner reacted with fantastic swiftness. Pulling his sword out, it hummed through the air knocking the blade away, only inches from Drake's chest. Drake and Madison stood shell-shocked, only now wondering what had happened. Dwaner looked around, cat-like, holding his sword in both hands as if expecting another attack. Leemstey stepped back, red-faced from embarrassment, he dropped the sword to the floor. The moment it clattered the blade retracted itself, vanishing, it once more was only a hilt.

"Young Dragonkeeper, I'm so sorry," said Leemstey apologetically, his hands were shaking. "Please understand that was completely an accident, I had no intention – "

"Little bro, are you okay?" interjected Madison coming to her brother's side.

"Y-Yeah, I, think," said Drake passing a hand across his chest.

Still holding his sword, Dwaner stepped between Drake and Leemstey, then angrily said, "Do *not* touch another item, do you understand assistant clerk? You know better than to pick up anything in the armory – many of these items are *enchanted*."

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“Master-at-arms, you must know it was not on purpose,” pleaded Leemstey. “I rarely come here. The sword hilt without a blade looked so peculiar to me...”

The grand advisor materialized in a flash of blazing light carrying Drake’s short-staff and Madison’s bowstaff. He looked more concerned and tense than Drake and Madison have ever seen. Quickly scanning the room, he handed them their weapons.

“Where is Straddleham?”

“He said he was taking care of business,” answered Leemstey nervously. He looked worried at Chu’s presence.

Chu once again glanced around the room, stopped at Dwaner and asked, “Is everything alright?”

“Yes,” replied Dwaner, a sour face watched Leemstey. He shrugged and added, “Everything’s fine.”

“Well then, we – ” Chu nodded at Drake and Madison “ – will take our leave now.” He motioned them to his side, doing so, they clearly sensed his unease. The grand advisor looked at Dwaner, “I will see you tomorrow.”

“Aye,” nodded Dwaner, sheathing his sword.

Chu swept his arm and in a blink Drake and Madison were back in the library. Madison stepped away from the grand advisor.

“Okay, what was that all about? You seem – stressed – what’s goin’ on?”

“*Never* again leave your chambers without your weapons!” said Chu harshly. He took a breath and became less angry, he continued, “I sense an increase in the Marag, the Dark Magic,

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within the compound. I am not sure why or what it means.” He focused his attention squarely on Drake and said, “Here, have this.” Chu handed Drake a folded parchment.

“Hey, this is the map, the chart from the library we were looking at earlier,” said Drake unfolding it. The map reacted, as it did earlier to Drake’s touch, once it was fully opened.

“Use this map until you are familiar with the compound,” said Chu. “Do not use anyone’s help, but my own, understood?”

Drake nodded slowly.

The grand advisor then glared at Madison, “Protect him at all cost, he is the *only one* that can obtain each – ” he stopped abruptly, then sighed, “ – that can obtain and hold the Dragon’s Eye.”

“About the Relic and Prophecy,” interjected Drake, holding up a finger, “we looked for more information, here in the library, but it’s all been taken out. Would you mind shedding some light on this? I’ve got some questions I’d like answered.”

The grand advisor was visibly uncomfortable upon hearing this. He opened his mouth to reply and then closed it. After a few seconds of awkward silence, he settled himself to his normal calm behavior.

“All will be revealed, young Dragonkeeper, in due time,” said Chu. “The time now is for both of you to return to your chambers and rest – tomorrow will be an important day for training. After breakfast go to the Dragonkeeper Training room, the map will show you where it is.”

“Why can’t you tell me?” pressed Drake. “Why do we have to wait?”

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“I apologize but I must leave, now,” said Chu firmly. “I sense you will be safe at this end of the palace, keep your weapons in hand, and please, go get some rest.” He exited the library, preoccupied with his own thoughts, concern seeping back onto his face.

“First mom and dad, and now *him*,” said Madison crossing her arms as she watched Chu leave. “Something’s definitely up and he’s not tellin’ us.”

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CHAPTER 10: Magical Reality Training Camp

This morning they were each greeted with a hearty breakfast prepared by the palace kitchen staff. Huge servings of wheat cereal, fruit, lightly sweetened pancakes, potatoes and bacon, and all the strange colored juices they could drink. The smell of just finished breakfast lingered, floating gently through the air sweet and delicious, as they both changed for today's important training.

The topic of what to wear weighed heavily on Madison's mind. She settled on wearing her pink workout sweats from home, it made perfect sense as she expected they'd be putting them through exercises of sorts. The trouble though was deciding what shoes to put on. Madison arrived to this strange world wearing her favorite flip-flops, which thankfully were in her closet, but made for real bad exercise gear. The other choices were long, cowhide-looking boots, the dancer-like shoes she wore yesterday, and a collection of slippers better suited for the fancier clothes that hung. What she really wanted were those cross-trainers back home in her own closet, if Madison was performing any amount of physical exertion those would serve her much better than any she currently looked at. Standing in the closet, hands on her hips, she thought of the shoes and wished she had them. Turning to walk out and think some more, she heard a low *pop* and then something caught the corner of her eye. Madison looked down and then stepped back astonished –it was her cross-trainers – the very same ones from home, the ones worn and scuffed from all the use. They were placed neatly beside all the other shoes.

“Unbelievable...” muttered Madison. She stared at the shoes wonderingly then came to a realization. She thought of another pair of shoes back home...*Pop*.

Right beside the cross-trainers appeared her sandals. She thought again...*Pop*.

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Now her dress shoes appeared. *Pop*. Her high school sweatshirt appeared hanging at one end of the closet. *Pop*. Her favorite skirt now hung in the closet. *Nothing*. Madison tried thinking of it again, this time she concentrated harder...*Nothing*. Her favorite rock band's t-shirt still had not materialized.

"Hmm..." said Madison, hands on her hips once more.

Madison thought of other items around the house...*Nothing...Nothing...Nothing*.

Quickly she understood that unless the object she imagined was *in* her closet, it was not going to appear.

"Well, at least that's something." Madison said to herself, pleased.

With her cross-trainers on and her bowstaff firmly in hand, she went to get Drake. Madison found him lingering outside her door, dressed simply in a white t-shirt with his karate gi-pants and shoes. She made doubly sure to notice he carried his short-staff, Madison was not about to let Chu down again.

"Mady, check it out!" Drake said excitedly, he turned fully around. "Guess how I got my karate pants and shoes?"

"You were standing in your closet and thought about them," said Madison matter-of-factly pointing to her feet.

"Oh, I see, you figured it out too," said Drake dolefully. His face lit right back up when he added, "Ah, but did you –"

"Yes," interrupted Madison, "I thought of a bunch of things around the house. I even imagined my own gi-pants, but they weren't in the closet. I think I left them out in the living room."

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Foiled again, Drake simply said, “Oh.”

“Do you have the map?” asked Madison.

Drake nodded ‘yes.’ He pulled it out of a gi pocket to show her.

“Okay, come on, let’s go before we’re late.”

Using the map they plodded towards the Dragonkeeper’s Training room, located at the northwest quadrant of the palace, at the complete opposite end from their bedchambers. Much to their frustration it was yet another long, grueling walk.

“We need Chu to show us that disappearing and reappearing trick of his,” said Madison grumpily. “All this walking’s getting on my nerves.”

At last approaching the training room, Drake used the map’s video feature to see if anyone was there at all. Brushing the parchment within the room’s outline, a small window opened and began playing live video. It showed the grand advisor and master-at-arms speaking to each other. Drake tried brushing and even tapped the video feed hoping to hear them talk.

“Huh, no sound,” said Drake.

“Sure would be nice to know what they’re saying,” said Madison.

“Yeah – it would be,” replied Drake. He closely inspected the training room area of the map.

The Dragonkeeper’s Training Room was a circular chamber similar to the Council of Dragons, but twice as large if not even larger. There were four anterooms spaced apart at the northwest, northeast, southeast, and southwest positions around the outside of the circular room. Their purpose, the map did not explain, it noted only that each was a separate entrance to the

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same immense chamber. The southeast anteroom was where Chu and Dwaner were talking that's where Madison and Drake headed.

Entering the anteroom, they were greeted warmly by Chu and given another Dvergar salute by Dwaner. Interestingly, they had both come prepared for training as well. The grand advisor wore what reminded Madison and Drake of a kung-fu uniform. A white satin top trimmed in black at the sleeves and matching satin pants also black trimmed at the ankles. They also noted he wore a wide, black silk belt, expertly tied with the knot placed off-center to his left.

Is he an actual black belt? thought Drake nervously.

Dwaner wore a brown vest of rough leather, exposing his hairy arms, and pants similar to yesterday though green. His boots were again tied in the same crisscross pattern to his ankle. He looked as if ready for a barroom fight.

“Young Dragonkeeper, you will train with me,” said Chu, “and the Lady Protector will train with the master-at-arms.” He motioned for Madison to move beside Dwaner and added, “We will share the training chamber. There is more than enough room for what each of you will practice today.”

And was there ever more than enough room! The map was simply unable to portray the sheer size of the circular chamber. Not only was it vastly larger in diameter than the Council's chamber, it was undeniably taller, the ceiling was at least 50 feet above them. Brightly lit by three rows of lanterns attached along the curved wall, the wall itself, they noticed, was more roughly cut than any they had seen so far. At ground level weapons hung of every kind they saw yesterday in the armory, many appeared well used and battered while some looked plain broken. There were no other decorations, no other markings, except for brown streaks Drake fretfully

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imagined as dried blood. A heavy smell of bad body odor, iron, and burnt wood filled the room. The stench seemed equally spread regardless of where they stood or moved to, Madison's eyes watered slightly from the suffocating tang.

“What is *that* smell?” asked Drake wrinkling his nose.

“*That* is the smell of hard work,” replied Dwaner with a knowing smile. He laughed at Drake's confused reaction and added, “Aye, you'll soon find out young Dragonkeeper – the sweet odor of *real* hard work.”

The grand advisor led Drake, who fanned the air around him, to one end of the chamber while Dwaner, trying hard not to cackle, escorted Madison in the opposite direction.

“Young Dragonkeeper, let us begin with learning what species make up the Cennud,” said the grand advisor, “or what you would call the *scaled* races.” Chu merely pointed to the ground before them, it began glowing, dust and dirt particles above the glow pulled together among glittering sparks of lights and slowly figures began solidifying until distinct firm shapes became apparent. What finally materialized were frightening creatures, Drake could not help but step back, scared.

“Do not worry, your training has yet to begin,” said Chu reassuringly. “This room is enchanted to give temporary life to any conjured animal or object within. They will look, smell, and *feel* genuine.” He walked over to the perfectly still creatures and continued, “These are the different types of the Cennud, all of them very dangerous. I want you to commit to memory how

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each of them looks – ” Chu directed his attention to the first menacing creature “ –this Cennud is called a cockatrice.”

“It looks like a chicken on steroids,” said Drake making a face.

“Indeed, a scaled chicken with poisonous glands in its mouth,” said Chu unsmiling.

“They can spit the poison to blind you, or bite you instead for a long, painful, and inevitable death. There is only one known cure and it is very, very rare – ” he paused reflecting distantly, a look of regret formed on his face, and then he continued, “ –soon, it will no longer be available. Fortunately, there is only enough poison in their glands for one attempt, either spitting or biting. It takes them an entire day to build it up once used. Hifearnan has a cockatrice advisor called Iseen, old and paranoid, and still very dangerous.”

“How would I guard against the spitting – or the biting for that matter?” Drake asked anxiously.

“You will learn soon enough,” said Chu smoothly, “there are ways to protect yourself.” He motioned to the next creature, “This is a snake, much larger than you are used to and as in your world we have different varieties, some are allied with cockatrices and *all* are loyal to Hifearnan. This particular species is called a Crotalus, their lairs are found mostly in Vesperik and New Vesperik.”

Drake considered the snake carefully and said, “This thing reminds me of a rattlesnake, a very large one.” He looked intently at its thick scales and reddish eyes, amazed at its sheer girth.

“More poisonous than your rattlesnakes, they can rear up to four feet high,” said Chu.

“The only antivenin that can cure their bite is dragon’s blood.” The grand advisor then stepped toward a disgusting looking frog. Instead of smooth clammy skin, it was covered in thick, ugly

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scales, he resumed, “This frog is a Vesperik Anura, they are very smart and very quick, they can jump far distances, and all are sickly-green in color. Because of their strength, Hifearnan most likely uses them as front-line fighters, maybe even his personal guard. As with the snakes, there are different varieties of frogs. One species exists in a helpful relationship with the cockatrices – hatching their eggs and raising their young chicks for the first year.”

“What do the other kinds of frogs and snakes look like?” asked Drake, his inquisitive self becoming more intrigued. “Or are they all the same basic shape and size – and with the same nasty abilities?”

“For the most part, they are all alike,” replied Chu, “but, there are some deadly differences. Shown here, however, are the kinds you might likely cross paths with on your quest.”

“Where will the quest take me?” Drake asked, jumping on Chu’s statement quickly.

“You will find out soon enough,” said the grand advisor in a slightly dismissive tone.

“Let us concentrate on your learning and training today.”

Chu turned Drake’s attention to the last conjured shape. It was more an object or thing than a recognizable animal. The object, a formless glob of dark-purple, almost black, thick syrupy liquid, appeared gel-like and ominous. Drake wanted to reach out and touch it.

“What is it?” asked Drake, fascinated.

“*It* is a viperinor,” said the grand advisor distastefully. “The most cunning and wicked of all the Cennud. This monster is a changeling, a shape-shifter. They can shape-shift into any animal or person they *bite*, luckily, they cannot change into an inanimate object, or into flowers or plants.”

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“They can change into most anything but a chair, table, or something like that – got it,” said Drake thinking aloud, trying to understand. The young Dragonkeeper recognized that its overall abilities were still fearsome.

“The viperinor will have all the talents of the shape-shifted animal,” replied Chu, “whether it may be poisonous bite or swiftness of foot, or what have you. It does *not* inherit the talents or abilities of humans it may bite, although, there are a few strong and powerful viperinors that are capable.”

“Tell me there’s a way to know when one’s lurking around,” Drake said in a tone hopeful for a good answer.

Chu shook his head ‘yes’, and said, “Gremlins. They are sentient or conscious creatures that can verbalize when viperinor are among them, unfortunately it takes them some time to sense it. There are other creatures, the monkaats, which are better suited since they discern viperinors almost immediately, but they are wild animals’ preferring the company of their own kind.”

“Gremlins, *really?*” said Drake. “And what are monkaats?” He remembered encountering the gremlin yesterday in the garden, and a monkaat was most likely that strange creature cuddling up to Madison. Drake was about to mention they had come across one of each when he decided not too. *If he’s keeping things from us, I’ll keep this from him*, he thought smugly.

“Hifearnan’s other advisor is a viperinor named Cruthlum,” continued Chu. “It is known to change into various shapes, from numerous species of the Cennud to Vesperik and New Vesperik tribesman.”

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“Hold on, it can change to a Cennud race?” said Drake. “But from what you’ve explained that means its bitten and probably killed its own allies...” He tailed off, confused.

“Exactly, young Dragonkeeper,” Chu said knowingly, “that is how wicked and evil these viperinor are – *all of them*. Never forget this fact.”

“For sure,” replied Drake nodding wide-eyed.

The grand advisor changed the topic to Drake’s powers, or rather the powers granted to a Dragonkeeper, a subject of concern and wonder to Drake.

Chu introduced him to certain magical spells he should be able to perform. There was the heat spell, granting heat resistant effects to hundreds of degrees; the cooling spell, used opposite to the heat spell, effective for temperatures well below freezing; the taming spell, which allowed the Dragonkeeper to tame most any creature, including dragons; and the invisibility spell, it permitted the Dragonkeeper to become unseen.

“You can transfer any of these spells to another, but only one,” said Chu specifically, “and it will only work *once* for the person it was bestowed upon.”

“I see, I can transfer it to Madison, for example,” said Drake.

“Indeed, but use and share these abilities wisely,” said Chu warningly. “They are useful for about one of your hours. The more a spell is used or given to someone the weaker it becomes when you may need it. If a spell or series of them are used too often, their effects will wear off faster, or they might not happen at all.”

“Why’s there always a catch with these things,” sighed Drake.

“A catch?” asked the grand advisor.

“Never mind,” replied Drake airily. “You were going to talk more about the spells?”

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Chu regarded Drake with a frown, then said, “We will proceed now with your actual training. I want you to try the spells, beginning with the heat spell. All of them start with the ancient key word *Abra* – ”

“Did you say ‘*Abra*?’” interrupted Drake almost laughing. “Like *Abra-Ca-Dabra*?” A low *pop* was heard and a bottled water instantly appeared in Drake’s hand. Startled, he dropped it and said, “Aaa!” It bounced off the floor, landed on its side, and rolled several feet away.

“Yes, young Dragonkeeper – *Abra*,” replied the grand advisor watching the bottle come to a stop. “As you can see, *Abra-Ca-Dabra* – ” an apple appeared in Chu’s hand, he took a large bite, chewed it, then swallowed, “ – is the *appearing spell*. Most anything simple and inanimate that you think of will appear in your hand – very good at getting items needed in a pinch.”

Once he realized what he had done, Drake simply beamed at having performed magic for the first time.

“Wow! I finally did it,” he said happily. “I finally did some magic. Way cool.”

The grand advisor retrieved the bottled water inspecting it curiously, handing it to Drake he said, “Obviously you must be thirsty for that water to appear in your hand. I imagined an apple and the same happened for me.”

“That’s one nice trick,” said Drake, impressed. He twisted the cap open and took a long swig, then continued, “You know, I *could* make Madison appear here...” He looked at her across the room mischievously, relishing what the look on her face would be.

“Aha – therein lies your ‘catch,’” said Chu slightly smiling, “you cannot make a person, or living being, or anything complex for that matter materialize. No Dragonkeeper has ever achieved this feat, although, some have tried.”

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“Well, in any case,” shrugged Drake, still beaming, “looks like I’m past whatever happened in Jiro’s bedchamber.”

The grand advisor returned a stoic face, not revealing whether he agreed or disagreed. Encouragingly, he said, “It seems that way, let us continue with the heat spell.”

“Alright, bring it on!” Drake said eagerly.

“To enable heat resistance, simply start with *Abra*, followed by *Gred*, then *Glowan*,” said Chu. “This should place a frosty covering over your entire body – seeming to an onlooker as if you were inside a body-shaped ice cube.”

“*Abra-Gred-Glowan!*” said Drake quickly without waiting for any other explanation. He looked at himself and then at Chu.

He failed.

“Young Dragonkeeper, you must concentrate, visualize it happening,” said Chu calmly. “Take your time.”

Drake tried it again, something shimmered right before his eyes, and then nothing. He failed a second time.

“Concentrate,” repeated Chu.

Taking a deep breath, Drake closed his eyes and deliberately said, “*Abra—Gred—Glowan.*” He opened his eyes and found himself shimmering once again, it steadied, and suddenly he felt covered in cool, smooth rubber – as though wearing a wetsuit. Drake looked at himself carefully – he was enclosed in ice, blue-tinged, and sparkingly.

“I did it! I really did it, Mr. Chu,” said Drake cheerfully.

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“Well done,” said Chu. “To turn it off, as with all the other spells, repeat the charm starting with *Non*.”

Drake collected himself and nodded, then said, “*Non-Abra-Gred-Glowan*.” The icy covering shimmered then seemingly melted from existence. Drake noted the sensation over his body was gone and that he felt strangely exposed.

Chu had Drake try the cooling spell next. Pronounced, *Abra-Oeri-Forst*, Chu explained it as a flickering and wavy shield – body-shaped once more. Drake would essentially appear fluttering as if viewed from a distance through a hot area.

The young Dragonkeeper succeeded on the first try. He felt as though inside a wetsuit again, only this time he felt warm. After happily inspecting himself, Drake turned off the covering as easily as he turned it on.

The taming spell was reviewed, a charm that not only operated on Cennuds but on dragons as well. The spell was voiced as *Abra-Anney-Jeed*, and was only capable of taming the weaker minded of those races.

“I can understand wanting to tame a Cennud,” said Drake, “but why would I want to tame a dragon?”

“Until your knowledge and power of spells increases,” replied Chu, “and more importantly, your integrity builds up among the dragon clans, this charm will come in useful in certain situations. And do not forget, smarter and more cunning creatures are not so easily controlled.”

“Another catch, huh?” Drake said smiling at the grand advisor.

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“Yes, yet another one, and there will be many more,” replied Chu seriously. “The last spell to cover is invisibility; state the word *Abra* followed by *Wang-Li-Pa*, and you and your clothes will become completely unseen. Try it now.”

“*Abra-Wang-Li-Pa!*” said Drake with growing confidence. Instantly, he vanished. He silently walked behind Chu and tapped his shoulder.

“Having fun, are we?” said Chu. “Well watch...” The grand advisor pointed to the ceiling and a bright light shone down upon them.

The light revealed Drake’s shadow and of course, where he stood. Chu turned to face him as Drake said, “*Non-Abra-Wang-Li-Pa.*” Drake reappeared all at once.

“Keep in mind young Dragonkeeper this is a defense that can be used by *any* adversary,” said Chu admonishingly. “And the *worst* of the adversaries know it.”

Boy, he’s getting a bit testy, thought Drake.

“There are other strengths and abilities you have as Dragonkeeper,” continued Chu, “some of which are quite powerful, but for now I want you to listen about two of the most important: Dragon conjuring and dragon calling.”

Long ago, Dragonkeeper’s were granted the power to conjure, or create, as many dragons as possible, though a single conjured dragon was no stronger than one of flesh and blood. In fact, it required two or three conjured dragons to equal the strength and power of a single live one. Furthermore, each conjured dragon diminished the strength of each existing previously, so the more dragons created, the weaker the individual ones were.

“So I can create, say, a hundred dragons, right now?” asked Drake willingly.

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“No,” said Chu curtly, “your powers are not at their fullest. At this moment the best you can hope for is to conjure a single, small dragon – a weak one at that.”

“Oh,” said Drake regretfully.

“Dragon calling is a Dragonkeeper’s ability to call upon *real* dragons for help or assistance, but this is, as you would say, tricky.” Chu said. “Both powers are tied to a Dragonkeeper’s *integrity* among the dragon clans; however, dragon calling more so than the other.”

“Even though I may call upon them, they might not show up?” said Drake with disbelief in his voice.

“The more integrity you display and acquire,” said Chu, “the stronger your powers become. The greater your integrity, the more your call is received as an order rather than a request.”

The grand advisor watched as the young Dragonkeeper struggled with the concept of dragons not heeding when summoned. Pointedly he asked, “Drake, do you *know* what integrity is?”

“Oh sure, integrity is doing the right thing all the time,” replied Drake rather confidently.

Chu’s expression remained blank as he smiled to himself like a teacher given an answer that was not quite right, he said, “Yes young Dragonkeeper, integrity is just that, strength of character. But it is also so much more and yet very simple. Integrity is not only doing ‘the right thing all the time,’ but doing the right thing when it is not popular, or when it is something we would rather not do – something we find distasteful. To have integrity is to do this when people are watching, and more importantly when they are not. That is the true strength of character.

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“Several previous Dragonkeepers, even Jiro, needed so much time to comprehend this – you do not have the luxury. You must understand this quickly and wholly if we are to have any chance of succeeding.”

Drake nodded solemnly in agreement, though unconvincingly he stated, “I understand, Mr. Chu, I really do understand.”

“Very well,” said Chu appraising him guardedly, “let us now focus on some of your other powers, try once again to conjure a shield with your short-staff. Remember, concentrate and will it to happen.”

“No problem,” said Drake with a touch of overconfidence to his voice. He held the short-staff out and stared at it with a menacing smile...*Nothing*. Drake shook his head and looked at his staff questioningly. He cleared his throat while adjusting his feet, then forcefully held the stick out once more and...*Nothing*.

“What’s goin’ on here?” complained Drake, irritated.

“It is quite alright,” said Chu. “These abilities are more difficult to perform than the spells. They require much more focus, instead, try imagining.” The grand advisor watched him anxiously.

Drake tried again...*Nothing*.

At the chambers opposite end, Dwaner continued training Madison through hand-to-hand combat. The master-at-arms found it very surprising that the female Greylander was familiar

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with Assuwan fighting techniques – she oddly called it ‘karate.’ When using conjured men, he was most impressed with her ability of taking on upto two-at-a-time relatively well.

He then directed the training onto her magical abilities with the bowstaff. Dwaner helped her with the subtle differences of conjuring shields varied in shape and size, how to shoot distinct fireballs, and how to quickly make it all happen.

Dwaner spoke to Madison at length about Hifearnan and his allies. They had venomous abilities at their disposal to harm her and her brother – blindness from spitting, or poisoning from the bite of a cockatrice, the same for some frogs and snakes. She understood gloomily that her ability to shield herself and the Dragonkeeper was very important.

The master-at-arms offered her some water from flasks resting along the curved wall. During this short lull, Madison glanced around for the first time truly noticing the battered and worn weapons, she saw Drake at the opposite end clearly struggling, and then, a thought entered her head.

“Why’re we being trained so hard?” asked Madison keenly. “How bad’s this quest gonna be?”

Dwaner’s rough face softened, like a father answering a child as honestly as possible, he replied, “The Evil One and his allies are wicked men and creatures. Once they discover we are making a move against them, they will come for your brother to destroy him – and then you.”

The truthful bluntness of the answer shook Madison. Equally though, she became resolute, determined not to let it scare her, she resolved for herself and for her brother to get them through this safely. *No matter what I have to do*, thought Madison decisively.

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Watching as determination emerged on the Lady Protector, Dwaner became impressed. He toughened his expression but in a kindhearted tone said, “Enough rest Lady Protector, I want you prepared for *anything* they might try. Listen carefully...” The master-at-arms then lectured her on weapons of all types, especially swords and hammers.

Madison noticed he was particularly fond of hammers; he spoke about some ‘mighty golden-haired Thor’ and even more fondly about this guy’s ‘smashing hammer,’ which was made by the Dvergars, thank you. Something Dwaner said that concerned all this Madison noted was important, but she couldn’t help tune him out without thinking how enjoyably dorky the master-at-arm’s really was.

The struggles continued for conjuring everything from shields and fireballs, to dragons, a point of frustration was reached to just give up, quit.

“I just can’t do it,” said Drake flustered, “maybe all of Tighearn Jiro’s powers weren’t really transferred – even you said the transfer had never been done that way – maybe something went wrong...”

“Yes you can, and you *will* do it,” snapped Chu losing some patience. “The powers were transferred. You need to *believe*, believe in yourself – concentrate and visualize like the spells.”

Rolling his eyes, Drake made an effort at conjuring a dragon, again. Concentrating, he raised his arms, pinched his brows, and focused. In front of him an image started to form as though composed of foggy, wispy air – for a few fleeting seconds it tried to assemble itself into a shape – then abruptly it dissolved, floating away softly and quietly. Despite this, Drake

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continued for a few seconds longer. When it became obvious no dragon had appeared, he allowed his forearms to fall heavily to his knees and then forced his breath out loudly, coughing.

“I just can’t,” whimpered Drake, “...just can’t!”

“Stand up straight young Dragonkeeper,” said the grand advisor forcefully.

Drake rose slowly bearing an irritated and reddened face, he said, “Is there a cheat guide to being a Dragonkeeper? You know that would really help a bunch about now.”

“A cheat guide? What do you mean?” said Chu incredulously. “No, there is no guide or book or anything. You are a Dragonkeeper, the *final one*, and cheating will not help you with your integrity, either with dragons or anyone else. You only cheat yourself by thinking that or worse yet by doing it. Now concentrate and try *again*.”

“I’m done, I’m mentally and physically exhausted,” groused Drake. “I can’t do it right now, maybe tomor – ”

“NO!” bellowed Chu, finally losing his patience. “There is no time, you will do it *now!*” The grand advisor turned sharply facing the creatures that stood frozen, he waved forward the cockatrice.

The cockatrice came to life, stretching and flapping its bony wings as wild eyes looked around then locked on Drake. It shrilled a maddening cackle and without warning lunged at the young Dragonkeeper. Realizing just in time, Drake darted aside, narrowly getting his arm bitten by the vicious creature.

Drake glared at Chu then returned his full attention to the beast, he yelled, “Hey! What the heck are you doin’?”

The grand advisor said and did nothing.

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Madison turned around startled upon hearing the shrilling noise. She saw right away Drake being attacked and angrily wondered why Chu just stood there. Madison took a step toward them – ready to take off running – when Dwaner stepped in front of her.

“Lady Protector,” said Dwaner at once, “you must let him do this. He must be able to use his own powers for defense. The grand advisor will not let harm come to him.”

She rocked back on her heels and watched nervously.

“*Abraanneyjeed!*” blurted Drake quickly.

The taming spell had no effect; apparently this animated cockatrice was not the weak-minded kind. Drake was unable to remember the invisibility spell but fortunate enough to use the cooling spell, covering his body just in time before the cockatrice tried spitting on him. The disgusting odor from the creature’s spit reeked of putrid acid, Drake gagged from the stench when he turned the spell off.

“Ah, grand advisor, Mr. Chu, I get your point, *okay?*” said Drake completely focused on the crazed animal. “*Please*, call it off!” In sheer panic, he raised a shield with his short-staff as the cockatrice pounced, its fangs still glistened and dripped with poison. After bouncing off the blue-glowing defense the beast howled, enraged, and then started to circle– it noticed Drake was becoming tired.

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“You will only defeat this monster in one way young Dragonkeeper,” stated Chu calmly. “You must do it, and do it now.”

Why isn't Madison or Dwaner helping me? thought Drake dismayed. He wanted to look behind, to see why she had not come to help, but knew it was foolish to turn his back on this thing.

Exhaustion settled in, the cockatrice was incredibly fast and Drake tapped all of his stamina merely to protect himself. He wondered how far the grand advisor would take this – knowing deep down inside Chu would not let him die – but get hurt to learn a lesson, maybe so. Dreading the animal's pointed teeth and razor sharp claws, Drake knew he had no desire being hurt by the thing, none at all.

With the remaining strength he could muster, he concentrated on a dragon to magically assemble. He raised an arm out and splayed his hand, the arm began to tremble. Wispy, white streaks of air appeared twisting around themselves, slowly at first, then faster. They began to dissolve and in their place a shape took form, transparent, then becoming more and more solid. As the shape became fully visible it flared brilliantly for an instant, and then there it was. A conjured dragon! It appeared solid and real, and looked like a Eura, except it was entirely white with a bluish-tint to its still, slightly glowing hide, and it had extraordinary blue eyes, the most beautiful and soothing shade Drake had ever seen, no iris or pupil, just solid blue.

Relieved beyond any measure, in his mind he rapidly formed one word: *ATTACK!*

The conjured dragon attacked the surprised cockatrice. They locked on each other with teeth and claws, violently rolling across the floor like one big ball. Ferociously, they slashed and snapped as each animal tried to gain dominance over the other. The cockatrice kicked off the

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dragon causing it to fall, flailing, on its back. The vicious Cennud sensed an advantage, it jumped into the air coming down upon the dragon with talons extended and fangs aiming for the throat. The dragon looked up calmly, as though it watched the cockatrice move in slow motion, and coolly shot a blast of fiery breath, so hot both the grand advisor and Drake took a step back from the intense heat. The cockatrice was turned into a flaming figure. As the creature was about to land, the dragon rolled away and stood, the conjured Eura blasted it once again with scorching fire. The cockatrice writhed in pain momentarily, then the husk that remained collapsed under the weight of flames.

The dragon stared at Drake and then stood motionless, almost involuntarily Drake willed it to disappear, with a whoosh of air the dragon dissolved into delicate streaks of light that faded as they rose towards the ceiling.

“Well done young Dragonkeeper, well done,” said Chu coming forward. “Now that you know you can do it, you can do it again when needed. We can work on perfecting your technique, as well as your stamina and strength for conjuring dragons as strong as possible.”

Drake felt completely drained, he sat on the floor heavily and said, “Is this how you teach your Dragonkeeper’s? Throwing a savage beast at them and telling ‘em ‘good luck?’”

“Understand Drake,” started Chu evenly, “even one conjured dragon is no match for a real cockatrice or any Cennud. You just saw how much effort it required on your part to dispose this relatively easy, magical one. Good practice, but it will be harder with the flesh and blood versions, trust me.”

“Great, nice to hear,” answered Drake sarcastically.

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“Do not fret,” said the grand advisor, “as you build integrity your powers will grow stronger, as you find the Relic – ” he paused, then continued, “ – *when* you find the Relic, your powers will also increase.”

Drake noticed his stutter, he looked at Chu crossways and was about to say something when Madison and Dwaner reached them. Madison offered her hand and helped Drake to his feet as Dwaner went to stand dutifully beside Chu.

“That was pretty cool, little bro,” said Madison.

“Aye, good job young Dragonkeeper,” added Dwaner.

“Did you control it also?” Madison asked curiously.

Before replying, Drake pondered for a long moment, finally he said, “Yes – in a way.” He paused continuing to recall, then added, “I could sense its thoughts, as if the dragon was allowing me to provide it guidance. Most of the moves were its own, but when it sent that second blast – I thought of it and the dragon just went ahead and did it.” Drake immediately realized something then turned to Chu and asked, “How would I control more than one? I can’t see how that’s possible.”

“Understanding will come with greater ability and ability will come with more training,” said Chu plainly.

“Man...” Drake said shaking his head and chuckling. “I’m ready to sleep for a week!”

The door leading to the southwest anteroom opened without warning – a palace guard entered running and approached them, he seemed harried. The palace guard glanced at everyone in turn and decisively settled on Chu, he said, “Grand advisor, we have two intruders being held in the confinement section of the palace – ”

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“Why disturb our training for this news?” interrupted Dwaner, annoyed. “Can’t the chief guard or one of you handle it?”

“It is *he* who sent me, master-at-arms,” replied the palace guard curtly, “Chief Guard Storg asks that you” – he looked directly at Chu – “be notified, the chief guard deems this a situation the grand advisor must handle.”

“Why?” said Chu evenly.

The palace guard firmly replied, “Because the prisoners are Greylanders *and* claim” – he pointed a finger at Madison and Drake – “to be their parents.”

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CHAPTER 11: Mom and Dad are Mad

Madison made a quick double-take and looked straight at the palace guard, with a touch of fear in her voice she stuttered, “Mom and Dad are – are *here*?”

The palace guard said nothing; he simply stared back at her.

Drake skimmed over the palace map and noted the ‘confinement section’ was actually nearby.

“Oh boy...”

“Take us to Storg,” said Chu to the palace guard.

Leaving the training room, Chu curtly waved a hand and then all conjured creatures, smoldering and otherwise, disappeared.

They were met at the confinement area by the chief guard himself, Lars Storg. A heavy-set man, pot-bellied with a thick, flabby jowl, he was dressed like the palace guards except his sash was green. Absurdly, he carried two swords, one sheathed on each hip almost touching the floor.

“Grand advisor, a security detail found two intruders in the palace, they had come through the same realm portal where Greylanders were found a year ago – they say they’re the young Dragonkeeper’s parents – we must know if they are one and the same.” The chief guard was not known for his pleasantries.

“Please sir, take us to them,” said Chu respectfully.

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Storg led them along a short hall to an unremarkable chamber entrance; it did not look like a jail cell from the outside. As the palace guard that followed them joined two additional guards waiting on either side of the entrance, he unlocked the doors allowing them in, and from the inside, it had no likeness to a jail cell either. Instead, it reminded Drake and Madison of a medium-sized classroom, with stark and dirty paneling, and floors that felt and sounded sticky when they walked in, the cell, or whatever this room was, looked like it had never been cleaned. There were no desks; in their place was a wooden, rectangular table in the center and intricately carved, high-backed chairs positioned all around. Two people sat at the end nearest to the door, at the head sat a woman and on her right sat a man – it was Dr. Candace Clark and Dr. Kenneth Wallace, Mom and Dad. Dr. Clark’s arms were crossed tightly over her chest as she fumed with absolute rage, in contrast, Dr. Wallace plainly looked haggard.

Upon recognizing the grand advisor, Dr. Clark turned in her chair and glared at him furiously, she sneered, “*YOU*, if I could have you arrested for kidnapping I would!” Then she turned her withering glare at Drake and Madison, “And *you two*, do you have *any*” – she strongly emphasized the word ‘any’ – “idea how worried sick your father and I have been these past couple of days?!”

Drake and Madison said nothing, they knew better than to answer.

Dr. Clark resumed, “You don’t leave a note, or a message on the phone – ” she looked directly at Madison “ – I expect *you* to be more responsible than that!” After a forceful breath in then out she added, “Do you know how we found out...*hmm?*”

A deathly silence fell over the room, even the grand advisor knew it was best to keep quite.

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“When your friends called asking for you,” said Dr. Clark, seething, “they said they saw your car at the park earlier in the day. We went and retrieved it wondering the entire time why your car was there to begin with.”

“Uh, that’s how we got here,” interjected Drake quietly, “one of the pillars has a realm portal.”

“I should’ve known!” Dr. Wallace said, snapping his fingers. “The original settlement is hundreds of years old, even though those pillars haven’t been there that long I’m certain there’s a connection.” He looked at his wife and placed a hand to his forehead, he added, “Oh my...we could have saved ourselves a whole lot of trouble.”

Dr. Clark grimaced irritably and shook her head at her husband, she continued, “Once we accepted you weren’t coming home, it was obvious where you two had gone. Your father and I then booked the next available flight to Portugal. Mind you,” – she took a deep breath and with clenched teeth resumed – “the flight was delayed two hours *and* we ended up lying to the director at the Old University. We needed to get access to the ruins – so we told him we wanted to take some pictures for our summer courses. He found it suspicious that we didn’t have a camera but we quickly lied some more telling him we were buying one in town.”

“B-But Mom,” said Madison hesitantly, “you didn’t have to do all that. We’re here, we’re safe.”

“And what exactly did you expect me to do?” Dr. Clark retorted indignantly. “Just *wait*? Or should I have called the police telling them my children went off with a strange man to some place in another world or dimension? Ha!”

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“Mom, I’m so sorry,” shrilled Madison, “I know I should’ve contacted you beforehand, but we simply got caught up in all this – ” she lifted her hands and looked around.

“Oh, please, save it for someone else, little miss. I don’t want to hear it. You two go wandering off with this man – and *you* know better. How could you?”

“Dr. Clark, your children came here all by themselves,” said Chu very disarmingly. “They were not forced and most certainly not kidnapped.”

Standing up from her chair, sheer fury and hatred in her eyes, Dr. Clark menacingly approached the grand advisor.

The chief guard stepped forward in an attempt to place himself between Chu and the Greylander woman.

“Aye,” began Dwaner, headed for Dr. Clark, he raised one hand as though motioning her to stop, “now let’s keep our wits about us.”

Dr. Wallace stood up as well and placed a hand on his wife’s shoulder, he tenderly said, “Candace...honey...”

Remaining quite unaffected, Chu coolly raised a hand to halt Storg’s and Dwaner’s advance.

“You’ve pumped all this insane craziness into their heads about final Dragonkeepers, Protectors, and an Evil One,” said Dr. Clark angrily at Chu, she had stopped moving forward at her husband’s touch. Her eyes began to water holding back tears, she added, “Telling them prophecies and putting rings on them that for all we know are tricked.” She now began holding back deep sobs and rambled, “Bringing them to where ever this place is, telling them they have a

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destiny to fulfill, to go on this quest for some Relic, to a place called Vesperik. This is not going to happen!”

Both Drake and Madison this time made a double-take, Drake asked, “Whoever said we were going to Vesperik?” They remembered the map and how it showed Vesperik was a continent west of the Dragonkeeper’s Palace, across the Sea of Caslis.

The grand advisor turned his head slightly in surprise, he then curiously gazed at Dr. Clark. Quite the opposite, Dwaner and Storg seemed absolutely clueless to what she had said.

With all eyes upon her, Dr. Clark burst uncontrollably into tears and began heaving loud sobs. Dr. Wallace grasped her and then held her lovingly as both Drake and Madison came to their side.

After a few minutes (and several handkerchiefs provided by Dwaner) Dr. Clark composed herself but then behaved withdrawn. She acted as though she struggled to make an important decision.

“Candace, why don’t you tell them about your – your *dream*?” Dr. Wallace said softly to his wife as he now stood beside her. “It might help explain your fears.”

Dr. Clark glanced self-consciously at her husband, her reddened eyes emphasized the uneasy feeling she felt inside. Distantly, she bobbed her head in agreement. Wiping her eyes and then blowing her nose, she calmed herself further with a ragged and sobbing breath. Facing everyone, in particular her children, she told them about her dream as if nearly spellbound...

The dream happened about six to nine months before Dr. Clark and Dr. Wallace discovered the realm portal at the Conimbriga Ruins. It was more vivid, more outwardly real than any other dream she had ever experienced. Alone in a vast and darkened room, she was

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dressed in a brilliantly white gown, barefoot, and she glowed. She felt happy, absolutely elated to be there. Then she felt the presence of someone or something else in the room. It was a young child. He or she, Dr. Clark was unable to tell, seemed about eight years old, bald with no eyebrows, and was also dressed in a brilliantly white gown. The child glowed as well and had the most beautiful, captivating smile she had ever seen anyone display. The child revealed a story to her through images and feelings of events that were to come – but not in her world – somewhere else.

“This child told me – no, *showed* me – about evil in this somewhere world,” said Dr. Clark musingly, “evil that if left unchecked would permeate into mine. These images and feelings were very disturbing and frightening.”

Upon hearing this, Madison’s instantly choked up remembering her own horrible visions; a painful, heartbreaking feeling went out to her mother. The Lady Protector had nearly begun crying when she walked over to her mother and placed a comforting arm across her shoulders. Drake, eerily reminded of Madison’s reaction to her own visions, had comforted both of them by placing his arms around each.

Answering their hugs, Dr. Clark lovingly tapped her children’s arms as if to say she was fine, they released her and both took a half step back as she said, “It’s okay guys, it’s alright. Actually, I was suddenly happy again when the child showed me how all this could be prevented...by my children. You guys, my son and my daughter. You would be the ones to save this somewhere world, and by default, mine.

“But I fought and argued with these images, I told this child, ‘No, not *my* children, *why* them? There must be another way.’ Then an answer came, it was simple and yet compassionate,

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I was plainly told ‘There is no other way, it is the only way.’ Right after that the dream ended abruptly...”

To everyone that listened, it was obvious she had more to disclose. They waited while she mulled over her words. Appearing slightly embarrassed by what she was about to say – was actually compelled to say – she continued, “I had a powerful feeling afterwards, a desire to stay right where I was, with the child, amongst that overwhelming feeling of peacefulness and joy...” Dr. Clark trailed off in thought.

“Do you remember any more details about your dream?” Chu asked with a strangely urgent tone.

“There were so many images and thoughts, and they came so fast,” said Dr. Clark, rubbing her forehead, “but I do remember the child saying Vesperik is where the quest begins, that stuck in my mind – I had no idea where there was a ‘Vesperik.’”

“It’s one of the continents of this world,” interjected Drake for his mother, “similar to North America in location, sort of, but shaped much differently.”

“As you can see,” said Dr. Wallace to Drake and Madison, “this is why your mother’s been on edge since Mr. Chu showed up at our door step.” He placed a hand on her back, tenderly, then stared at her with a disapproving smile and added, “I just found out about this – dream – the night you two disappeared.”

“Mom, you’ve known about this,” said Madison as she aimlessly waved a hand in the air, “all of this, for almost two years now and didn’t say anything – not even to Dad?”

“What did you expect me to do?” replied Dr. Clark slightly defensive. “Come up to your father and tell him our children are destined to save the world, just not ours? I’m so scared for

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you, I simply couldn't let you do it – there *had* to be another way – maybe there's someone *else...*" She turned to Chu and looked hopeful.

An awkward silence ensued, eventually the grand advisor flatly said, "But you realize now there is no other way, there is no one else." He declared this more as a statement than question.

"Ya, sure," replied Dr. Clark tersely, "but it doesn't make accepting it any easier. Some of the visions I saw were scary." She paused remembering something else and said, "However, I do faintly recall the child saying my kids would be safe in the end – but *changed*. That also sticks in my mind and concerns me. What did 'changed' mean?" – she raised her hands exasperated – "I never got an answer."

"But Mom," said Madison happily, "this is great news. We're already *changed* – both Drake and I." She turned and faced the grand advisor, with an eager expression she pointedly asked, "Aren't we Mr. Chu?"

The grand advisor nodded, but his face hid his lack of complete agreement.

Madison readily showed her parents a small portion of what she could do, some of which was done very carefully with the help of Dwaner. Playfully, Drake showed off the invisibility spell, he sneaked up behind his parents while unseen and grabbed them unexpectedly. Needless to say, Mom and Dad were scared out of their wits, but once they realized what had truly happened they were astonished.

"So you see Mom, we've already had the *change* you were told about," said Madison. "Everything should work out in the end." Once more, she looked expectantly at the grand advisor and asked "Right, Mr. Chu?"

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After a barely noticeable delay, the grand advisor said, “Of course, it should.”

Dwaner stepped forward proudly, all of the almost five feet of him, and saluted Dr. Clark, his gleaming grey-eyes bored into her, and he said, “Aye, mother of Dragonkeeper and Protector, when the people and races of Olden Terra learn of your dream it will further prove your children’s rightful place in the Realm of Faerie.”

“The Child that granted you the dream is a being we call the Child of the Light.” Chu said, adding to Dwaner’s statement. “This being has only spoken or given visions to a select few in this world, and I suspect now in your world as well. Once proven, you will be revered and your children will garner greater respect and admiration as an outcome.”

“Mom, you’ve raised us for this,” said Drake respectfully. “You taught us to be caring and courteous to others, to help fight for good causes – this is a good cause. Dad always kids you about ‘saving the world one person at a time.’ Let us save this world in return.”

Watching Drake speak so passionately had made Dr. Clark view her son in a new light. It occurred to her that he seemed much more mature and older than his age of fifteen years. *Changed*, maybe? She reached out and tightly hugged him. She motioned for Madison to join and hugged her fiercely as well.

Dr. Clark held Madison’s face softly in her hands, tears streamed from her eyes as she joyfully cried and said, “Mady, you look after your brother, you’re his Protector – *so protect him.*”

“I will, Mom.”

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“Mr. Dwaner,” said Dr. Clark, releasing her children and turning to the Dvergar, “I don’t know why, but I have a sense that you’ll be on this quest. May I ask you to please, *please*, watch over Madison?”

“I assure you mother of Dragonkeeper and Protector,” replied Dwaner strongly, “that I and my fellow Dvergars will fight and protect them both with our lives – at this you have my solemn word.” He bobbed his head punctuating the undeniable resolve imprinted on his face.

Dr. Clark regarded him and genuinely smiled – she thought to herself how he was the shortest person in the room – but at this moment he stood taller than anyone she had ever met. This small man’s statement was hugely heartfelt and without any doubt, sincere. Her eyes watered.

“Thank you, Mr. Dwaner, thank you very much.”

The Wallace family embraced each other in one big, group hug. Sniffles were heard all the way around.

Clearing his throat, the grand advisor tactfully said, “Well then, I imagine there may be friends or colleagues that might be looking for you, or are wondering were you have disappeared too?”

“Ah...I imagine so,” said Dr. Wallace, glancing at his wife, “at the very least our Portuguese colleagues may be questioning where we are.”

“Chief Guard Storg,” said Chu, “may I ask you to please escort Dr. Clark and Dr. Wallace back to the realm portal?”

“One of my men waiting outside will take them,” replied Storg.

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“If it’s okay, we’ll follow them as far as the palace portal,” said Drake, “so we can say ‘goodbye.’”

The grand advisor nodded once and said, “Doctor’s, we will try to keep you updated with the status of our quest, as best we can.”

“Thank you,” said Dr. Clark.

“Of course,” said Dr. Wallace, “we’ll wait to hear from you, thanks.”

Escorted out of the room and into the hallway, the Wallace family talked lively among each other as they set off to the palace portal. Mom and Dad shared the details of their travel story while Drake and Madison listened and asked questions. Drake and Madison were last heard excitedly telling their parents about the unbelievable things they had seen so far in their short time here.

“So, is she correct?” Dwaner asked the grand advisor. “Will I be going on this journey? And is it really to Vesperik?” The tone in his voice sounded concerned.

“In truth,” started Chu, “I *was* going to ask that you join the group. And yes, her dream was correct, I was told by Jiro the quest would begin in Vesperik, with the Amphithear’s clan.”

“Aye...*that* is why we have the other two involved.”

“I wish we were dealing with one of the believing clans, but we are not. We will have to deal with the Amphithears, and do so carefully and diplomatically.”

They both moved towards the door to leave.

“Please get with Straddleham or Leemstey,” resumed the grand advisor, “tell them only that we are ready to begin the quest. Have them get the others prepared to meet the final

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Dragonkeeper and his Protector, tomorrow.” He placed a firm hand on Dwaner’s shoulder and added, “Have them immediately begin preparations to go to Vesperik.”

Dwaner agreed and without delay took his leave from Chu.

The grand advisor wondered about the ‘changed’ Dr. Clark had mentioned as he watched Dwaner move swiftly, farther and farther away. He knew full-well this only applied to the final Dragonkeeper, and he suspected Drake had not undergone this ‘changed’ anyhow.

In fact, he didn’t really know what the change was, and suspected he’d never know – only the final Dragonkeeper would – and only when the time came. However, he was deeply convinced it had nothing to do with performing magic spells or conjuring dragons.

What he did know was he was racked with guilt for being less than forthcoming on so many details, to the point of lying, and for this he was truly sorry. But now was not the time for them to understand– that would come later. The quest desperately needed to begin, and after tomorrow’s meeting, they could get started in earnest.

The worries and concerns for the whole Realm of Faerie were on his shoulders as he quietly walked back to his chamber.

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CHAPTER 12: The Evil One's Plan

From a large, golden chalice, he drank zealously of a dark-crimson colored liquid. Leaning back, relaxed on his cold, granite throne, the sickeningly sweet smell of the drink electrified him. He felt incredible power course through his body while slurping the last drops of the thick fluid into his mouth.

Alone in his dimly lit throne room, except for the monkaat that slept by his side and the perfectly still personal guards, he eagerly meditated, *Father, I feel getting stronger by the day. Soon I will have the power to release him.*

The power you feel is not even capable of lighting a candle, Fool! The Father of the Marag replied. *You will need more dragons and time before you can release my weapon.*

Yes, of course my Father.

What of the young Dragonkeeper and his companion?

My spy last reported they still remain in the palace. We are waiting for the coronation, or afterwards, when he makes his public appearances to crush him.

Slave, make sure to kill him soon. Do not let me down or you will face the fate of my last servant, or better yet – worse.

Hifearnan shuddered, recalling what he knew of the fate. He had no intention of reaching *that* horrible outcome, or any other.

As you command my Father, as you command...

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Cruthlum entered the room, unannounced, shaped in its favorite human form – the bearded, lead palace servant – wearing a smug expression of superiority on its face. It arrogantly pushed its way past Hifearnan’s personal guards, the Anura frogs, causing a couple of them to stumble and clank shields. The monkaat beside the Evil One jumped wildly in its cage upon sensing it. Several of the frogs motioned to restrain it, but they pulled back frightened noticing it was the viperinor

During this commotion, Iseen artfully slinked into the room and watched the viperinor with veiled despise. He was utterly infuriated at how the shape-shifter nastily moved around showing no respect for the Dragonslaver. How to turn Hifearnan’s opinion against the creature and thereby the Evil One’s need for it, Iseen madly wondered about once again. The cockatrice thought, *As soon as I can do this, I will slay it immediately...*

“What is it servant advisors?” Hifearnan said, sounding irritated. “Why do you come now to disturb me?”

Iseen bowed humbly before Hifearnan and said, “My Tighearn Dragonslaver, we have received news from our palace spy. The Dragonkeeper and his companion will soon be on the move.”

“Has a coronation taken place yet?” quizzed Hifearnan.

“No, my Tighearn,” replied Iseen. “They are on the move to Vesperik to meet with the worthless Amphithear’s king and queen.”

“Why would they be leaving the palace compound before a coronation...?” the Evil One questioned out loud, almost speaking to himself.

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“It is the *Prophecy*,” interjected Cruthlum urgently, “it has been fulfilled. They are now in search of the Relic.”

Hifearnan stood instantly enraged. Angrily flicking the excess of his cloak behind his back, but careful to put down the chalice he held, the black serpent painted on his breastplate seemed to writhe menacingly as he roared, “THERE IS NO PROPHECY, MY *ADVISOR*.” – he dipped the word ‘advisor’ in heavy sarcasm while furiously contorting his face– “HOW MANY TIMES MUST I STATE THIS – IT IS ONLY A MYTH!” He passed his fingers through his hair trying not to lose his patience further, and added, “Clearly, Jiro has not died – they must be building the young Dragonkeeper’s integrity with these visits to the stupid kings and queens of the clans – *that* is the only answer!”

Around the throne room, Hifearnan’s personal guards shifted uneasily where they stood. Mostly in fear they might be asked to seize the viperinor.

“Yes, Dragonslaver,” replied Cruthlum, trying very hard to hide its frustration, “this truly must be the case.” The changeling’s eyes were ablaze with anger.

“Iseen,” began Hifearnan, “do you know when they’ll be leaving?”

The cockatrice grinned viciously at Cruthlum, delighted that Hifearnan harshly rejected the viperinor’s suggestion, he replied, “An exact date? No. But soon, very soon. It seems they are gathering a diplomatic group, before they visit the Amphithears.”

“Cruthlum!” barked Hifearnan. “Is your colleague ready?”

The shape-shifter changed its head to that of a cockatrice leaving its body from the neck down unchanged, it shrieked, “At a moment’s notice.” The hideously shaped Cruthlum glared at

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both Hifearnan and Iseen, then spat to the ground in the cockatrice's direction. The saliva fizzed and bubbled eating away a hole into the floor.

“Well then,” stated Hifearnan, he winced at the grotesque form held by Cruthlum and then turned his gaze to the cockatrice, still looking disgusted, the Evil One continued, “Iseen, make sure the colleague gets an – *opportunity* – at this so-called ‘diplomatic group.’” There was clear disdain in his voice when he finished speaking.

“As you wish, my Tighearn,” said Iseen. The cockatrice considered returning a spit in kind, in Cruthlum's direction, but decided differently, instead he exchanged another dangerous smile with the viperinor, this time dripping with venom, and added, “I will make sure an opportunity is given and then taken.”

With a measured tone of warning to his voice, Hifearnan said, “Ensure the colleague first brings the Dragonkeeper boy here. I want to kill him, *myself*. The rest of the group can then be eliminated however best preferred.” He paused while arranging his cloak to sit down, careful to not tip over his cup. Once seated, he then looked up at the ceiling, dreamily, then returned his gaze once more at Iseen and intensely resumed, “Also, as an added measure, notify our servants in Vesperik this group is coming. Let them know that crushing the group will be greatly rewarded by their Dragonslaver.”

“As you wish, my Tighearn,” screeched Iseen, bowing. The cockatrice quickly exited the room after extending its bony crest and flapping its wings at the viperinor. Both mannerisms used by cockatrices as intimidation.

Cruthlum began to leave as well (a deadly look in its eye as it watched after Iseen) when Hifearnan stopped him, the Dragonslaver said, “Let your colleague know that if he is successful

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he will join my council – I’m sure you’d like a friend in harassing Iseen?” The Evil One leaned forward as he said this, enticingly he smiled and nodded.

The changeling slowly altered its head, contorting it into repulsive shapes until finally it was back to the original human form for the body below, it replied, “Dragonslaver, I will let my colleague know –” it shrugged “– maybe it will be viewed as added motivation.” Cruthlum’s human face glared back at the Evil One with a noticeable smirk.

Hifearnan’s expression changed to one of confusion. He wasn’t sure if the viperinor had just been snide with him.

“However, I think I’ll leave the harassing fun for *me*,” added Cruthlum. The viperinor dismissed himself, leaving the same direction in which it entered. As it approached the throne room’s exit, the frogs made a wide path, stepping away several feet and appearing very wary as the changeling walked out. The monkaat jumped even more violently as the viperinor exited the room, almost knocking its cage off the black pedestal on which it rested.

Watching his personal guards cower away from Cruthlum, Hifearnan, out of frustration over the shape-shifter’s lack of respect, banged the top of the cage quieting down the monkaat at once. The little creature remained silent and still, knowing not to press its luck.

That accursed monster will become a problem sooner than I had feared, thought the Dragonslaver, dismayed. *I need its help but I cannot keep it around too long, it is becoming less fearful of my authority. I may have to destroy it before its usefulness has worn out.*

Mustering as much commanding authority as he could, he called after Cruthlum and said, “You are dismissed servant advisor...And announce yourself next time...!” He thought he heard a distant cackle.

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Hifearnan leaned back on his granite throne, musing idly and shaking his head, irritated. He composed himself quickly, for he knew speaking to Father in an angry mood was not a good idea. Closing his sinister, white-pupiled black-eyes, he meditated, *The plan has been set in motion my Father, just as you commanded. I hope you are pleased...*

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CHAPTER 13: The Dvergar, The Gremlin, and The Gurgola

Late last night, Madison and Drake were told by the grand advisor to attend a meeting next morning at a chamber beside the Dragonkeeper Training room. It was at this time they discovered Chu's bed chamber was the room neighboring Drake's. The grand advisor made a point and expressed to them the importance of this gathering: Meeting the members of their group traveling with them to visit the Amphithear's king and queen, and to also collect the Relic. Chu respectfully reminded them to please hurry along after breakfast and get to the meeting room soon afterwards.

The next morning, after another hot bath and hearty breakfast (Drake was starting to get the hang of bathing – but he still missed his shower) they met each other in front of Drake's door. Given the impression this meeting was of utmost importance, Madison and Drake decided to forego casual clothes and dressed formally. Madison wore a beautiful, nearly floor-length jupon gown that caught her eye hanging in the closet. The body of the gown was of rich velvet, navy-blue in color, while the sleeves were loose fitting and off-white. She put her hair down curly and very pretty, and in case she needed to move around fast she wore the dancer-shoes, even though they didn't quite match with the gown. Out of his closet, Drake chose a brocade doublet with diamond-shaped patterns along both sides of the chest and down the length of both sleeves. A thin, black belt matched the black pants and shiny boots he also wore. He thought this was a good opportunity to wear his Dragonkeeper cloak, draping over his shoulders with the hood down and clasped with the silver dragon brooch. Each with their staff in hand, Drake led the way using the library map only he could bring to life.

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Trudging down the long, echoing halls of the palace, morning rays sloped in through tall windows casting enormous spots of sunlight onto the floor. Walking through these areas of alternating shade and light, Madison passed the time by practicing with her bowstaff. The Lady Protector created a shield, then turned it off, created another differently shaped shield, then turned it off. This continued for some time – on, off, on, off, on, off...to the point of monotony.

“Would you quit it?” Drake said slightly annoyed.

“You’re just jealous ‘cause you can’t do it,” said Madison.

“No, that stuff I can do pretty good,” said Drake half-jokingly, “it’s the rest of it I’m havin’ problems with.”

“Well, if you’d practice instead of spending half the night reading.”

“How’d you know I was...? You *spying* on me?”

“I’m supposed to know smart one, remember, I’m your Protector – I followed you to the library then back to your room. What did you read anyway?”

“Boy...your good,” said Drake, impressed. “I didn’t even know I was followed. Anyhow, I was looking for history on Glicemax and the Dragon’s Eye. Found plenty on the old dragon – precious little on the Relic.”

“What’cha learn about Glicemax?”

“There was one thing that was most interesting – he had become a de facto ruler at one point. It happened during that long stretch of time, you know, the one after Meltyn but before Raiko. Glicemax made decisions that were unpopular with the clans Chu calls the doubting one’s, but were well received by the others.”

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“So basically, he was a politician,” scoffed Madison. “Hated by doubters and loved by the believers. Imagine that...” She paused a moment and added, “Did you read anything about where he disappeared too? Have there been any ‘Elvis’ or rather Glicemax sightings?” She tried to sound humorous while vividly recalling the visions from a few days ago, how she sensed the dragon was still alive.

Drake knew what she was getting at, having experienced the same images, he responded, “Nothing like that. He hasn’t been seen or heard of since that day, and that was five hundred years ago.”

An unspoken agreement passed between them, one where they each understood the other accepted as fact Glicemax was somehow still alive. Where? They did not know. What they did know was from their visions – regardless of how Glicemax was viewed by a particular clan he was, for the most part, considered the wisest and most insightful dragon to ever live. Then why during this time of strife wasn’t he making himself known once more? This one point distinctly troubled them.

“I also tried getting into the museum again,” said Drake. “But of course, it was locked nice and tight.”

“I know little bro,” said Madison, “I was watchin’.” She regarded him puckishly for a moment and added, “I saw you trying to place a spell on the door, attempting to get in – you should’ve seen yourself, it was hilarious.” She laughed.

“Not funny,” grumbled Drake, as he felt his ears burn.

Madison laughed even harder, “Yeah, really it was.”

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They reached the meeting room and entered. Already attending were the grand advisor, Dwaner, Straddleham, and Leemstey. The grand advisor, dressed in his formal, emerald-green Mandarin suit, bowed slightly greeting them. Wearing a green cape over top his woolen, red tunic, Dwaner thumped his right-fist to his chest (saluting in the Dvergar way) causing his sword to rattle by his side. Straddleham wore an even more lavish surcoat than the first time they saw him, it was diagonally bi-colored in red and white, split at the legs up the front and back. He nodded once without a word and watched them carefully with his heavy-lidded eyes. With a quick wink and a flashy smile, Leemstey welcomed them. Dressed in a dark-grey, long-sleeved tunic, the assistant clerk looked more relaxed than ever.

The chamber they were in was a formal meeting room, very spacious and elaborately decorated with colorful crests and coat-of-arms hanging along the walls. They immediately recognized the crests as matching those attached to the lecterns inside the Council of Dragon's. From the ceiling hung three, small enchanted chandeliers, each burning eight shining candles arranged in an octagon. Situated in the center of the room was a large table, essentially rectangular in shape but curved out, down the long sides. Made of dark-cherry wood, the thick sides were intricately carved with dragon heads and the shapes of other beasts. Heavy looking chairs were pushed in under the table top, beautifully carved along the back- and arm-rests in braided patterns of circles, squares, triangles, and other geometric shapes. One chair, at the far head of the table, was obviously larger and a lighter shade than the rest.

“Welcome everyone,” started Chu. “I have requested you here to introduce the group proposed for the Dragonkeeper” – he looked at Drake – “to go in recovery of, of...” He tailed

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off searching for the correct words, as though not wanting to disclose something in particular, he then cautiously continued, "...of—the—Dragon's Eye, of course."

Drake took note of Chu hesitating then glanced at his sister's dismayed face, he thought, *He we go – again – he's keeping something from us.* At the same time, Drake became somewhat nervous as the grand advisor apparently treated *him* in a position of higher authority.

Chu motioned for Drake to take the light-colored chair at the table's far end. The young Dragonkeeper did so, bashfully, as all eyes were upon him.

"Oh, stop it," said Madison shaking her head, "you know you're enjoying this."

The grand advisor then beckoned Madison to take the chair on Drake's right. She strolled over in an inflated, snobbish manner, primly raising a hand while taking long, exaggerated steps. Drake covered his mouth, chuckling under his breath as she sat down.

"Now who's enjoying this?" he breathed to her.

Chu and Straddleham picked chairs in no obvious order of rank; Leemstey, however, remained standing by an empty chair beside the chief clerk.

"Assistant clerk, please allow the group to enter," said Chu.

Leemstey walked over to a door, different than the one Madison and Drake came in from. He opened it and stepped halfway out.

"You may come in now."

What entered was the motliest group of individuals Madison or Drake could ever have imagined.

Entering first was another Dvergar, slightly taller than Dwaner but pudgier. His disposition seemed less serious than Dwaner's as he sauntered in into the room wearing the silliest grin.

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This Dvergar's hair was more blonde than Dwaner's but completely unkempt like his thick, scraggly mustache and beard. His wide eyes contrasted with the rough features of his body giving his face a very innocent and childlike look. Dressed in a wrinkled, red vest overtop a white shirt that had never been bleached clean, he wore stiff-looking tan trousers with ground-in dirt marks at the knees. He wore boots that were old and awfully scuffed, tied in the same crisscross pattern they had seen Dwaner use, but these laces were on really tight – Madison and Drake could see his calves bulge between the laces. The Dvergar obsessively caressed the right-side of his moustache, stroking it with alternating wipes of his fore-finger and thumb, and sometimes his middle-finger. Then, a small, furry creature zipped in quickly, even though it had large cat-like ears they had barely seen it over the table. After it took a seat, they looked at it curiously and by golly, the little creature did seem familiar. However, what entered next, instantly grabbed their attention away from the thought. It was a Gurgola. This was only the second Gurgola they had ever seen, but Madison and Drake both imagined there could never be a fiercer looking one. It was lean but thickly muscled with a glare that appeared etched to its face. Completely grey in color, it had sharp spurs on the back of its knees and dreadfully pointed wings topped off with a single, hooked claw. They noticed it only had three fingers and one opposable thumb, each ending in sharp talons it could extend and retract at will. The wing-like ears, and two horns sticking out of its head, devil-like, gave it a somewhat frightening appearance. The Gurgola aimlessly twitched its long and thin tail which ended in a spiky, arrow-like shape. Getting past its frightening features, Madison and Drake clearly saw it carried itself with poise and authority. It went straight to the chair at the opposite head of the table and sat

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down. Deliberately, the Gurgola glanced around the room with its intelligent, green eyes, ultimately settling on Drake.

“Please sit down,” said Chu to the still standing Dvergar and Leemstey.

Leemstey sat next to Straddleham while the Dvergar pulled a chair beside Dwaner.

The Dvergar began patting Dwaner on the back, vigorously, then grabbed the master-at-arms by the shoulders playfully shaking him. It was a strange and awkward greeting. Dwaner looked embarrassed and nodded his head as he gestured for the Dvergar to sit down right away.

“Master-at-arms, please introduce the Dvergar, the gremlin, and the Gurgola,” said Chu, “to the young Dragonkeeper and Lady Protector.”

“The Dvergar here, beside me,” said Dwaner rather stiffly, “is my blood-brother, Dween. He’s an excellent tracker and is even better with the Dvergar-hammer. His skills will serve us well.”

Dween smiled wide and toothy (with teeth that seemed too big for his mouth) bobbing his head slightly as he tirelessly stroked the right-side of his moustache.

“Next is the gremlin, Trilly,” continued Dwaner, “who I think you’ve already met. Is that so?”

“Oh, yeah...” said Drake, “that’s why you look familiar. We met you in the palace garden.”

“Have you been surprising anyone lately?” asked Madison dryly.

“No, not really,” replied Trilly with a smile. “You two were the last ones.” She giggled.

“Trilly is known for being very adept at getting into and out of tight places,” added Dwaner. “She’s also good at building and constructing things, if not better, than tearing them

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apart. Also, gremlins are good at sensing the viperinor in their presence. This ability alone will come in useful.”

Trilly giggled again, but nervously.

“And finally, seated at the other head of the table is...” said Dwaner trailing off. He paused momentarily staring at the Gurgola, who simply returned the stare without blinking. Something silently exchanged between the two and Dwaner resumed, “...is a...Gurgola clan representative, his name is Rockford. He has diplomatic experience with his northern neighbors, the Amphithears. Rockford is what you would call ‘athletic,’ he is considered one of the strongest and fastest of his kind. His experience and talents will benefit us greatly.”

“Thank you, master-at-arms,” said Chu, he then looked at Drake. “It is my advice you accept them as your group, along with Dwaner, in recovery of the Relic.”

Everybody turned and faced Drake.

The young Dragonkeeper blushed. Caught off guard he stupidly looked back at everyone then stuttered, “Ah, um...okay.”

Madison dropped her head into a hand and shook it. She leaned to Drake and whispered, “Hey, next time try to sound regal or something.”

“Sure, I’ll try to remember that,” groused Drake under his breath.

“*This* is the final Dragonkeeper of prophecy?” said the Gurgola at once. “And the Protector is a *female*? There must be a mistake.” The dragon glanced irritably at the ceiling. “May the Light help us!”

“What’s your problem, pal?” said Madison, offended. “We’re here helping *you* out, not the other way around.”

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“Ah, a feisty one this female” sneered Rockford. He laughed that low guttural laugh of dragons. The Gurgola abruptly composed himself and addressed the master-at-arms in Dragon Runes, he coldly said, “Is she any good?”

“She can hold her own,” replied Dwaner in Dragon Runes as well. “Although she is still raw, with more experience she’ll give you a tough time.”

Rockford glanced at Madison and laughed heartily, then flippantly said, “Yeah, right, I look forward to it.”

“You don’t have to wait to long dragon,” said Madison angrily. “We can take this to the training room and find out soon enough.” She gripped her bowstaff tightly glaring at the Gurgola.

“Oh, look, how precious,” mocked Rockford, “she knows the language.” He looked at Chu and added, “You may want to *advise* her that the young Dragonkeeper won’t be of any use. I’m not quite submitting to him at the moment.” The Gurgola stood up menacingly, extending his talons and flexing his muscles.

“Please...Rockford,” said Chu coolly, “I respectfully request your forgiveness of the Lady Protector. As you know, she is not familiar with our ways.” Chu turned a frown upon Madison and continued, “Lady Protector, believe me when I say you are no match for the distinguished Gurgola. I ask that you please apologize.”

Madison’s eyes shifted from Chu then to Rockford. Seeing the powerfully muscled dragon standing there, ready to take her up on her challenge, savoring it actually, Madison increasingly recognized it was probably not a good idea. Through slightly gritted teeth, grudgingly she said,

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“Please forgive me...ah, distinguished representative of the Gurgola’s, I apologize.” Not knowing what else to do she bowed her head.

Listening to the apology, even though forced as it was, Rockford realized if the Dragonkeeper was half as tough as his Protector then they actually might have a chance at being successful after all.

Relaxing and then moving to sit back down, the dragon smiled at Madison, “Don’t worry Chu, I wouldn’t have hurt her...too much.”

Madison visibly fumed at the dragon’s words. She was not the type of person who backed down from any fight. She had taken on men bigger and stronger than her, and won. As menacing and dangerous as the Gurgola appeared, Madison was confident in her old abilities and her new found ones as well. She could take him on and was certain she would surprise the cocky dragon. But a voice of reason entered her head. This was not about her – this was all about her brother. Madison recalled Chu’s earlier words, how she needed to do everything possible to support and assist her brother with the dragon clans. Picking fights and getting into them was certainly not the way to go about it.

The Gurgola (and everyone else for that matter) watched closely as the Dragonkeeper’s Protector became angered then saw her expression soften as she remained quietly seated. The chair creaked as Rockford bent forward, placing his arms and elbows on the table. Softening his expression in return, in a business-like tone he said, “Lady Protector, *you* must show us, the dragons, respect, *not* the other way around. If so, we will return the same in kind if not greater. Your grand advisor should have told you that.” He leaned back and added, “I accept your apology, but do not confuse this for weakness. Although I am impressed with your spirit, and

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can only hope the Dragonkeeper's is as good, this disrespect should *never* happen again, understood?"

With the collective room holding its breath, Madison replied, "Yes, and thank you." She respectfully tipped her head toward the dragon.

"Whew!" said Trilly with her mischievous eyes upon Madison. "I was afraid you were going to argue with him. You know – " she giggled " – you should *never* bicker with a Gurgola."

"Oh, shut up," snapped Madison, the giggling had gotten on her nerves. "No one asked you for your opinion."

"Lady *Protector*," hissed Straddleham, as though he was the one offended, "it would do you well to show respect to all members of the group, not only the distinguished dragon."

"Yeah, sis," said Drake in a low voice, "let's try not ticking everyone off."

"Alright, alright," said Madison somewhat defensively, she then looked straight at Trilly, "I'm sorry, it was...good advice, thanks."

"No worries, no need to apologize," chuckled Trilly. "I have a bad habit of saying things that irritate people. Just can't help myself." She squirmed and snickered in her chair.

"Yah, happy too serva te finol Dragoonkiper oond ees Prootector," said the Dvergar Dween unexpectedly, he had moved his hand away from his face. "Eet oon hoonor foo te Dvergoor. Wen coon wee getsk soomtrin too eatsk?" He resumed caressing his moustache with fore-finger and thumb.

"What the heck did he say?" asked Madison to no one in particular.

"I think he said he wanted something to eat?" Drake replied, unsure.

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“Dween said he is happy to serve you and your sister,” said Dwaner, trying to control his temper, “that it’s an honor for the Dvergar.” The master-at-arms turned angrily in his chair toward Dween and growled, “You just had a huge breakfast! I told you we’d get something *after* the meeting. Do not ask again!”

“Dwaner, you said he was your ‘blood-brother,’” said Madison, with a curious expression. “Is that just a term-of-endearment or is he actually related to you?” Madison eyes shifted back and forth, from one to the other, she then smiled and added, “I think I now see a resemblance.”

“We Dvergar consider ourselves brothers and sisters to each other,” said Dwaner, after calming himself, his face though still grimaced. “This sense of family is what makes us strong. If we have the same mother and father then we call each other blood-brother or blood-sister. Dween and I have the same mother and father.”

“Why does he talk that way?” interjected Drake.

“My blood-brother has rarely left the northern wild-country that we’re from,” said Dwaner, “as you can see.”

Madison and Drake looked over at Dween, silently agreeing. The pudgy Dvergar grinned stupidly and nodded his head several times, still caressing the right-side of his scruffy moustache.

“Although he can speak your language and Dragon Runes,” added Dwaner, “he obviously does so with a thick, Dvergar accent. Unless you’re used to it, it can be difficult to follow.”

“You know that accent reminds me of something back home,” mused Madison. “What was it...? Something about a chef...”

“Did you used to talk this way?” Drake asked curiously.

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“Aye, even worse,” replied Dwaner.

“I see this is going to end well,” said Rockford cynically. “We have a gremlin that can’t stop giggling, one Dvergar that we plain can’t understand, a disrespectful Protector, and – ” the dragon glanced at Drake, unimpressed “ – a boy Dragonkeeper with no integrity.” He sighed heavily. “Who else is part of this *elite group*? Don’t tell me it’s one of you soft-skins coming along.” The Gurgola swept a taloned hand that included Chu, Straddleham, and Leemstey.

Madison whispered to Drake and asked, ““Soft-skins?” What does he mean?”

Drake shrugged.

Overhearing the question, Dwaner replied, “It is a derogatory term used by dragons – ” he bristled in Rockford’s direction “ – *mostly* Gurgolas because of their ill-tempered nature.” He turned back and faced Madison and Drake, “The term is a slight on races or creatures that are not like them – without hard or leathery skins.”

Drake had an overwhelming feeling they would be hearing more of this term, and possibly others, until he could build his integrity among the dragons. *But what do I have to do before this gets out-of-hand?* Drake wondered desperately.

“Distinguished Gurgola,” said Chu reprovably, “I respectfully request we hear no more of such talk.”

Leaning back in his chair, relaxed, Rockford waived one hand dismissively and said, “Yeah, sure.”

“Now, to answer your question,” resumed the grand advisor smoothly, “the assistant chief clerk of the Council, Ped Leemstey, will go along to help.”

“Why aren’t you going?” asked the dragon suspiciously.

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“Tighearn Jiro has not yet passed,” said Chu. Pointing to himself and Straddleham, “Our duties remain in the palace until the Tighearn departs this life. Consequently, the young Dragonkeeper is in authority and the master-at-arms is more than capable to serve as advisor on the matter of recovery.” He locked eyes with Rockford and added, “*Everyone* will answer to Dragonkeeper Drake’s authority.”

“I will not!” Rockford said indignantly. “He has no integrity to speak of with my clan or any other for that matter.”

“I respectfully submit to you,” said the grand advisor calmly, “we have gone through this every time there is a new Dragonkeeper. They must be given a *chance* to garner integrity. You must and will do so.”

As Chu spoke, Rockford ignored him; the Gurgola was off in deep thought. Wondering aloud the dragon ruthlessly questioned, “Since he *is* the final Dragonkeeper, why should *any* of the dragon clans follow him at all...?”

A tense few seconds passed that brought no answer.

“Because it is in your nature,” said Chu abruptly, “dragons from all clans, deep down inside, want to be lead by a Dragonkeeper. Without one discord and disunity will tear you apart. *You* especially know this better than anyone here.”

The statement hung in the air like a dense fog. Drake felt there was sting to it that implied more than the dragon knowing better. There was something about the way Chu had said it that had a personal undertone, a suggestion of Rockford’s past that only Chu and the dragon knew about.

The Gurgola became angry.

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Smoke spewed from both the dragon's nostrils and mouth. He glared around the room making furious eye contact with everyone eventually settling on Chu. After a quick puff, he watched broodingly as the smoke rose and twisted upon itself, through clenched teeth he griped, "Are we here to sit around and look at each other or is there a point to all this?"

"Young Dragonkeeper," began Chu, "may I proceed with the rest of the meeting? I would like to present the recovery plan to you and your group."

Caught again by surprise, Drake's gaze darted around at everyone as he replied, "Uh...yeah...go ahead, proceed."

"Little better," murmured Madison, holding back a chuckle, "but pay attention next time."

Chu suddenly clapped his hands once and then slowly spread them apart. A sphere began to form, growing until it reached three feet in diameter. The grand advisor motioned with his chin and the sphere floated away quietly and gracefully, stopping above the table's center. It began to shimmer and spin in all directions, and then an image formed on its surface. The sphere became a floating globe of Olden Terra.

"This is our location," said the grand advisor, a big, red dot brightly appeared on the globe in the continent of Assuwa, "we are, of course, inside the Dragonkeeper's Palace, located nearby the coast of the eastern Nord Gulf. The group will travel by palace portal to the continent of Vesperik."

Madison nodded immediately; the view matched the map she examined in the library, just a couple of days ago.

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With no obvious interaction from Chu, the globe rotated gradually until Vesperik faced everyone. It then flattened and shaped into a thin rectangular screen, becoming a view through a perfectly clear window.

The image depicted through the magicked screen was a close-up view of the entire Vesperik continent. Drake noted that some of the terrain appeared difficult to cross – there were two major mountain ranges, of which the larger one parted a massive desert and huge, sprawling forest. A red dot highlighted a centrally located position along the eastern coast of the continent. They were told the palace portal would lead them here, to the Dragonkeeper's Residence in Vesperik, with the Sea of Caslis as a neighbor.

“Note the enormous lake to the north, Lake Bigead,” narrated Chu. “It feeds the Egahi River which flows south until reaching near the isthmus connecting Vesperik and New Vesperik, then spilling out its mouth into the Sea of Caslis. A distributary called the Adanodo River branches off to the east, at the halfway-point down the continent, going through the Chawlee Forest until it reaches the sea. This is the river you will take to reach the Yasidi Tribe town of Hagosda.” A red dot illuminated a position just south and east of where the Adanodo River branched from the Egahi.

“Who are the Yasidi?” Drake asked.

“They are a proud people with a rich history,” replied Chu, “you will learn about them in time. What you need to know now is that you will find a guide in Hagosda to take you to a different tribe town called Ocksias, here.”

Another red dot appeared. Ocksias was nestled between the Chawlee Forest on the east and the massive Equa Mountains to its west.

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“The Yasidi have an excellent relationship with the Amphithears who live in the Equa Mountains,” continued the grand advisor. “After gathering supplies in Ocksias you will then trek to the Amphithear’s Lair.” A blue dot emerged this time, pulsating, as if urgently calling them. It was positioned at a split directly centered in the mountain but south of a large gap called the Fierlan Pass. “It will be here you will come into possession of the Relic. No one else can be entrusted to it but the young Dragonkeeper.”

“Why?” asked Madison.

Chu simply replied, “That will be revealed in time.” He handed Drake a rough, leather pouch with a looping string that could draw its opening shut, he said, “Use this to hold the...the Relic, once you’re in possession of it. The string is magically enhanced so you can wear it around your neck confidently, knowing it will not snap.”

Madison had let out a frustrated sigh and Drake knew why. Chu, yet again, was holding something back about the Dragon’s Eye. Something he began to suspect Chu does not want them to know now – or possibly ever.

Drake placed the pouch around his neck; it looked too small, he said, “I thought the Dragon’s Eye was larger?”

“It is,” said Chu. He added nothing more.

Drake blinked at Chu nonplussed and asked, “Okay...so how am I going to put the Relic in the pouch...?”

“You will know when the time comes,” said Chu briskly.

The young Dragonkeeper got the impression Chu had stopped treating him with kid gloves. He thought, *But heck, I’m still a kid.* Drake made a questioning face and asked, “Any hints?”

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Chu placed his arms into opposite sleeves and appeared to sit even more rigid. In a fatherly tone that clearly indicated discussion of the topic was over, he replied, “Trust me Drake, you will know when the time comes.” He immediately glanced around the room making sure he had everyone’s attention and continued, “Once the young Dragonkeeper has the Relic, return the same way back to the palace for our next move.”

“Let me get this straight,” interjected Rockford, “we go in, find someone else to tag along, meet the king and queen Amph’, which by the way, will be extremely enjoyable” – he said this with obvious sarcasm – “then get this Dragon’s Eye, and finally come back, right?” He waited several heartbeats to see if anyone saw his point, when no one did, he added, “Why so many of us to do this? Am I missing something?”

“Safety in numbers,” answered Dwaner. “The Protector will protect the Dragonkeeper and we can watch over her as well as each other. And keep in mind, everyone here has been selected to perform a role that will most likely be needed.

As Hifearnan grows stronger so does the Marag, releasing evil spirits into the Realm of Faerie banished ages ago. Not to mention the violence occurring in outlying areas by the Cennud. All of this will be waiting out there – for us. As a group, we will need to remain cautious until our return.”

“When do we leave, today?” squeaked Trilly. “I’m looking forward to going back to Vesperik, really.” The little gremlin tittered with restless, bottled energy.

“You will leave tomorrow,” said Straddleham. “This will allow you the remainder of today and until late, next morning to prepare for departure.”

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Chu stood and walked to the head of the table where Drake sat. From within his jacket he removed a folded parchment and said, “Young Dragonkeeper, please accept this map, a map similar in enchantment as the one you possess for the palace, however, this map is of Vesperik. Keep it with you at all times, it should come in helpful for guiding your group and tracking the progress of your quest.”

Drake took it with an agreeable nod.

A slight wave of the grand advisor’s hand and the rectangular picture faded from existence. With his arms once more crossed into opposite sleeves, he simply turned and the doors to the room swept open by themselves. Palace servants were waiting outside.

“These servants will show you to your resting chambers,” said Chu, pointing to the doors with a slight tilt of his head.

Dween hastily stood up, awkwardly giving a Dvergar salute to the young Dragonkeeper, then said, “I foo woon look ahead too tris questsk. Tris ees oon hoonor foo ah Dvergoor.” He paused smiling, childlike.

Watching him intently with a warning stare was Dwaner, he hissed, “Don’t say it...”

“Coon wee eatk noow?” Dween then resumed stroking his moustache.

“Argh, Dween!” cried Dwaner. “Now is not the time, *please* show some patience.” He apologetically glanced at the grand advisor and said, “I am sorry for his behavior” – the master-at-arms looked humble and shrugged – “Dween *really* is good at what he does.”

“And what exactly is that, *eating*?” said the Gurgola sarcastically.

He tersely rose and exited the room. The dragon stopped just outside the door and looked back in, shaking his head with disgust, he then turned his attention to the palace servants and

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impatiently motioned for one to start leading the way to his chamber – several of the servants did so, hastily scurrying.

As the dragon was lead away everyone in the room clearly heard, “May the Light help us!”

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CHAPTER 14: A Trip Down the River

Drake awoke the next morning with a huge sense of excitement and adventure welled up inside. It pent during the sleeping hours as his mind dozed into and out of consciousness. His imagination wildly sketched grand images with the sights and sounds of new things they would see in this world – at the *other side* of this world. But he was sobered by the fact this was not some ordinary, summer vacation. There was serious business to attend and real dangers to worry about. Though, with his sister by his side and the little group that followed him, he didn't feel as apprehensive as he thought he would. He actually felt downright confident – but tried desperately to temper and remind himself not to feel *over*-confident.

Buoyed by adrenalin and youth, the young Dragonkeeper overcame his lack of sleep and quickly got himself ready for the big day ahead. Remembering being told the palace portal leading to Vesperik was located next door to the Dragonkeeper's bedchamber, he met up with Madison outside her room to begin the (mercifully) short trek there. But before leaving their rooms for who knew how long, they took stock in what they had with them. Drake and Madison both carried their sticks and each had a satchel slung diagonally across their chests. The bags contained a toothbrush, toothpaste, and a hair brush, along with a change of clothes when needed.

“Do you have the map Chu gave you yesterday?” asked Madison. “The map of Vesperik.”

“Yep,” replied Drake, “and I'm still carrying the one for the palace too.”

Drake appraised his sister curiously and somewhat surprised.

“You look like you're ready for a fight.”

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Madison was dressed in a cream-colored cotehardie, long-sleeved and belted around the waist, with the skirted bottom going down to about mid-thigh length. She wore dark-tan crews underneath the skirt, the legs of which were tucked into black tall-boots that came up to her knees. Her hair was pulled back tight into a fluffy pony tail and she made a point of proving to Drake she wore the ring given to her by Jiro.

“I’m ready to roll little bro,” said Madison, sounding cool. “How ‘bout you?”

“I think I am,” replied Drake, as he appraised himself then stared at Madison for approval.

The young Dragonkeeper dressed similarly for this trip to how he explored the palace just a few days ago, he put on another long-sleeved padded shirt, but this time underneath a short-sleeved, leather jerkin. The studded-ring belt and boots he had grown attached too happily completed his attire. Underneath his shirt hung the empty, leather pouch Chu gave him yesterday. Even though the string attached to it was magicked not to break, Drake tapped the pouch without thinking to make sure it was there.

“Yeah, you’re dressed okay,” said Madison, starting to smile. “But...”

“But, what?”

“Too bad there’s *nothing* we can do about your face.”

“Hey! Not cool...”

Approaching the room with the palace portal, Drake and Madison both fought the urge to enter the Dragonkeeper’s bedchamber to visit Jiro. They knew he had to be in there. Although they barely knew the man, they felt an undeniable kinship to him, maybe because of what he did and gave up for them, but certainly a greater feeling than simply ‘owing him.’ The last time they

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saw him, Jiro was so fragile and near death, they wondered silently if he had already died and were plainly not told. Madison stopped at Jiro's door as Drake kept on walking with his nose toward the palace map. He immediately noticed she wasn't beside him and glanced back. Somehow, Drake *felt* the Tighearn Dragonkeeper was on the other side of the door, weak, rasping at every breath, but still there – alive.

“He's there, he's still alive Mady.”

“How d'you know?” said Madison, startled. She pulled her reaching hand back from the door.

“I—I don't know, I just know he is.”

Madison regarded her brother carefully. After staring into his eyes looking for anything to truly be worried about – and not finding it – she softened her face and said, “Okay, I'll take your word for it. Let's go.”

They entered the room of the palace portal to find it chock full of occupants, in particular, palace guards standing warily in the oval-shaped chamber. Along the wall were seven pillars with two palace guards beside each and scores of extra guards milling about. The guards were heavily armed with weapons of all sorts and carried thick, strong shields. Drake and Madison were unnerved by the show of force. Observing the room carefully it simply appeared very plain and very stark, unremarkable even. Why such an armed corps to defend this room? Or were they an offensive unit unbeknownst to them?

Thankfully, a group of familiar faces was already there: Dwaner, Dween, Trilly, Leemstey, and Rockford, as well as Chu waiting in the center of the chamber. Each of them in turn became aware of Drake and Madison's presence.

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“Good morning sleepy heads,” giggled Trilly. “Are you two excited? I sure am!”

Dwaner and Dween each saluted the young Dragonkeeper and Lady Protector. Dwaner gave a heartfelt salute, smiling fatherly in the process. Dween’s salute came off as clumsy – they really began to wonder what was wrong with him.

The two Dvergar’s were similarly dressed except for the color of their long-sleeved tunics and billowy capes. Dwaner’s tunic was red underneath a rich-emerald colored cape, while Dween wore an earthy brown cape overtop his tan shirt. Where they clearly differed though was in their own appearance and the look of their clothes. The master-at-arms had closely shaven around his beard and his hair was combed neatly, the helmet he wore was pressed down snug on his head, and his clothes were obviously clean and appeared freshly pressed. Dween, on the other hand, looked as wild and unkempt, even more so, than yesterday. The Dvergar’s hair stuck out wiry all around his helmet, and his attire plainly looked rumpled and dingy. Once again, the laces over Dween’s boots were on tight – tighter than the day before. There were no two brothers’ that looked and acted so completely different.

Drake and Madison noticed as well the Dvergar blood-brothers were more heavily armed than the guards about the room. Dwaner carried a broadsword by one side, a shortsword on his back, and just a sword hilt attached to his belt. His brother carried a Dvergar-hammer on his left – an enormous, heavy-looking cross-peen hammer, flat on one end and shaped narrow at other, the handle was thick and long, and wrapped in leather. As if that weapon wasn’t enough, he also had available an assortment of sheathed knives around his waist. Dween rested his left hand on the hammer while the right obsessively caressed his moustache. Surprised and wondering why

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the blood-brothers were *so* heavily armed, Drake and Madison were abruptly pulled out of their musings by the melodic sarcasm of the dragon.

“It’s so *nice* of you to join us, young Dragonkeeper and Lady Protector. Did you get enough sleep or should we *delay* further so you can have more?”

“That is quite enough, Rockford,” warned Chu in Dragon Runes, “please begin showing the young Dragonkeeper his due respect.”

“I—I thought we had until late morning?” said Drake, taken aback. “Are we here later than expected?”

“Not at all,” said Chu, glaring at the Gurgola, “the Dvergars and gremlins are early risers by nature, our distinguished dragon left orders with his servants to bring him here once the first person had arrived – that would be me. Leemstey and I have already been to the residence and back making sure all is in order for your arrival.”

The reality of what they were about to do hit Drake soundly, like a punch to the gut.

“Grand advisor, Mr. Chu,” said Drake solemnly, “I want to thank you for all you’ve done, really.” He looked at his sister who nodded, “Madison and I – we greatly appreciate it.”

Chu lifted his blue, Mandarin cap and bowed. He replaced it and graciously said, “It is my pleasure to serve you, Dragonkeeper Drake. I do hope and expect you will find everything in order when you arrive.”

Meanwhile, the Lady Protector glanced at Leemstey wondering why the assistant clerk did not seem like himself. There was no trademark quick wink or smile when they entered the room. Leemstey appeared withdrawn and acted shyly, as though he was silently observing everything around him. Even the clothes he wore reflected his gloomy mood. He had on what

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seemed like a black t-shirt with long, tight sleeves, underneath a dark-purple jerkin trimmed in an even darker shade. The assistant clerk was also equipped with a weapon, carrying a wide longsword tucked in a metal scabbard by his side. Recalling how he almost stupidly hurt Drake, Madison doubtfully wondered he even knew how to wield it.

“Straddleham’s not here to say goodbye, I see,” said Madison casually.

It took Leemstey a moment to register the statement was directed at him. He softened his expression and forced a smile.

“Ah, yes, Straddleham, he has important palace business to attend. The chief clerk sends his apologies for not being here to see you and the Dragonkeeper off. He wishes all of us good fortune.”

A chain that hung around Leemstey’s neck dangled a roughly cut, black jewel. Right away it caught Madison’s eye and interest. She noticed if light hit the jewel at just the right angle, it appeared to glow.

“Your necklace, and jewel, it looks pretty,” said Madison, pointing. “I didn’t notice you wearing it before. What is it?”

Leemstey stared at her for a moment, as though he did not hear the question. He reached for the jewel without looking and began to finger it, he answered, “It’s what you Greylanders call a ‘good luck charm.’ We call it a ‘gem of good fortune.’”

Madison leaned on her bowstaff and thought, *He’s sure not himself today. Maybe going on this quest has him scared...?* Out loud she said, “Well, let’s hope it does bring us good luck and good fortune.”

“Yes, let’s hope so,” replied Leemstey.

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“Where’s the portal to Vesperik?” asked Drake, sounding impatient. He quickly scanned the room.

“This column behind you,” said Chu, gesturing with his head, “on the left-side of the door as you entered.”

“What’re the other pillars’s for?” Madison asked curiously.

“This one room and *only* room now connects the compound to all of Olden Terra,” replied Chu. “All the portals were recently moved here from their previous locations throughout the palace, and of course each pillar still remains linked with a site in a different part of the Realm.”

“I see,” said Madison, with a sudden rush of realization, “all these guards are here to *protect* the palace.” She wondered anxiously how bad the situation had become to move all the portals into one place and then guard the room in such a manner.

As though reading Madison’s mind, the grand advisor said, “Lady Protector, we *are* living through the times of strife predicted in the Prophecy. As a clear sign of this, the Cennud are progressively becoming bolder in their attacks. We have increased our defenses, here, within the palace, as well as added guards at each of the seven matching exits. Our intention is to protect these palace portals as long as we can, otherwise we will have no choice but to destroy them to keep the palace and compound safe.”

“One pillar for each of the seven continents, then,” interjected Drake, looking around the room once more.

“Not exactly,” said Chu. “Not every pillar leads to a different continent.” The grand advisor approached the column he singled out earlier and waved his hand before it. The pillar

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rippled for a second, then from a bright point the familiar rectangle-shaped opening grew to its full size.

Drake watched as the portal came to life. The magical doorway silently shimmered, waiting without care or burden for anyone to step through. The young Dragonkeeper felt strangely beckoned by the impassive, tall opening, staring at it dumbly when he realized something. Hastily he approached Chu, soaked with the impatience of a student that truly believed they had a better solution to a known problem.

“Why couldn’t there be an exit at the *lair*, the Amphithear’s Lair? We could just go straight there and avoid all this traveling.”

“Young Dragonkeeper,” began Dwaner, he made sweeping motion with his hand, “as you can see there are only these many palace portals and each is linked to a specific location. The portals are enchanted gateways using the Light’s magic to keep the path between both ends active.”

The grand advisor motioned the master-at-arms to let him continue and said, “Even though the Light is boundless, the magic needed for the link has limits. In these times of strife we have discovered some palace portals ceasing to work. We have been able to re-enchant them, to make their connection once more, only to see the link fail again.”

“What about the realm portals?” Madison asked right away, her voice sounded anxious.

“There was a time, just recently,” replied the grand advisor, “when each palace portal was paired with a realm portal. That is not the case anymore. *Some* of the realm portals have been lost, most likely, forever. The other pairings still exist and we are doing everything possible to keep those realm portals working. Unfortunately, as the Marag or Dark Magic grows

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stronger through Hifearnan, so will the weakening of the realm portals. Unless we do something about the Evil One, there will come a time when we can do nothing to stop the loss of the remaining ones.”

The urgency of what they were about to do and how it really affected them worried both Drake and Madison. If all the realm portals were gone, how would they get back? For the first time Drake was seriously having doubts, while his sister had slight trouble breathing.

“Aye, you see we could create new links between locations,” said Dwaner, “but for every new one, more of the Light’s magic get’s used that has currently grown weaker.”

Noticing the alarmed look on their faces, Chu moved quickly to soothe them, “For now, the realm portals that remain are stable. The Light’s magic remains considerably strong and keeps them active as expected. If we remain focused on our purpose and are successful, then all these concerns go away.” He paused and smiled reassuringly, then added, “Anyway, if the entire Realm had portals connecting every location to another, how would we get our exercise?”

“The truth is, Dragonkeeper or no Dragonkeeper,” groused Rockford, “we dragons don’t want you” – he glared at all of them – “soft-sk—your kind, barging in whenever you want. Even *if* we had all the Light magic possibly available, the clans would not allow it in their own lairs. No, never.”

“There’s the real reason little bro,” said Madison flatly, “the *dragons* don’t like it. Simple as that.” She pursed her lips trying to hide her irritation with Rockford and now growing to dragons in general. Madison hoped that at least some of them were not as difficult to get along with as this one.

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“I foo woon knoww te Dvergoors woold allow poortols een oor land,” said Dween without warning. “Tris ees oon hoonor foo oos too serva.” He saluted with a smile.

Drake and Madison looked at each other with baffled faces, deciding not to even bother or ask.

“Dween,” Trilly began, giggling, “you’re really funny.” She darted around his legs and laughed as the Dvergar watched her with all the wonder of a child.

“Trilly, please calm down,” said the grand advisor firmly.

The little gremlin stopped on a dime, she shook herself then stood waiting, smiling wide. After Chu frowned at her, she hopped around the room in a blur settling between Dween and his brother, earning a grimace from the master-at-arms.

She giggled almost uncontrollably with her tiny hands help up to her mouth.

“Very well—” said Chu, he then waited tolerantly for the gremlin to stop laughing, “the group will move in the following order through the portal: First in are Dwaner and Dween, followed by Trilly, Rockford, then the young Dragonkeeper and Protector. Leemstey, you will go through last.”

The group proceeded through the palace portal in the order given. Drake and Madison marveled at the warm tingly feeling stepping through, literally, to the other side. They arrived at a large room, finding it filled with numerous, straight-faced palace guards standing at the ready.

The large chamber had tall windows, paneled into many small, square pieces, putting Drake and Madison in mind of fairy tale castles. In fact, the room appeared very closely as one found inside an actual castle – rough walls, lanterns casting weak candle light, and bumpy floors. The architecture was a complete departure from that of the Dragonkeeper’s Palace.

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They arrived early in the morning with the sun just starting to make its slow crawl up the sky. It was now undeniable this Realm of Faerie, Olden Terra, was a round world like their own. And at present, they had to experience some “portal lag” because of the obvious time difference between Vesperik and the Dragonkeeper’s Palace in Assuwa.

As Leemstey came through the portal, Madison strolled to the nearly floor-to-ceiling height windows at the east end of the room. She casually gazed out the windowpanes, uninterested really. Madison eyes then widened and she gasped.

“Oh my, the view...it’s magnificent!”

Drake readily trotted over to her side and looked out as well. The view was absolutely stunning. The castle was on top of a bluff, at the very edge of its sheer face overlooking the Sea of Caslis like a sentinel. An enormous, blue ocean spread out before them, way down beneath at the base of the cliff. The sea sparkled beautifully in the rising sun, as if a million, tiny diamonds floated on its surface. The growing morning revealed the bluff’s face covered in huge patches of lush, dark-green grass, or maybe even moss. Although the windows were closed they could distinctively smell the refreshing salty aroma of the ocean’s mist. Even at the top of the bluff the panes of glass were speckled with droplets of sea spray; every so often the beads of water were replaced by a new spattering from ocean below.

“Aye, the view is beautiful, isn’t it?” said Dwaner as he joined them. “I love coming here just to see this. It’s hard to imagine there are problems in this world when you gaze out of these windows.”

A silent moment of reflection followed as the three of them soaked in the vista.

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Dwaner resumed, “This residence is a simple castle on a ledge overlooking the sea. The structure we are in is a turret or tower – to your left you can see another one.” Sure enough, through some light fog not yet burned away, another turret loomed lonely in the distance. “The residence is essentially square-shaped, there are two more turrets at corners we can’t see from here. They’re joined by a fifty foot wall that is thirty feet thick, and all four turrets are of different sizes, for a reason unknown to me –” Drake gestured to ask a question, but the master-at-arms raised a hand delaying him “ – if you’re wondering, we’re in the shortest tower. It is a 180 foot drop from where we stand to the ocean.”

Drake and Madison both looked down – it was a *long* way to the bottom where incoming waves crashed onto the rocky base.

“Young Dragonkeeper, how ‘bout we get moving?” said Rockford impatiently. “It will take us most of the day just to reach Hagosda.”

Drake saw that everyone was immediately waiting on his words, he quickly replied, “Yeah, of course, let’s get going.”

The group made their way down the turret to the castle’s base floor where palace servants waited with strange creatures called an *equis*. They looked like pre-historic horses. These equis’ walked on three toes, had a back that was less arched, and their face, snout, and neck were somewhat longer than a present day horse. Its thickly muscled legs made them invaluable for carrying supplies long distances, but were capable of running fast too, when unencumbered. They were smaller than a horse, but seemed slightly larger than a big pony.

There was one equis per group member, saddled with a simple rubber mat set on its back, tied around the abdomen. Two additional ones were provided, one that seemed unduly burdened

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with extra supplies of food, drink, and cooking utensils, while Drake noted the other carried weapons.

Everyone climbed onto their equis', Rockford's became jittery upon seeing the menacing Gurgola approach it, but surprisingly, the dragon was able to calm the creature down and mount it without too much difficulty. What was even more surprising was the equis held the massive dragon's weight without any outward appearance of trouble or strain.

They left through the castle's drawbridge with Dwaner and Rockford leading the way, followed by Drake, Madison, and Trilly, with Leemstey and Dween side-by-side, at the rear. Drake made a point to grab the equis laden with supplies, taking the opportunity to add his satchel to its load and pull it along; Madison followed his lead, placing her satchel on the same equis as she towed the other that carried weapons. The group then began snaking their way down a slight yet slippery trail toward the river.

Just as Leemstey appeared in the castle, a creature sensed the Dragonkeeper's arrival in Vesperik. The creature had lay dormant at the bottom of a lake, only moving to prey for food, the rest of the time comforted by hundreds of years of slime and muck collected along the lake's floor. Without warning it received a message, startled, it thrashed and snapped protecting itself from an unseen intruder. The message was repeated as a vision and this time it was understood. A request from Hifearnan received as an order from the Father of the Marag. It would carry out the order dutifully, already relishing its expected reward. Slowly, at first, it began to swim, then silently it used its incredible strength to pick up speed. The monstrous creature sliced eagerly

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through the water toward the mouth of the lake, southward, to its meeting with the young Dragonkeeper.

Upon reaching the river, they found a barge – it was flat, very long and wide, with a lifted bow and stern. The barge was moored securely to a short dock, rhythmically tapping against it from the current of the river. Everyone dismounted from their equis' and then they led the strange horses to the barge.

“No engines?” noticed Drake. “How are we going to move this thing?”

“*Engines?*” asked Trilly, her face lit up at the word. “O h, yes – *motors* – how I'd love to tear one apart.”

“How do you know about motors?” asked Madison.

“My father told me stories,” replied the little gremlin happily, “how his grandfather used to take them apart in the Realm of Grey. I've been told they're quite fun to play with.”

“Good thing this boat doesn't have one,” murmured Madison dryly, as she raised her eyebrows and gave Drake a knowing look.

The gremlin tittered causing her equis to neigh and dig at the ground nervously.

Dween saluted the young Dragonkeeper at once and blurted, “I foo woon weel feend eet oon honor too row tris boorge.”

The master-at-arms came up behind Dween and patted him on the back, with a caring smile he said, “Aye, do not worry my blood-brother, you won't have to row the barge alone.”

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“Enough of this,” growled the Gurgola, “let’s load and go. We want to be at our next stop before nightfall.”

After loading the barge with their equis’ (carefully arranging them toward the center of the boat) and then themselves, Madison was the first to notice something was missing.

“Where’re the paddles?”

Everyone’s eyes scanned the floor of the barge and suddenly realized there were none.

“*You*, what’s your name?” barked Rockford, pointing an extended talon at Leemstey.

“Ah—Leemstey,” replied the assistant clerk mechanically, “Ped Leemstey...”

“Yeah, whatever, weren’t you supposed to make sure everything was in order? Like the paddles.”

“I...Chu was...maybe forgot...I’m not sure,” stammered Leemstey.

“A puff of smoke lifted from Rockford’s nostrils, he sharply said, “Can’t you wave your hands and whip up some oars?”

“No—I cannot.”

“You can’t?” said Dwaner skeptically. “Assistant clerk, you know very well you can.”

Leemstey was looking panicky; he began fingering the black gem hanging from his neck and said, “I just—can’t.”

“Great, just great!” roared the dragon, rolling his eyes.

The whole time the discussion went on, Drake tried remembering something that might help. Finally, it came to him. Drake closed his eyes and concentrated very hard, in a voice louder than he expected, he exclaimed, “*ABRA-CA-DABRA!*”

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A breath of wind, his hair tousled, and then a very long oar appeared in his hand. Almost dropping his short-staff from surprise, he blurted, “Hey, it worked!”

Rockford turned and saw what Drake had done. The Gurgola flashed Drake a pointy-toothed, fierce smile and said, “Well, well. There may be hope for you yet.” Rockford took the paddle from Drake and inspected it, nodding his head and apparently meeting with the dragon’s approval he then surprised everyone when in a truly respectful tone the Gurgola said, “Young Dragonkeeper, may I ask you to please cast some more? So we can leave now.”

Drake happily produced seven more long paddles. Soon afterwards, the group was pushing the barge west toward Hagosda.

The creature continued its fast paced swim down the Egahi River. It knew from its vision that the Dragonkeeper and accompanying group were headed for the town near the *Split*. As it was known to those who dwelled in Hagosda, the Split was the location where the Adanodo River parted eastward from the main Egahi. The monster was driven, almost by madness, to get to the Split and turn east to reach his prey, however, not so mad that he stopped to devour a school of fish because of hunger – he needed his strength to perform the job ordered by the Father.

Onward the creature continued, satisfied with the thought that when he needed to eat again he would surely be upon the Dragonkeeper and his group.

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The trip had become long and boring.

At first, witnessing the new trees and flowers that lined the river's shore, seeing new birds and bugs that flew about, and experiencing the warmer weather in Vesperik was absolutely fascinating. The strong, woody odor of pettigrain was new to them, it had filled the air since they left the castle and thankfully it was not overpowering. Unfortunately, the last few hours of unchanging scenery, the drudgery of having to push the barge along, and the marked increase of humidity started to wear thin.

They decided as a group to rest in pairs. Drake and Madison were paired, so were Dwaner and Dween, and Trilly with Leemstey. At Rockford's insistence, he rested alone.

The only interesting part of the trip now was the smallest member of the group, Trilly. Using her teeth and nimble hands, the little gremlin had cut her oar down to a size suitable for her height, and then shaped the handle to fit perfectly in her grasp. Drake, impressed by this display of wood work, asked Trilly to do the same for his oar. He was amazed at how well it fit in his hand once she finished shaping it; luckily he had it done before some real blisters started to form.

Drake insisted and then convinced everyone to have their oars sized and shaped by Trilly. Everyone took the offer but Rockford.

"I don't need it 'fixed' as you say," said the Gurgola with disdain. "The weaknesses that afflict...your kind, do not affect me."

Quite happily Trilly responded, "Suit yourself, O'leathery one." She then giggled.

When the sun had reached its highest point in the sky, the dragon requested a short break for lunch. After Drake agreed, the entire group sat down at the bow to rest and eat. They ate

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dried meats, a variety of nuts, and deliciously sweet fruit. One fruit was called a *nangarahanga*, it tasted like a less sweet version of maraschino cherries, while another was named *guayago* which Drake and Madison thought was a mix of peach and strawberry.

As the barge floated lazily down the river, Drake reached into his pocket and removed the map of Vesperik. Once fully unfolded, the map went through its familiar burning process from Drake's touch, magically revealing its writings and hidden features. Studying the map, he saw an asterisk centered within the lines that drew the Adanodo River. The asterisk was about halfway between the symbol for the Dragonkeeper's Residence and Hagosda.

The map had bloomed with all its labeling visible in Dragon Runes. He tried brushing and tapping the map but nothing happened, apparently it was only enchanted to show him their current position. Drake wondered guardedly if it was keyed to all of them or just him. He had just begun looking closely at different items on the map when he was interrupted.

"Can you believe we're here?" said Madison wistfully. She was lying on her back looking up at a cloud-laced sky, hands behind her head, rocking one leg balanced on the other knee as though sitting cross-legged.

"What do you mean?" said Drake, starting to fold the map and replace it into his pocket.

Madison made a sweeping motion with her hand, "Here, all this. These people, the dragon, everything." She sat up partially leaning on an elbow and forearm to face Drake, "Just a few days ago we were in school worried about finals and now *this*."

Drake gazed at the murky water of the river watching the sun dance and glide across its surface. He stared off in the distance toward the thickly wooded shore line and wondered what

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hid in the forest. And then he settled looking at everyone and everything in turn around them.

He smiled knowingly.

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s pretty darn hard to believe.”

After some silence, Drake asked, “How do you think Mom and Dad are doing?”

Madison answered faster than he expected, “Oh, Dad, he’s probably concerned, but he believed Mom’s vision – he sees we’ve changed – he’ll be okay. Mom on the other hand, well, she doubts herself so she’ll be more concerned and of course, she’s *Mom*, she’s a worry-wart no matter what.”

“Hmm...” said Drake.

Madison waited for more. She sat up completely and when still nothing came she said, “‘Hmm’ what?”

“I’m not so sure about this whole ‘changed’ business,” said Drake pensively. “Yes, we’re different now, we both have powers no one back home would believe we have. But, it’s just the way Chu looked when you asked for agreement – on us being changed. He looked as if he was just siding with you to get Mom to calm down. I think there’s more to all this than he’s letting us know.”

“This isn’t the first time we’ve gotten *that* impression,” said Madison resentfully.

“There’s more to the Relic than he’s letting on to, you and I both know that. I just wonder why he’s not completely forthcoming. Is he trying to protect us from a truth we shouldn’t hear? Or is it something else?”

Nervously, they exchanged glances, knowing the other had no word of comfort or any answer.

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“Alright, enough rest,” growled Rockford loudly. The dragon stood using his tail to push him fully upright. “Young Dragonkeeper, may we proceed with the trip?”

It began to dawn on Drake that Rockford was consenting more and more to his authority. *Could it be that my integrity is growing?* he thought hopefully.

Seeing that her brother was lost in thought, Madison nudged him back to the moment.

“Wha?” said Drake, shaking his head. “Oh, yeah—you’re right. Come on, let’s all start pushing the barge.”

Without referring to the map, Drake *knew* they were nearing Hagosda. Instead of feeling relieved the first leg of the journey was ending, strangely, he began to feel tense.

Rockford spoke as though he had read Drake’s mind, “We should be nearing the tribe town soon, very soon. Everybody, be alert and ready.”

It happened so fast Drake had no time to react.

River water bubbled and popped, as though boiling at a huge spot on the starboard-side of the barge. An immense creature burst ferociously from beneath the water, it drenched everyone and almost capsized the wide barge. The monster, whose head was now twenty feet above the water gazed down viciously at his quarry.

It lunged at Drake.

“Sea-serpent!” screamed Rockford in Dragon Runes.

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The creature came down upon Drake, its head falling fast like a missile and its massive jaws gaped with two rows of long, razor-sharp teeth. Drake saw the outer row glistening; the monster's teeth appeared jagged, like the carved mouth of a jack-o-lantern.

An instant before the creature snapped its jaws shut on Drake, Madison placed him behind the largest shield yet, conjured from her bowstaff.

“Get down!” yelled Madison, as equis' began neighing and rearing in horror.

The humming, blue shield repelled the sea serpent, bouncing its head back into the air. The monster was rebounded several feet out of the water; it had to be at least fifty or sixty feet long. The sea serpent had large scales that looked rock hard, its fish-like eyes blinked, and the wing-like ears flapped in protest. It roared a horrible, screeching sound, thrashing in the water enraged. Without warning the serpent's tapered back-end flicked out of the water in whip-like motion, grabbing an equis and pulling it into the river. The equis shrilled horribly as it and the serpent went under.

Drake had seen what happened. He quickly scanned the barge taking an inventory of everyone. Dwaner and Dween had each dropped their capes, pulled their weapons, and stood close by. Madison appeared shaken as she looked around wildly, her bowstaff with no shield held firmly in both hands. Trilly bounced around the barge like a hyper-active child and the dragon looked angrier than Drake had ever seen – smoke spewed from his nostrils as his talons were fully extended, his muscles taut and ready. Leemstey, though, stood perfectly still, he seemed unaffected except for the cross face that stared at the river.

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Madison jarringly realized the sea serpent looked exactly like the one she envisioned several days ago. The same one that mercilessly attacked a sea fairing ship hundreds of years earlier, leaving no survivors. She shuddered recalling the horrific event.

“It was a sea serpent,” said Rockford acidly, “one of the Cennud – clearly sent by that coward Hifearnan...” He trailed off, making no attempt to hide his disgust.

“We must get moving once again,” said the master-at-arms, “we need to get off this river.”

“Excuse me, by the way,” lilted Trilly, smirking, “I hate to point it out, but the equis that was taken carried our food.”

“Shoot!” Madison hissed at Drake. “Our bags, our *stuff*, it’s gone.” She then looked at her brother for some reassurance.

Drake simply shrugged.

“Then we must definitely get to Hagosda, now,” said Leemstey calmly, keeping his angry stare on the water.

Rockford stepped to where his oar laid and snatched it up, then said, “Alright, let’s get mov—” He never got to finish.

The sea serpent crashed through the water’s rippling surface and rose quickly.

Instantly, everyone sprang into action.

Another shield from Madison’s bowstaff covered Drake with time to spare.

Dwaner and Dween shouted a Dvergar battle-cry, running to starboard to face the beast.

Surprisingly, the little gremlin pulled out two, incredibly long knives from within her pelt. In a blur, she jumped from the barge and landed on the creature’s back.

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Dween meanwhile seemed possessed. Carrying his Dvergar-hammer, he swung toward the beast's head as it lunged again. The Dvergar powerfully hit the serpent with the flat side of his hammer – a loud smack placed squarely on the jaw – knocking its head away like a baseball.

Trilly attempted plunging her knives into the creature's armor-like skin, stunned when the knives merely clanked against the scales. Once the serpent noticed, quietly, the monster's tail sneakily curled up behind the gremlin.

Drake yelled, "Trilly, watch out!"

Too late.

Trilly was slapped off hard, hitting the water even harder. Under she went.

"*Do something!*" Madison shrilled at Drake.

The young Dragonkeeper drew a blank, frantically he thought, *What can I do...?* One spell did come to mind, in a commanding tone he blurted, "*Abra-Anney-Jeed!*"

It was the taming spell – it had no effect.

The sea serpent roared tauntingly, it sounded like a laugh. He pounced once again, this time, knocking off two more shrilling equis' from the barge, expecting to feast on them later.

Angered by the Cennud's total disregard for life, Rockford was no longer able to simply stand and defend the young Dragonkeeper. As the creature's body came within reach the Gurgola jumped on right behind the ears.

"The soft-skin's devices might not work on you, treacherous Cennud," snarled Rockford in Dragon Runes, "but *these* will get under your skin." The dragon sank his taloned hands deep into the Cennud's neck.

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The sea serpent yowled in pain, it quickly dove underwater and resurfaced, shaking its head violently as the Gurgola held on like a rag doll.

Rockford tried desperately to keep his hold, gripping tighter to the soft, wet flesh underneath the scales, but he began to slip. The serpent shook powerfully again, hurling a flailing Rockford almost effortlessly toward the far shore and into the woods. Drake heard the cracking and breaking of trees and branches as the dragon's body disappeared deep into the forest.

The master-at-arms, carrying a broadsword in one hand and his shortsword in the other, got between the sea serpent and the young Dragonkeeper. Without looking at Drake and Madison he commandingly said, "Push the barge with Leemstey to Hagosda. Find refuge there and help from the Yasidi. Dween and I will buy you the time to get away. Please, get ready." He glared at Leemstey who remained furiously staring at the sea serpent, then Dwaner yelled, "Assistant clerk, come help *now!*"

"No," said Madison firmly, "we're not leaving either of you behind."

"As valiant as your gesture may be, Lady Protector," scowled Dwaner as he turned to face her crossly, "it is the only way. I won't say it again – get ready!"

With the master-at-arms distracted, the creature took advantage and came down hard and fast.

Drake pointed and yelled, "Look out!"

Before Dwaner could react his arm was bitten to the bone, he screamed in pain as the broadsword fell to the barge. Vainly he tried to slash and puncture the creature with his shortsword, it was no use.

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The sea serpent pulled a screaming Dwaner off the barge, holding the squirming Dvergar tight causing him greater pain when the massive jaws bit down even harder. Once the creature reached high above the boat he tossed Dwaner up like a peanut, then opened his large maw wide and eagerly waiting to swallow the master-at-arms whole.

Dween watched in horror as his brother was taken off the boat and then tossed into the air – something inside the grubby Dvergar snapped.

The berserker within surfaced.

Screaming the Dvergar battle-cry like a banshee, he bellowed, “NOO, BLOOD BROOTER!”

Revealing unbelievable strength and speed, Drake and Madison watched as Dween ran to the starboard edge and jumped high – as though flying toward the serpent. Dween swung the Dvergar-hammer so fast that it couldn't be seen. Its pointed end hit the creature's side with a loud and sickening *CRACK*, twisting the serpent's head and body away from a falling Dwaner, and causing the creature to spit up gooey, greenish liquid. Then, all three of them, Dwaner, Dween, and the sea serpent crashed violently into the river in one earth-shattering splash.

The barge rocked frightfully as was it inundated with river water. Drake and Madison were thrown to the floor, both losing grips on their staffs. Leemstey, somehow, kept his balance throughout the ordeal.

Eventually the water stilled and the barge stopped its stomach-churning pitch and sway, Drake and Madison then got to their hands and knees to look around and get their bearings.

Drake took another inventory: Dwaner and Dween were gone, Trilly was also gone, and Rockford was most likely hurt somewhere in the forest.

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What a mess, thought Drake.

At least Madison was beside him and Leemstey was still on the boat along with six wildly neighing equis’.

They looked at each other to make sure they were alright and then alarmingly realized something was missing: *The staffs! Where the heck are the staffs?* In a panic they scabbled around the barge trying to find their sticks...

The serpent blasted out of the water shaking its head, completely maddened. Wasting no time, it saw to its delight that the Dragonkeeper was exposed, unprotected. This time the monster felt it would not be denied. He would seize the Dragonkeeper *and* the girl that had shielded him.

Still searching for their staffs, the horrible stench of the creature’s breath reached them first. Glancing up in horror they saw as the serpent reached for them with its forked tongue, a gleeful and wicked expression of victory on its face. Instinctively, Madison pushed her brother down and covered Drake with her body. She looked up one last time, bracing for the pain, and squeezed her brother tight. Out of the corner of her eye Madison noticed Leemstey came toward them, she thought, *Oh great, he can die along with us.*

The assistant clerk had unsheathed his longsword, with expert finesse he slashed at the reaching tongue (Madison felt a breeze above her head) cutting it off right behind where it forked. Rearing in shock, the serpent screeched oddly and madly. Ignoring its pain and the man that just maimed him, it blindly rushed the Dragonkeeper and Protector. Enraged beyond reason, it forgot its orders and was now bent to destroy them, soon after it would deal with the man. As

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the sea serpent clenched its jaws to crunch down on the boy and girl – it felt pain – the likes of which it had never suffered in its entire life.

Leemstey had jabbed the longsword underneath the open mouth of the serpent, the softest area of the creature, and like a hot knife through butter with ease he slashed down to the throat. Thick dark-green liquid flowed from the long gash. The sword began to illuminate, glowing green from the liquid as Leemstey twisted and turned the weapon. The serpent tried to pull away, but Leemstey held, the sword continued glowing as more of the green liquid spilled onto the barge – life slipped away from the beast in short convulsions until finally, it stopped.

Drake and Madison heard Leemstey snarl angrily at the creature, “He is not yours!” The assistant clerk forced the sword in deeper, twisting it even farther for good measure.

When it was evident the creature had bled out and died, Leemstey yanked the sword callously releasing the serpent. It slid back into the river sinking beneath the rippling water as bubbles roiled briefly on the surface where it went under.

Leemstey turned and marched toward Drake and Madison who were just now separating from each other and standing up. Still holding the now unlit, green-gleamed sword, Leemstey continued his approach with a crazed expression, when surprisingly, Trilly bounced onto the barge, dripping wet. Everyone was astonished to see her: Particularly Leemstey whose astonishment was strangely mixed with disappointment and slight fear; he unconsciously fingered the nearly black jewel as if checking the good luck charm still hung from his neck.

The water-logged Trilly dropped to all fours and shook herself dry like a dog, then she stood up and said, “Nice job Leemstey” – having caught the tail end of what the assistant clerk

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had done – “I didn’t know you could handle a sword like that.” She giggled then winced holding her side.

“Believe it or not gremlin, I know a thing or two about weapons,” said Leemstey curtly, wiping the longsword with a handkerchief and then sheathing it. “I simply did what I had to do.” He placed his hand back on the jewel, this time, almost clutching it.

Drake wondered, *Boy, what’s up with him?* Then out loud he said, “I’ll say, you saved our lives. That serpent was about to have us for dinner, thanks.”

The assistant clerk said nothing, he walked over to the remaining equis’ and began calming them down.

“Trilly, we thought you’d drowned or something,” said Madison with concern. “It looks like you’re okay, though.”

“After I got slapped off I landed in the water out of breath,” recalled Trilly. “As I gasped for air I swam to shore, luckily I made it.” She winced while giggling again.

“Are you alright?” Drake asked.

“Yeah, nothing broken,” replied the gremlin, smiling. “But I’ll definitely be sore tomorrow.”

Beside the barge a splashing noise was heard, both Drake and Madison startled while Trilly bounded next to them with one knife in hand. Madison looked at Trilly who simply shrugged.

“I lost the other one in the river,” said Trilly. She smirked then grimaced.

A voice called out, “Helpa! Eet ees I, D-ween oof te Dvergoor oond mee blood-brooter D-wa-ner. Hees hoort, please helpa oos!”

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Drake and Madison ran to starboard and helped them get on the barge.

Except for being soaked Dween looked unharmed. Not only did he return with an injured Dwaner, but he carried all their weapons on his person as well. There was more to this Dvergar than a weird accent. Drake and Madison smiled at him and now viewed him in a new light, putting Drake in mind of never judging someone until you really got to know them.

“Yah, I foo woon tankh te Dragoonkiper oond ees Prootectoer foo savin oos from te wooter,” thanked Dween in his usually awkward way. “Eet ees oon honour foo a Dvergoor too bee helpa by yoo.”

“Dween, we thought you two were eaten by the serpent,” said Madison. “What happened?”

“Yah, wen wee woor onderwooter,” said Dween, recalling the events in the simple manner of a child, “te seerpent woos spittin oop blood. I grabba D-wa-ner oond sweemed too te soorface.” Dween’s expression saddened as though he was about to cry, then continued, “Mee blood-brooter woos noot breetin. I shook heem oond called hees name oonteel hee coof oop wooter oond breeted ageen. Ten I heeld heem tightsk oond sweemed oofter te boorge oond ten yoo helpa oos. Tankh yoo.”

Drake quickly turned his attention to Dwaner kneeling down next to him. The young Dragonkeeper noticed Dwaner’s right arm was badly injured – deep bite marks had covered it crimson-red. He looked at Madison frightened and concerned.

“He’s lost a lot of blood. What’re we gonna do?”

“I don’t know – what can we do?” replied Madison, her eyes were opened wide and round. “There’s no doctor around that I can tell.”

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A loud thud and the boat pitched, scaring everyone. Dween and Trilly spun around, ready to fight. What met their eyes simply made them stop and laugh (and Trilly wince.)

“I hate to break up the reunion, but let’s move before another one of those things shows up,” said Rockford firmly.

Other than a few cuts, the Gurgola appeared fine and was still his old grouchy self.

“Dwaner’s hurt real bad, Rockford,” said Drake seriously. “Is there anything we can do?”

The dragon clomped over and carefully examined Dwaner’s injuries.

“Don’t worry,” said Rockford, watching the master-at-arms compassionately, “I think I can do something.” His face quickly turned sour and he growled, “Now, everyone, step back and give me privacy! He’ll be fine soon enough.”

They had begun pushing the barge toward Hagosda after the Gurgola pricked his finger and dripped a considerable amount of blood on Dwaner’s wounds. His wounds began to heal almost instantly, and his apparent pain seemed to lessen before their eyes, it was utterly amazing.

“The master-at-arms will be better by morning, let him rest.” Rockford had said.

Rockford had also described, when asked, what happened to him when he was thrown into the forest. Once his hold slipped, he felt flung like a rock toward the river’s shore, unable to really slow himself down he curled to protect his head. Using the innate Gurgola ability of turning itself partially or fully into stone, he essentially became a wrecking ball, clearing a straight path of destruction breaking and snapping trees along the way for what he figured was

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five hundred or so feet. He had rushed back through the path he cleared, then along the river's edge until he saw the barge. The dragon made it to the barge flying, a short hop that Gurgola's are capable of, reaching them when he did.

Replaying the day's events through his head, Drake had become somewhat depressed. He felt completely inept during the entire ordeal of the attack. The only spell he had remembered was worthless and he could not even protect himself. Even the small gremlin and Leemstey did a better job.

He even noticed a marked difference in how Rockford treated him since the attack. After listening to how Madison, Trilly, and Dween all gushed over each other's performances defending against the monster, and the kudos to Leemstey for saving the lives of the young Dragonkeeper and his Protector, Rockford had shown little or no respect for Drake.

That's the price of losing your integrity, Drake thought with dismay.

He began worrying if he really was able to do all this Dragonkeeper stuff – if he cannot perform the spells or work his powers – what use would he be even with the Dragon's Eye?

All these thoughts at once became secondary when all of a sudden they reached Hagosda.

“May the Light help us...” said the dragon in a tone of pure shock.

They had reached Hagosda – or what remained of the Yasidi Tribe town – scattered piles of smoldering wood buildings, and ruined brick and mortar shelters.

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CHAPTER 15: Into the Dragon's Lair

The scene was one of complete and total devastation, not a single building was left standing and all but one wooden structure was burned to the ground. A thick haze of dust and smoke was evenly spread throughout the tribe town which made breathing difficult and forced everyone to cough, everyone except Rockford.

At first glance, Madison and Drake morbidly noticed there were no obvious signs of survivors. As they looked around in horror they wondered what exactly had happened to the Yasidi, seeing how the town about them was razed, their imagination formed terrifying images that kept the disturbing question unvoiced.

After stranding the barge beside the remains of a charred dock, the little group with their six remaining equis' gazed silently at the devastated tribe town. With Rockford in the lead and Dween carrying an injured but recovering master-at-arms, the group carefully entered the town, nervously vigilant against a surprise attack.

Walking among the smoldering remains of huts and cabins, and kicking over bricks and cinder-blocks, it became apparent the destruction that occurred here happened not recently, but not too long ago either. Maybe just a few days ago.

They heard a moan from one of the ruined buildings.

Trilly was off in a flash searching, using her sense of smell and quickness she found what they hoped was a Yasidi tribesman, trapped underneath a sizeable pile of rubble. Once enough rubble was pulled away, they were able to rescue the man and move him carefully to the town's, lone remaining structure – a wooden porch, partially burned, standing before the ruins of what must have been a house, but still strong looking and intact.

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The man was cut, bruised, and bloodied all over, but still breathing and alive. Madison along with Trilly began to gently clean him up and nurse his wounds. Unconscious at first, the man began to stir and with difficulty opened his eyes. Drake noticed and then questioned the man urgently.

“Who are you? What happened here?”

The tribesman stared at Drake for a few seconds mustering more strength, he then croaked, “I...am...Sehede. You—you are...the Young Spirit’s...Final One.” The man coughed in uncontrollable spasms that racked his body. Once the coughing attack subsided he cleared his throat wincing in pain, then slowly the tribesman continued, “Thankfully you were not here...the Evil One’s creatures came looking for you...when they did not find you, they destroyed our town. Many people did not survive...some were taken. Fortunately, many others got away...I was hiding when the building collapsed...it saved me, I suppose...from a horrible death.”

“What do you mean they came looking for him?” asked Rockford gruffly.

Sehede regarded the dragon and closed his eyes, he hoarsely said, “Ah, most distinguished Gurgola – ” another short bout of coughing “ – exactly what I told the Final One. Cennud of all kinds...came and terrorized our town, demanding the Dragonkeeper. When no one could produce him...well, you can see how they reacted.”

“How did the Cennud *know* we were coming?” asked Rockford to no one in particular, he was clearly surprised to learn this. Angrily, he glared at everyone around him.

The dragon desperately wanted to speak with Dwaner, but his brother had just recently laid him down on the porch to continue recovering from his injuries. At the earliest, the master-

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at-arms would be healed by morning. Rockford had no choice but to speak to, what he believed, were the lesser creatures around him about the concern bubbling to the forefront of his mind.

“If the Cennud knew we were coming here,” said Rockford, addressing everyone, “then it was no accident we met the sea serpent. This can only mean one thing.”

“What?” Madison asked.

“There is a spy in the palace,” replied Rockford firmly. “Which means that not only do the Cennuds know where we’re going, but why we’re going there.”

“So what now?” said Madison. “Do we turn around and head back to the palace?”

“No. We continue.”

“How about just sending back Trilly, Dween, or Leemstey?” interjected Drake. “To warn Chu.”

“No,” repeated the dragon. “Remember what the master-at-arms said, everyone in this group is needed. We’ve already been attacked once and someone’s been hurt, it will surely take all of us to get the Relic.”

Rockford keenly scanned the landscape from where they stood, then looked toward the sky and noticed the sun was clearly on its downward slide headed for nightfall.

The Gurgola had made a decision; he turned briskly and addressed everyone, “It will be dark soon. Let’s collect as much unburned wood as possible to keep a fire going all night. Everyone then rests and at daybreak we head for Ocksias.”

While Madison and Trilly stayed on the porch watching over the tribesman and Dwaner, the rest of the group went out to collect wood. As they searched they were surprised to find quite a bit came from collapsed shacks and huts that did not completely burn. Taking it seemed wrong

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– these were the Yasidi’s houses and workshops – Drake felt immensely remorseful gathering the wood. He was terribly aware of the fact this town and most of its inhabitant were crushed because of *him*. It was *him* they had searched for, it was *him* they really wanted to destroy, and when they couldn’t find *him*, they viciously took their frustration out on these unsuspecting and innocent tribespeople. Walking about, continuing to collect firewood guiltily, he saw for himself that the entire town was completely leveled, there were no survivors other than Sehede, and it gave Drake little comfort knowing that ‘many others’ actually ‘got away’. But the urgency and need to survive through the fast approaching evening overrode some feelings of guilt. Even so, Drake genuinely hoped he could return someday and replace the wood taken here, maybe even help rebuild the town. *Definitely after we get past these ‘times-of-strife’*, he thought with conviction.

Dusk approached and a large pile of firewood had been collected. The Gurgola had made the determination it was enough and then began to stack some of the wood to start the campfire. Once he was finished, everyone looked at the cone-shaped stack and admired Rockford’s handiwork. Drake realized they now needed matches, or something to strike a fire.

“How will we light it?” said Drake. “Just rub two sticks together – ” at once he looked at Rockford knowingly then pointed and smiled “ – or can *you* light it?”

“I’ll be able to do it,” said the dragon simply.

“You can?” said Leemstey, surprised. “I thought Gurgola’s were unable to breathe fire.”

“The vast majority of Gurgola’s are unable,” said Rockford in a lecturing tone, “but some of us are. In my—my family alone there are several that can and I’m but one of them.”

“*You* can actually produce a flame?” said Leemstey, he sounded strangely interested.

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“What’s it to you, assistant clerk?” Rockford said suspiciously.

“Oh, nothing just...*interesting*,” replied Leemstey, rubbing his chin.

Facing away from everyone, the dragon bent down and aimed his mouth at the base of the stack. Taking a deep breath in and with his lips separated only slightly, he blew out a jet of red-hot, intense flame. It scorched the wood causing it to immediately snap and crackle, and within short moments the base, followed soon after by the entire stack, became a raging fire.

Watching as the dragon easily lit the campfire, Drake curiously asked, “Rockford, who else in your family can produce flames? A brother?”

“My personal life is *none* of your business, young Dragonkeeper,” snapped the dragon, whirling around to face him. Drake obviously broached a sensitive topic. Rockford angrily added, “You’ll do well to concern yourself with your own matters.” The dragon turned away furiously, his tail twitching as he stomped to the opposite side of the fire.

“I think I’ll take the first watch with Mr. Sunshine,” said Trilly, referring to Rockford and trying to ease some tension. “My night vision is excellent, so rest assured that I’ll see anything lurking about. Besides, we gremlin’s really don’t sleep much.” She giggled and bounced over to the dragon.

Darkness had completely fallen upon the still smoldering remains of Hagosda. The sky was clear and the stars shone brightly through the haze of smoke still lingering around them. With the campfire providing their one, warm comfort, there was nothing else but go to sleep, bedtime had arrived and everyone began settling in.

Out of respect, it was decided that Sehede would recover and sleep upon the porch alone. This meant everyone else was going to sleep on the ground. Drake tried using the appearing

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spell to conjure full-sized beds, but was unable. He even tried making cots appear and was unsuccessful as well. Apparently, both beds and cots fell into the ‘complex’ category Chu had spoken of just a couple of days ago. Drake was able to conjure thick blankets and large pillows for everyone, so at least they were not sleeping directly on the cold, hard ground.

Dween used his cape and blankets to provide a clean surface for the yet unconscious Dwaner to sleep on. The Dvergar covered the master-at-arms warmly with his brother’s own cape and allotment of blankets, then rested on the bare ground next to Dwaner still looking quite worried. Leemstey sat alone against a fallen log, looking out at nothing, apparently waiting for sleep to overtake him. Trilly spoke to Rockford, mostly small talk about the evening’s cool weather while the dragon plainly ignored her, obviously still brooding from the earlier tantrum with the young Dragonkeeper. Madison and Drake had laid down next each other facing the campfire, and even with all the blankets and pillows, it was almost impossible for them to find a comfortable position on the ashen ground.

“I really don’t like Rockford,” muttered Madison, staring at flames lashing overhead, “how he treats you, how he thinks he’s all *that* when he’s not.”

“It’s my lack of integrity...” Drake tailed off sadly.

“He’s supposed to treat you with respect, give you a chance. Remember how Chu told him?”

“He has Mady. How many chances is he supposed to give me?”

“I don’t know. You’re the Dragonkeeper – as many as it takes.”

Silent moments passed as Drake watched the little gremlin slowly drag a heavy-looking piece of timber toward the campfire. He waited curiously to see how Trilly was going to lift it,

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when Rockford abruptly snatched the heavy wood from her grasp then tossed it into the flames as though it were a twig. Embers were blown everywhere, twisting and floating in the darkness like fireflies.

“Who do you think’s the spy?” asked Drake, as the ember’s died quickly in the cool evening breeze.

Her head jerked up, she had fallen asleep, “Whasat?”

“I said who’s the spy?” replied Drake.

Madison rubbed her eyes and wiped her face, then irritably said, “*Straddleham*. Who else could it be? Acting snobbish as he does and always talking to us condescendingly. Oh, and going off on *palace business* all the time – come on. I betcha that’s him goin’ off and reporting. Let’s just hope Chu figures it out before we get back.”

“Yeah—I guess you’re right,” said Drake. He didn’t feel convinced.

“Get to sleep little bro,” said Madison, turning her back to the fire and pulling the blanket tight, “that dragon’s gonna get us up early.”

Try as he might though, Drake was unable to fall asleep. Instead, he watched as the dragon said something to Trilly and they both walked away, outside the glow of the campfire, yet he heard them rustling out of sight, no doubt still keeping guard. Dwaner slept fitfully and Dween, certainly exhausted from his experiences today, snored lightly as drool rolled down his beard. His sister appeared to sleep uncomfortably, turning from her left to her right and back again, all the while clutching her bowstaff like a security blanket. The assistant clerk sat alone, still against the log, with his blankets and pillows by his side. His arms were crossed tight before his chest and even now he seemed angry over something.

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Once again, Drake replayed the events of earlier today, over and over, getting down on himself for having been completely useless. So many had almost died protecting his life, while smaller, seemingly weaker creatures he conceitedly believed, were in all actuality stronger than him. He felt totally disheartened.

From behind Drake, a hoarse voice said, “Do not worry Final One, you will do and act as needed at the appropriate time.”

Slightly startled, Drake rolled and turned to face the porch, he breathed, “What did you say?”

“Your time is not now – it will come,” said Sehede. “Prepare yourself and remember your training, for very soon you will need it.”

Color had returned to the tribesman’s face, but the flickering light of the campfire played with shadows, concealing his eyes and giving him an eerie, haunted look.

Drake shifted uneasily, *How did he know what I was thinking?* The young Dragonkeeper stared at Sehede for a while, then said, “Why do you call me, ‘Final One’?”

“You will find that you and your sister will go by many names,” replied Sehede, smiling. “But more importantly, because that is what you are – the *final one*. The being you call the Child of the Light picked *you* to be the next and final Dragonkeeper. You are really more than that. The Final One is the harbinger of strife ahead – that is why so many do not want to believe in you. Yet, you are a symbol of hope that victory will come in the end, and hope is despised by the Evil One, the Marag, and its Father.”

Drake appreciated learning more about this fate, the fate of being the final Dragonkeeper bestowed upon him. He sensed a connection of sorts with the tribesman as though they were

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meant to meet each other. The young Dragonkeeper wondered if Sehede was, by chance, the guide they were supposed to meet, but instead of asking him that he was drawn to learn about something else.

“I was told the Yasidi have a rich history,” said Drake. “Please tell me about it.”

Sehede sat up Indian-style with a grunt, stretching his arms and craning his neck, and then he gazed squarely into Drake’s eyes.

“I am honored the Final One is interested in our history. I wish we had days to review it, but we do not. I will tell you what you should know – what you need to know – it is what the Final One deserves.”

The Yasidi tribesman passed a casual hand above the porch floor and magicked a bluish-white flame, it silently gleamed between them.

Drake couldn’t help but shake his head in disbelief – yet another person he’s met able to do magic in this strange, little world. As Sehede spoke the small flame grew larger casting a revealing light upon the tribesman, for the first time Drake truly noticed the deep lines of age carved on his face. Upon the flame, images and pictures flashed of what the tribesman described and spoke about; it was captivating and frightening all at once.

“Long ago, there were seventy tribes of the Yasidi in the Old World, what you know as the Realm of Grey,” began Sehede, staring at the flame with a most serious expression. “The tribes were vicious, blood-thirsty bands of warriors, each trying to best the other and put its will upon weaker, neighboring nations. One day, the greatest warrior from those tribes, Nadargi, was on a mountain top overlooking a land he planned to attack when he received a vision. The vision ordered Nadargi not to attack for if he did, the tribes, all of them, would be destroyed. Instead,

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they were given mysterious powers so they could live peacefully among each other, and the powers were to be used for the best interests of the people.”

Drake watched mesmerized as images danced on the flame, depicting Yasidi living happily in large, sprawling tribes. There was peace, there was harmony, but most of all there was love. Then wise-men became established, they were considered wise because they had learned how to use the mysterious powers in ways never before imagined. Some wise-men began using the mysterious powers in very strange and troubling manners, upsetting the people of the seventy tribes. What these wise-men did over time drew the people away from their peacefulness; instead, they pushed the people towards committing crimes against each other, feuding amongst the tribes, and even to commit murder. But there was a very small group of Yasidi, which had members from all the tribes that banded together against this distortion of the mysterious powers. They were on the verge of being killed when the Light Spirit offered to show them the way to a new land. A land where they could live once again in peace, harmony, and love.

Sehede remained intently focused on the flame, he continued, “The Light Spirit brought us here and for hundreds of years we have been at peace with each other, and our neighbors. But now the Evil One has surfaced to ruin the unity in the Realm of Faerie, we Yasidi will not allow it. We will help you, Final One, and find allies to help us – I give you my word.” He looked at Drake for acknowledgement and found that the young Dragonkeeper had finally gone to sleep. Sehede did not know when or where in the story Drake had begun slumbering, but he had a strong sense the boy had heard everything he wanted to and needed to know.

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The next morning Drake was woken up by Madison, she said, “Dude, I didn’t know you snore, it was awful.”

As he sat up and collected his wits, Trilly handed him some oatmeal-looking mush for breakfast, “Your sister said you sounded like a buzz-saw. What’s that?” The little gremlin’s cat-like ears perked up and her eyes looked expectant as she giggled.

“Nothing,” said Drake grouchily. He took the breakfast, smelled it, and made a face.

“It’s all we could find little bro,” said Madison, observing Drake’s reaction, “but it’s actually good, eat up. I’ve been told we have a long day ahead.”

Drake saw to his great surprise (but to his immense relief as well) Dwaner was wide-awake, alert, and on his feet. The master-at-arms’ customary scowl was firmly in place, and he thoroughly looked great.

“Dwaher, howph doo you feeph?” asked Drake with a mouthful of the delicious slop.

“Aye, with the blood of a dragon coursing through me,” said Dwaner animatedly, “I feel better and younger than I have felt in a long time.” He looked around their small camp and asked, “Where is Rockford? I must thank him.”

Rockford came into view from behind the porch, apparently having heard the master-at-arms, the Gurgola said, “Forget it. We dragons are used to bailing out your kind.”

Dwaner smiled, he knew that was as close to a ‘Your welcome’ he would get from the acerbic dragon.

The morning was cool and damp, and fog was mixed in with the smoke of destruction – a sobering reminder of where they were and what had happened. Leemstey and Madison tended to

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the equis', while Rockford and Dwaner spoke in hushed tones. Trilly licked at her fur, it was the first time Drake had seen her do it as Dween watched merrily along, obviously happier now that his blood-brother had fully recovered. The young Dragonkeeper looked around and suddenly realized he had not seen the tribesman.

“Where’s Sehede?” he asked, wishing furtively to speak with him more.

“Who?” said Dwaner, looking over to Drake from his conversation with Rockford.

“Yah, I foo woon knoo whoo hee speekas oof blood-brooter,” joined Dween, “te Yehseedee treebsmen.”

Drake looked at Dween and waited, then smiled patiently and motioned a hand toward him, “Yes?”

“I foo woon knoo te Yehseedee treebsmen leefta eerly tris morgon,” replied Dween.

“What? Why?”

“The tribesman did not want to disturb you,” said Leemstey, in a tone expressing frustration, “he watched you sleep all night.”

“And guess what little bro,” added Madison, “the guy said he was supposed to be our *guide*, the one that would’ve led us to Ocksias, but he couldn’t do it. He said he had to go southwest of here to warn the other tribe towns.”

“So what do we do?” Drake asked.

“We don’t need him anyway,” grumbled the Gurgola, “I know my way around pretty well. I can get us to Ocksias and then the lair.”

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Trilly leapt from where she stood and landed in between them, she said, “*Right* – I saw Rockford asking directions from Sehedo this morning.” The little gremlin then bounced away laughing.

After breakfast and after getting themselves in order, they broke camp and loaded themselves along with their strange ponies onto the barge. Their plan was simple: Cross the Egahi River then make due west through the Chawlee Forest until they reached the western side, once through, the group would easily find the tribe town of Ocksias. As they made the short jaunt across the deep Egahi, no one said it, but they all thought it – everyone hoped nothing had happened to Ocksias. Not only did they want to avoid seeing another massacred town, but selfishly, they were in desperate need of food and water.

They beached the barge deep into shore to prevent it from floating away, and then knowing they were going to need it for the return trip, they hid it with tree limbs and branches as best they could. Hopefully it would be waiting for them when they returned, if not, it was a long walk back to the residence from Hagosda. Everyone hopped on one of the six remaining equis’, except Rockford. The dragon made it quite clear he did not need one. This worked out anyway since one of the little horses carried the extra weapons. Rockford walked the lead alongside Dwaner with Madison and Drake following, they in turn were in front of Dween as Trilly and Leemstey tailed next, beside each other.

The trek went on for hours, even though the group tried moving through the dense Chawlee Forest as fast as they could. The forest was filled with huge trees, thickly leaved, similar to maple and sycamore, while others reminded Madison and Drake of the tall elm tree. Beautiful shrubs and flowers were seen throughout their progression, the reds of what looked

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liked azalea and the bright yellows of dogwood bushes. Sadly, many of these plants were trampled because of their haste, no one wanted to sleep outdoors under the moonlight-blocking canopy of the trees.

The glint of something shiny caught Drake's eye as he sat lolling on his equis. He looked ahead and saw it, then wondered why he had not seen it earlier, and wondered even further why it was there at all. The young Dragonkeeper, remembering about Dween, glanced behind to the smiling Dvergar and noticed the same thing.

"Dwaner," started Drake, "you've got your helmet on."

"Aye, young Dragonkeeper," replied the master-at-arms, his tone sounded teasing when he looked back and added, "I *do*. Don't I?"

"No that's not what I mean," said Drake slightly defensive. "It's just that you and Dween both fell into the river yesterday, I thought you guys had lost your helmets at that point. Or are those extra ones?"

The master-at-arms smiled, "These are the one and only helmets we have with us."

"They had to have fallen off when you guys landed in the water," said Drake, as though trying to solve a puzzle. "Somehow the helmets floated and Dween grabbed them."

"I foo woon knoo oor helmeets woor un oor heeds," called Dween from behind.

"He's right little bro," said Madison, "I remember both of them havin' their helmets when we pulled them out of the river."

"Well, then how the heck did they stay on?" said Drake, addressing Dwaner rather than his sister.

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“Dvergar forged metal is legendary all over the Realm of Faerie, and rightfully so,” said Dwaner proudly. “Our metal-smithing techniques produce shields that retain their shape, swords that remain sharp, and helmets that barely dent when hit, and of course, this includes any other object that can withstand a direct, powerful blow. In fact, the enchantments placed on our armor and weapons are even better known. These same shields are magicked to grow in thickness or size, the same for swords which can glow bright or burn hot, and helmets that remain on the wearer’s head regardless if they trip, are knocked over, or say...”

“You fall into a river,” interrupted Madison dryly.

“*Exactly*,” said Dwaner.

“So those things are made *not* to fall off your heads?” Drake asked incredulously. “No matter what?”

“It’ll stay on until the wearer decides to take it off,” replied the master-at-arms. His tone turned serious and he said, “Now take this sword hilt for example.”

Madison and Drake gazed at it remembering the last time they had seen one – Drake had almost been skewered.

“It’s similar to the one the assistant clerk poorly mishandled,” continued Dwaner, “but with an added – fiery – capability. It’ll come in useful if we need it, though I hope we never will.”

Drake looked back at Leemstey to check if he had listened at all to what was said. The young Dragonkeeper knew Leemstey was apologetic for what had happened in the Dvergar Armory, the whole incident was behind them now and Drake wanted to keep Leemstey’s mood

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from souring even further. The young Dragonkeeper simply hoped he would just take the comment in stride.

Grinning timidly, Drake leaned past Dween to face Leemstey and said, “Did you hear any of the conversation?”

“None at all,” replied Leemstey dourly.

“We haven’t heard anything,” interjected Trilly, becoming excited. “Where you guys saying something funny?” She chuckled and squirmed on her equis.

“Oh, it was nothin’ really, never mind,” said Drake at once.

They began noticing the forest was thinning out as the little group continued its westward march. Overtop the tall trees they glimpsed patchy views of the huge and imposing Equa Mountains, chalky-white in color, the massive peaks were tall, jagged, and uninviting. If the Amphithear’s were anything in character like the Gurgola’s, it seemed fitting that they would live there.

The group hurried faster when they saw the clearing beyond the definite edge of the forest. Just as Rockford was stepping out, a trap was sprung. Magical “bars” popped up quickly from the forest floor, spaced closely apart, surrounding them instantly. The bars glowed to a brilliant white and they let out a soft, buzzing sound. Trilly got too close to one – singeing the fur on the back of her arm to her skin. She howled in surprise and pain. Before the group could react, men from everywhere, even from above, came charging with fire-tipped spears and bow-and-arrows. The men screamed a piercing battle-cry as they swiftly and many deeply surrounded the magical trap.

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Dwaner and Dween were first off the equis', bearing their shoulders from beneath their capes with broadsword and hammer in hand. Rockford extended all his talons as Trilly pulled out her one and only knife. Madison also lowered herself, holding her bowstaff at the ready. Leemstey however, was oddly relaxed, almost aloof, fingering his jewel while Drake remained saddled not knowing what else to do. In spite of this the young Dragonkeeper noticed these men resembled Sehede with their dark and hardy features, and were dressed similarly with rough, leather tops and pants.

A path split among the men allowing one of them to reach the glowing cage. This man wore a headdress of some strange creature's fur, apparently singling him as the leader. He looked around the cage and his gaze eventually fell upon Drake. The young Dragonkeeper was thinking fast of something to say when the man in the headdress spoke.

“Forgive us for the rude welcoming Final One but the current situation has forced *this*.” The man in the headdress motioned to the bars between them and gravely added, “We are at war.”

With no noticeable movement from the leader or any other man, the bars slipped back into the forest floor with a rustling of leaves. Weapons were then lowered after a stern glare from the headdressed man – by both sides.

As night approached, the little group along with the leader and a few Yasidi defenders made their way to the tribe town of Ocksias. The remaining bulk of defenders stayed in the forest, hiding themselves nearby the magical traps laid out as their first line of defense.

Eventually, Ocksias came into view – it was prepared for a siege. The Yasidi instantly tensed and hurried the little group into the town swiftly and quietly.

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A makeshift brick and mortar wall about ten feet high was hastily built following news from tribesfolk that had escaped the attack on Hagosda. Inside, weapons and other armaments were being made in preparation for the defense of Ocksias. The group, after being led to water for their equis' and then securing them for rest, were taken to a meeting room within a small building. Straw mats were spread in a large circle on the floor, which they were kindly told to sit on. The man with the headdress sat next to Drake and then spoke to the little group.

“I am Chief Ladusu of the Yasidi Tribe here at Ocksias. I wish we could have welcomed you Final One” – he looked at Drake sadly – “under better circumstances. Please accept my apologies once more.”

“I, um, no problem, really,” said Drake, trying to sound official.

“You mentioned being at war,” said Dwaner, skipping pleasantries.

“We know the Final One is in search of the Dragon’s Eye,” replied Ladusu. “We also know Hifearnan has given the Cennud free reign to search and destroy the Dragonkeeper, and his Protector.” He looked at Madison while saying the last part, then continued, “The Cennud are using this as an opening to get back at those they think, in their twisted minds, have wronged them.

“Even worse, as Hifearnan grows stronger so does the Marag and its Father. Creatures of the Marag cast out over a thousand years ago are once more surfacing as a result. These are vile monsters that may claim allegiance to the Evil One but in fact are only allied to their own gruesome desires.”

“Have you received no aid from the Amphithear’s?” questioned Dwaner.

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“They have their own problems to deal with,” replied Ladusu, “not only the Cennud but other races loyal to Hifearnan. In both cases, attacks have grown against dragons without fear of reprisal.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Rockford sharply. “Have you heard what is happening in other areas, maybe as far south as New Vesperik?”

Ladusu respectfully bowed, making a show of it, he said, “No, son of Gurgola, I’ve heard no reports.”

Rockford was surprised by the show of respect and then became quiet, the dragon acted as if he hoped no one had noticed.

“I imagine we’ll be able to spend the evening here, ah, chief-sir?” asked Madison, noticing the darkness from outside through the windows of the room.

“But of course, Protector,” chuckled Ladusu deeply. “The Yasidi are honored to have the Final One and his Protector among them.”

“May we get supplies?” added Dwaner. “We lost all of our extra food and water to a sea serpent on the way here. We don’t need much, just enough to get us to the lair.”

“You will get everything you need,” said Ladusu, “all that we can spare. But first, let us show you the hospitality of the Yasidi. We will feed you properly and in return you will tell me about this sea serpent. I must know about everything that menaces outside these walls.”

“Yah, I foo woon knoo howw wee ull faysa te seerpent,” said Dween in his awkward and simple manner.

The Dvergar then told the story of how everyone fought against the monster. In particular, he was especially proud of his brother’s willingness to sacrifice his own life so the

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Dragonkeeper and Protector could stay safe. This was what any great Dvergar would do, you know.

As hot and piping food was brought into the room, and a lazy-Susan was lifted from the ground before them, Drake could not help but admire Dween for his selfless and modest behavior – the Dvergar was truly the best among them.

After spending the night in the same room made into sleeping quarters, they were awoken the following morning to a wonderful, hearty breakfast that rivaled last night's dinner. Their breakfast consisted of wheat pancakes (surprisingly filled with sweet syrup), banana bread, cereal, strange but delicious tasting fruit of the land, and thick milk – all in large servings. Madison thought she would not like the milk, but after observing the “boys” and Trilly down it in great big gulps she gave it a try...

“Bleaah!” Madison choked. “This stuff’s horrible.” She quickly asked an attendant for juice and instead got water, it didn’t matter, she drank plenty trying to get the awful taste out of her mouth.

They were each given a leather backpack to wear; the equis’ were unable to make the trip since the creatures naturally feared heights. With the backpacks the little group stored extra food and water for the trip, Dwaner and Dween however packed as many extra weapons (mostly flails and maces) as they could into theirs. Trilly instead asked for a knife to replace the one she lost; the chief handed the gremlin a dagger with a thick grip, she accepted it while snickering then

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quickly worked on its handle. Once everyone had finished packing they bid their farewells and expressed their thanks.

Leaving the now heavily fortified town, they exited through a thickly-made wooden door, drawn down from the wall that enclosed Ocksias. Marching westward toward the towering Equa Mountains, Drake looked back wishing the best for the Ocksias-Yasidi as the door loudly thumped shut.

Over hundreds of years of peaceful neighboring between the Amphithears and the Yasidi a path had been worn by tribesfolk making regular visits to the king and queen's lair. However, the path was very dangerous, mostly on the side of the mountain and not very wide, it only allowed two or three to stand side-by-side and the ground was slippery because of loose gravel. Despite this, the group got into a rhythm and they made good progress toward the lair's high location.

With Dwaner and Dween in the lead and Rockford trailing in back, they were rounding a sharp and small-ledged corner when suddenly they were stopped by strange and ugly looking creatures. Instinctively, Rockford took one small step in reverse and was surprised to find another group had dropped down behind him; these were hanging on the mountain side above without being noticed. There were four of them in front and another four in back, they stood taller than Dwaner and Dween but not by much, they had misshapen horns protruding from their heads and very curly hair extending down their backs, they looked filthy and were dressed in tattered woodsman garb. The creatures carried spiked clubs and make-shift shields, and each wore an evil grin of victory.

“Accursed *Bergtrylles*,” spat Dwaner. “I should’ve known these mountain beasts—”

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But before the master-at-arms could finish his statement – two Bergtrylle were upon him and another two pounced on Dween. Using their oversized arms and hands they ripped at the backpacks. Dween's was tossed over the ledge as Dwaner's was torn out of his grip. The Bergtrylle that took it quickly passed the extra weapons to its companions. Then, from in-front and back-behind, the Bergtrylle attacked.

Dwaner and Dween went swinging into action and yelling their battle-cry as Trilly joined them. Rockford, with Leemstey's help, engaged the four in back. Drake heard the dragon roar while Leemstey's face looked maniacal; the assistant clerk appeared to relish this opportunity to battle. The young Dragonkeeper simply stood ineffective, not knowing what to do; he was roughly grabbed by his sister as she whipped around and shot a blazing fireball at one Bergtrylle. The creature burst into flames and fell to the floor. Just in time, Madison conjured an enclosure for her and Drake as another Bergtrylle struck from behind.

The fight raged on until the mountain beasts began overpowering them: Dwaner looked tired, the little gremlin could not get close enough, and Rockford's swipes missed several bulbous noses. Slowly and methodically the Bergtrylles were pushing the group closer together, closer to the ledge...

Sensing the gravity of the situation – Dween snapped to berserker mode.

Using his hammer the crazed Dvergar blocked one mace swing and then punched the same Bergtrylle in the face, knocking it backwards off the ledge. With fluid movement Dween quickly swung the hammer around hitting another directly on the temple, it crumpled to the floor, then he flung his hammer bashing a third one on the head with a loud crunch. The beast was knocked off its feet and landed face-first with a thud, it remained motionless.

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Meanwhile, Dween's wild onslaught provided enough distraction for Rockford to flip into the air and land behind two Bergtrylles. The dragon promptly grabbed them like dolls and tossed them over the small-ledged corner – they screamed as they fell until a *CRACK* and a *THUMP* were heard.

With lightning speed, Trilly disarmed the remaining forward-facing Bergtrylle, laughing at it as she held its club and tossed its shield to the ground. She feigned to attack it and said, “Boo!” then allowed the beast to run away for its life.

Leemstey was less forgiving. He took gleeful pleasure in backing the last Bergtrylle toward the ledge. The beast saw it was cornered and outnumbered; it dropped its weapon, fell to its knees, and began whimpering for its life. The assistant clerk acted merciful, stepping back so the creature could run away, then, as soon as it stood, Leemstey viciously kicked its chest pushing it off the mountain. The Bergtrylle cried in horror until several, terrible cracking sounds were heard down below.

Madison released the protective enclosure over her and Drake, and then they silently exchanged knowing looks, disturbed over Leemstey's behavior. Unlike the other Bergtrylles this one was defeated and had begged for its life. *Why not let it run away?* they thought. Leemstey's continuing change in demeanor had really begun to worry Madison and Drake; the quest seemed to be taking a toll on the assistant clerk's mind.

Everyone huddled together looking at each other for injuries. Except for some bumps and bruises, and a small cut on the back of Rockford's right arm, they came out of this battle quite well. Unfortunately, the extra arsenal that the master-at-arms and Dween had carried did not fair as good. All were either lost with the Bergtrylles that had handled them, or lay broken

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and useless on the ground. Dwaner kicked at the broken weapons in disgust as his blood-brother patted him on the back, consoling him.

Madison spotted blood tracking down the dragon's forearm, with genuine concern she said, "Rockford, you're *bleeding*. Do you want it bandaged or something?"

"Lady Protector, never you mind," replied Rockford. "We dragons heal quickly. Our blood not only mends your kind."

Madison pursed her lips at his reply, then lightly said, "Okay, no problem." She next thought to herself, *See if I ever care again whether you're hurt, pal.*

Drake became depressed all over again knowing he had done absolutely nothing in the battle. Of course, everyone asking him if he was alright did not help matters. Add to this, Drake avoiding eye contact with the dragon since he knew Rockford was well aware he had plainly hid behind his sister's shield. How he was going to do to get out of this rut began consuming his mind. Not only did Drake have no integrity with the Gurgola, but he had no control over his powers. Drawing these blanks at the worst possible times was simply embarrassing. He knew he needed to get himself right soon or else his impotence was going to get someone really hurt – or killed.

Heavy pounding sounds shook the trail and startled the group. Everyone spun around – it was two large Amphithears. The curving smile of their mouths was betrayed by the seriousness in their small eyes. When the each saw Rockford they immediately bowed and then the slightly larger of the two spoke in Dragon Runes.

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“My drihten, excuse us, we thought you were a group of Bergtrylle. The mountain beasts are now allied with Hifearnan and the Cennuds, and they have become bold enough to attack unsuspecting Amphs – many have gone missing over the past month.”

Rockford, looking very self-conscious, walked away from the group to the Amphithears – he spoke to them privately in their own melodious tongue.

“What did they call him?” Madison murmured to Drake.

“I think they called him a ‘drihten,’” he replied.

“Huh? What’s that?”

“It’s like ‘tighearn,’ a word from another language. It might be Welsh or maybe Old English, it stands for ‘lord.’”

“*Lord?* Like royalty?” Madison shook her head, she then glanced over to the huddled dragons, “Do you hear what they’re saying now?”

“No, I can’t hear them.”

After the dragons finished speaking to one another, Rockford returned to the group and said, “They’ll take us to their lair safely. Let’s go.”

The larger Amphithear lead by ground as the other provided cover by air. Onward they continued the ever increasing climb up the mountain and the expectation Drake would soon have his hands on the Relic.

As they neared the lair entrance, Drake began imagining what to expect. He knew from reading that dragon’s lived in caves and normally these were stark and bare locations. Yet, these dragons did not seem to follow the normal mold, maybe their den entrances were different. So it came with a slight sense of disappointment seeing that the Amphithear’s Lair was simply an

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unremarkable cave opening, high in the mountains. One-by-one they entered, following the two Amphithear's that led them here, into the dark, maw-like opening of the cave. When Drake entered, everything changed. From the outside, the lair's entrance looked like any other big, dark, hole-opening in the side of a mountain. Though, from the inside, the lair entryway was completely different, and beautiful.

“Wow...” said Drake, slack jawed.

“This is incredible...unbelievable,” said Madison, as if in reply.

The others in the group were not as impressed, Drake supposed they had seen all this before or somewhere like it.

The entryway lead into a long and high hallway bordered with perfectly white, sand stone walls, enormous lanterns were attached which crackled with fire. The passage was filled with two rows of marble pillars, opposite each other, with every column reaching at least forty feet high. The floor was also of marble, but it was smoothly tiled with pictures of different Amphithears in acts of valor and action. The Amphithear's coat-of-arms hung from every other pillar: It was a flat-topped heater shaped symbol with a white background, one corner of the emblem contained a blue and red bi-colored square, while the remainder had a stylishly drawn Amphithear – swooping down from left-to-right – with a jet of flame extending from its mouth. The pillars without a banner had a name etched into it, Drake imagined these were either previous kings and queens, or maybe famous Amphithears. The hallway seemed to stretch on forever, along with the rows of pillars and pictures on the floor.

There were guard dragons stationed at the entrance which paid no attention to any of them except the Gurgola. They bowed slightly toward him and repeated, “Greetings my

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drihten.” Rockford furtively looked back at Drake, ignoring the guards as the entire group and the two Amphithears that lead them pressed forward.

After being taken down a side hallway, passing more guards, they reached a chamber opening that stretched almost to the ceiling. Rockford asked the Amphs to hold a moment, then he turned and faced the group.

“We are about to enter the Court of King Capac and Queen Itzel of the Amphithears – ” the dragon focused on Madison and Drake “ – walk directly behind me, when I bend down to my right knee and bow my head, do the same.”

Drake smiled inwardly because he and his sister already knew about this custom.

The Gurgola continued, “I will then introduce you and we can state our reason for this visit. Focus on treating the king and queen with the utmost favor, then maybe you can get from them what we came for.”

The group followed the two Amphithears and Rockford as Madison and Drake kept behind the Gurgola, Leemstey was behind them, and Dwaner, Dween, and Trilly walked side-by-side in back. They entered into a great, circular room, much bigger than the Dragonkeeper Training Room, with rough hewed walls and light from burning, wood torches. Far ahead of them sat one large, dark-gold Amphithear and a smaller, red one beside it. They sat in golden hammocks held securely from high above, with their enormous wings pressed against their backs, and their small legs dangling, comically beneath.

A wide carpet was spread before them, white trimmed and bi-colored in blue and red, it led the entire path to the king and queen. Maybe ten steps from reaching the royal dragons, two other guards approached and stopped everyone from proceeding further. Rockford knelt and

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bowed, everyone followed his lead and waited. The larger Amphithear, King Capac, spoke decisively in Dragon Runes.

“You may all rise. Prince Rockford, son of the Gurgola’s, what business brings you to our clan’s lair?”

“Dear prince, how is your brother King Perrin these days?” inquired Queen Itzel, also in Dragon Runes. She then added with a sad tone, “Are you two *still* not talking?”

Drake’s mouth gaped at what he heard.

Madison whispered to her brother, “*What?* No way! A *prince?* And he never told us...?”

With smoke spewing from his nostrils and clearly embarrassed, Rockford stood and replied, “King Capac, you are as commanding as ever, and Queen Itzel, you are truly the radiant light of the Amphithears. I wish I’d brought words from my brother, but no, our fight continues. The Gurgola king is as – unforgiving – as ever.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that prince,” returned Queen Itzel, her thin head shook sadly.

King Capac clapped the hand-like appendages on his forewings and the four Amphithears on the carpet moved away, now, nothing stood between the little group and the monarchs. The Amphithear king then said, “Indeed, prince, your brother can be stubborn at times. So, what brings you to our Court?”

The Gurgola moved aside and allowed Madison and Drake to take a few, timid steps forward, he said, “I come on request of Tighearn Jiro and Grand Advisor Minh Chu to present the – ” Rockford’s face vaguely soured, as if he was about to say something he did not like “ – the final Dragonkeeper and his Protector of the Prophecy.”

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The statement caught Madison and Drake by surprise, it was news to them Chu had recruited Rockford in this regard. Then again, they were unaware until moments ago the Gurgola was royalty as well.

The king silently examined Drake, inspecting him as if for defects, the queen meanwhile appraised Madison. Through it all, Madison and Drake waited patiently and uncomfortably, they stole quick glances at each other, looked down at the floor, and nervously tapped their staffs. Finally, King Capac spoke.

“So the Prophecy is true.” He pointed at them and his wing made a rustling noise, “You are the young Dragonkeeper called Drake, and you are Lady Protector Madison?”

The young Dragonkeeper waited to reply, not wanting to accidentally interrupt the king, at last he said, “Um, yes, my sister and I are that.”

Neither the king nor queen said anything, another moment of awkward hush ensued.

“Well...” Drake said, thinking on his feet, “your representative on the Council of Dragon’s, Halian, has he come and spoken to you?”

“Oh yes,” replied King Capac, “he was here days ago. He’s already returned to the Council to report what is happening in Vesperik. While here he told us everything that happened at the last meeting. All very convincing, mind you.”

“Indeed,” interjected Queen Itzel, staring directly at Madison, “it was hard for us to dismiss what Halian said you did.”

Like an old married couple, they finished each other’s thoughts.

King Capac scratched his rounded snout and resumed, “That wily, old Wyvern – what’s his name...?”

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“Gahiji, my liege,” replied the queen Amphithear.

“Yes, thank you my beloved,” said the king, his long tail which tapered to a colorful mass of feathers, twitched and brushed the queen’s as they sat, slightly rocking in their hammock-thrones. “Gahiji – what he did, proved the Prophecy we thought to be fable, true after all.” He turned his gaze away, then in a lower voice he added, “And I imagine Queen Young-Flower and the prince’s brother have had a change of opinion also...”

“For so long we have not believed,” said Queen Itzel, “to now find out we were wrong. Well, it’s...how would I say it?”

“A *shock*,” King Capac interjected.

“Yes, shock and surprise,” continued Queen Itzel. “Since this revelation, we’ve gone back and studied our history, to see how we led ourselves astray, how we ignored the truth.”

“I wish we could say it was one thing,” said King Capac, fluttering his wings and entwining his tail with the queen’s, “but as with most things in life it was really a combination of influences and choices, most of which were unfortunately bad or wrong.”

Although fascinated by the discussion, Drake began feeling weary and impatient. He sensed enough time had been given to the king and queen, to let them speak uninterrupted, quickly noticing a break in their dialog, he shrewdly said, “King Capac, Queen Itzel, I see both of you understand the situation we’re in, and no doubt this is reinforced with how the Cennuds are acting of late.” Drake took a deep breath and continued, “So, to be brief with your time, may I respectfully request the Relic from you? The Dragon’s Eye crystal? I trust it’s in your possession, somewhere?” The young Dragonkeeper looked around to emphasize his point.

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The king of the Amphithears let out a puff of smoke from his nostrils, the dragon at once appeared strangely distressed and said, “That’s the problem young Dragonkeeper...What we’ve been trying to say is—”

“My dear boy,” interrupted Queen Itzel dolefully, “we do not have the Dragon’s Eye. We haven’t had it in our possession for hundreds of years.”

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CHAPTER 16: The Quest Continues

The muted sound of burning torches filled the room as Drake stood dumbfounded, staring at the queen. Barely audible, he creaked, “Wha...?”

“*You don’t have it?*” Madison said indignantly. “Did you lose it? Did you misplace it? Do you have any idea what it took to get here?”

“*Lady Protector,*” snapped Rockford, “control yourself and show respect to the king and queen!”

Both the king and queen Amphithear squirmed in their hammock-thrones as smoke rose from their nostrils.

Dwaner noticed their reaction, he stepped forward glaring at Madison while he said, “Your highnesses, please forgive the Protector, it has been a difficult journey. This comes as a shock to all of us. We were told the Dragon’s Eye was given to the Amphithears for safe keeping...” He trailed off leaving the conclusion to hang.

Drake composed himself quickly then thought hard and fast, he said, “Queen Itzel, you mentioned recently the Amphithears have gone back and studied their history” – the queen dragon nodded – “King Capac, you then said there were influences and choices which were bad, correct?” The king merely stared back at the young Dragonkeeper, Drake resumed, “Given these statements, may I respectfully ask you a question?”

“Go on.” King Capac replied stoically.

“How did the Amphithears come to *not* be in possession of the Dragon’s Eye?”

King Capac glanced at his queen and then bowed his head, clearly uncomfortable with the question posed.

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“Go ahead my liege,” said Queen Itzel, nodding. “Tell them.”

Using his massive wings the king Amphithear floated up, off the hammock-throne, then softly lowered himself to the floor. Laboriously, he paced on his small legs for a minute and then slowly turned to face the group.

“Young Dragonkeeper, we have learned the Dragon’s Eye was stolen from us over seven-hundred years ago. A short time after Glicemax delivered the Relic piece to us.”

“Who stole it?” Drake pressed gently.

“You must know that in those times,” said King Capac, walking along the edge of the carpet, “although the Cennuds were in exile, kept away in southern Aphrike, there were still some that many trusted and allowed to remain among us.

“There was one such Cennud, a Crotalus, who became a representative within the lair that the previous king, my father, trusted. This Crotalus ultimately became tempted by the Father of the Marag. To prove his allegiance the Cennud stole what was considered very valuable to us – the Relic piece.” The king Amphithear stopped pacing at once; with his tail twitching, he sighed and continued, “Looking back now, this may be the reason why we as a clan became doubters of the Prophecy. Without the Dragon’s Eye piece as a constant reminder we plainly forgot and stopped believing.”

Drake fleetingly wondered why the king Amphithear continued referring to the Dragon’s Eye as a ‘piece’, but quickly discarded the thought to more urgently pursue what had happened to it.

“Did you try to recover it?” Drake interjected urgently. “Had it been missing long before you found out?”

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“Young Dragonkeeper,” replied Queen Itzel from her hammock-throne, “we discovered almost immediately, but knew of nowhere the Crotalus could have gone too. They are indigenous to Vesperik and live practically throughout the continent. At the time, it was an impossible task to find him.”

“Your highnesses,” started Dwaner respectfully, “may I ask if there is any idea where the Dragon’s Eye might be today? Surely over the centuries you’ve heard stories of its fate.”

King Capac blew dark smoke from his nostrils and said, “Yes we have. There are stories from Dineh tribesman, cousins to the Yasidi, who live on the western side of the Di-See Mountains. I’ll let our resident representative tell you himself.”

Drake recalled seeing the Dineh tribe land on his map, pulling the map out of his pocket he referred to it closely. The Dineh seemed to live awfully far away. Between them and the Amphithear’s Lair laid a huge desert called Gahida, bordered with a warm plain to the south and a cold plain to the north. And as the king had mentioned, a smaller set of mountains separated the Dineh from the desert.

The king ordered one of the guards to fetch the Dineh representative. After only a few minutes the Amphithear guard returned with a very old man, very wrinkled, and with a very deep, dark tan. He wore a dark-brown leather shirt underneath an open vest of fur and instead of pants he wore stiff, rawhide leggings. His head carried a headdress, more elaborate and beautiful than what the Ocksias chief had carried. The headdress was a fully beaded head band with black, yellow, and orange feathers attached, all of which extended behind his head, three feet from his brow. The representative walked in with an obvious hunch – Drake wondered sadly if the large headdress rendered it more difficult for the old man to move around.

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“This is Nehehota,” introduced King Capac, “of the Dineh tribe town, Notama. Nehehota lives with us since the Dineh are so much farther away than the Yasidi. It is easier for them and us to have a tribal elder which can advise on how the Dineh would react to our proposals for trades and services. More relevant to our discussion is that the tribe town of Notama has some history with regards to the Relic – I will let him tell you.”

At this, Nehehota bowed slightly toward the king then stared carefully at Drake and Madison. The Dineh elder smiled widely and closed his watery eyes, in a low voice he said, “Great Light’s Child, thank you for the privilege of gazing upon your Final One and the Guardian.” He took a deep breath in, letting it out slowly and quietly.

“What did he call me?” Madison whispered to Drake. “I thought I was the ‘Protector’?”

“I learned recently,” Drake replied, “we go by many names around here” – he shrugged – “I guess that’s what the Dineh call you.”

While rolling her eyes, Madison dryly said, “Oh, I can’t *wait* to hear some of these other names—*humph*.”

“Forgive me, but I am elderly,” started Nehehota humbly, “my powers of storytelling have diminished to simply speaking. I assure you the history I will tell is not only relevant to your journey of recovery, but because you are the Final One, it will be a story of *learning*, which you must do.”

“Okay...” said Drake, not sure what the Dineh elder was getting at.

“In the First World, after the dawn of Creation,” resumed Nehehota, “we, the Dineh, were the Great Light’s angels – beautiful and perfect. We lived for the Great Light, we loved the Great Light, and then something happened, what exactly we have never known but we believe it

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was terrible. Enough so that we were banished into the Second World and turned into wolves. As wolves we only felt anger, pain, and hunger. Most of the pain was inflicted by each other but some pain was caused by evil, monstrous creatures of Dark Magic, the *Marag*.”

“So...this Second World...” said Drake, thinking aloud, “this is where the Marag came from?”

“And soon we would learn – its Father,” said Nehehota morosely. The Dineh elder drew a deep breath and continued, “After a time the Great Light’s Child appeared and took pity upon us, but strangely, also asked for forgiveness. The Great Light’s Child then brought us into the Third World and the Dineh became human, we were happy once again, and no longer felt any anger, pain, or hunger. Over time we met our brethren, the Yasidi, and everyone lived in peace. Then something happened to them, to change their peaceful behavior, and eventually we warred.”

“This is when the Dineh left the Third World and came here?” interjected Drake, his eyebrows had pinched.

“No, Final One, the clashes we had with the Yasidi were nothing compared to what really threatened us. You see, either by accident or by design, the creatures of the Marag *also* entered the Third World. They wanted nothing more but to destroy everything. Fortunately, a Fourth World was created by magical beings with help from the Great Light’s Child. This allowed us, the Yasidi, and many others to escape, but it also allowed the Marag, its children, and worst of all – the *Father* to follow as well.”

Things were beginning to add up in Drake’s mind. He had wondered where all these crazy beings came from and now he understood and saw the relationship between them. Drake

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also realized he was hearing some history from hundreds of years earlier than what Chu had given him. Maybe some further information about the Relic would be passed along...

Nehehota continued, “Once the Father, his Marag, and its children were discovered among us, a horrible and lengthy battle arose. Eventually, after the loss of many lives, the destruction of so much – the evil was banished, or so we thought. Indeed, all but one creature was banished. This creature was not the strongest of the Marag’s, although powerful in its own right, it was more intelligent and cunning a monster making it the most dangerous of all. It turned itself into human form and avoided banishment, and then went out seeking the favor of the Father—”

“This is all fine and dandy,” interrupted Madison, exasperated, “but what does this have to do with where the Relic is?” She dropped her right hand clapping her thigh as the other tapped the bowstaff on the floor.

The Dineh elder became very serious and his expression turned dark, he retorted, “It has everything to do with the Relic *and* where to find it. You are filled with the impatience of youth – listen and learn.”

“Fine, I’m sorry, go ahead,” said Madison, she had placed a hand on her hip and moved her weight back to one leg.

“The story handed down through the ages,” resumed Nehehota, “about the Dragon’s Eye and its whereabouts begins as the king, I imagine, has already told you – ” King Capac nodded in agreement “ – What we the Dineh of Notama have learned through heartache is what happened afterwards.

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“The Crotalus the king spoke of eventually appeared in Notama. Tribesman of the day knew about the Dragon’s Eye and found it strange that a Cennud would be in possession of it. Add to this, even though they knew some Cennuds were allowed out of exile, it was still a rare occurrence to meet one. Naturally, the Crotalus caught the curiosity of the chief. Sensing the chief was becoming suspicious of its possession, the snake decided to flee before the truth was discovered. The Crotalus then vanished into the Dark Stroud – never to be seen again.”

“What’s the Dark Stroud, and where is it?” Madison asked, as Drake began reviewing his map.

“The Stroud is located outside the northern border of our land,” replied the elder, “it is an overgrown marsh of brushwood with thin trees that grow very close to one another. It strangely contains cave openings believed to lead into the northern Di-See Mountains. The marsh is so thick and the trees are so bushy-topped that it always seems as nighttime to those braving entry.

“Dineh history teaches us that creatures of the Marag once called it home, many, many sun-risings ago. Since that time, there have been numerous Dineh that have entered the Dark Stroud to explore it, and never return. Over the centuries some have with strange and unbelievable stories of beasts, Cennuds, which are grotesquely disfigured.

“One such Dineh, my brother, returned recently with a fantastic story having witnessed the Relic. It was not in the possession of the Crotalus or any other Cennud.”

The Dineh elder stopped at this point as though resting, he had closed his eyes and appeared to vaguely sway as he stood, hunched before them. Madison glanced at her brother, who had his nose to the map. Apparently he had not paid attention. After she sighed impatiently waiting for the old man to continue, Madison tilted her head to face Nehehota.

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“Well, then, who had the Relic?” urged Madison softly.

Nehehota’s eyes popped open as he turned slowly to face everyone, defiantly he said, “*The Faceless Mage.*”

Dwaner stepped forward and blurted, “Aye, but that’s impossible! The Faceless Mage cannot exist. Tales about him go back to the time of the Great Daewins, another seven hundred years back from the Crotalus’ crime—that’s—that’s fourteen hundred years!”

“Hold on, what does this mean?” said Madison, raising one palm toward Dwaner.

Drake had listened during the entire exchange while still reviewing his map. He noted the Dark Stroud seemed very uninviting, even on paper. It definitely looked like a place he had no desire to enter much less visit. Looking up and shaking his head, he answered his sister.

“What Dwaner’s saying is that this Faceless Mage-guy supposedly lived fourteen hundred years ago, yet Nehehota’s brother saw him recently. This can only mean the Faceless Mage has been alive and kicking for *all* this time.”

“Oh, I see,” replied Madison.

“Yah, I foo woon agreea wit mee blood-brooter,” chimed in Dween, “tis coonoot happena. Te Dvergoor’s weell noot beleeva tis.” He firmly nodded once then continued caressing his scraggly moustache.

“The Dvergars can believe what they wish,” retorted Nehehota sternly. “The facts are that not only did my brother *see* the Faceless Mage *with* the Relic, but many others as well over the past seven hundred years. All of which, by the way, barely made it out alive to tell the story.”

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“The Faceless Mage lives...” said Leemstey, looking very awestruck. “And has lived through the last fourteen hundred years of history...Why hasn’t he made himself known in all this time?” He looked directly at the Dineh elder for an answer.

“Whoa, hold on,” interrupted Drake, “before we go any further, who the heck exactly is this Faceless Mage?”

“Ah—Final One, we are back to where our first story left off,” replied Nehehota, smiling. “The Faceless Mage is the Marag’s child who avoided banishment. The lone surviving creature who now was a man like you or him.” – the Dineh elder pointed at Leemstey – “After seeking the Father of the Marag and falling into his favor, the Father granted him much power in hopes of defeating the magical beings that helped create the Fourth World. The creature grew strong, stronger than Meltyn ever became and stronger than Hifearnan will ever hope of becoming. So strong, it is said, that his powers rivaled those of the Father. But even with all this force and might, he could not defeat the magical beings.

“After the creature’s failure, the Father of the Marag promptly cursed him and the Cennud followers he had gained. The curse turned him *faceless* and his followers were disfigured, this was done as a reminder to all of the Father’s ultimate supremacy.

“It is said that although he is faceless, he is not without senses. However, therein lays the cruelty of the curse. He has no eyes but still can see, he has no ears but still can listen, and the senses are reduced, weakened. Imagine being thirsty and drinking water, all that you can, and the thirst only becomes worse. That is the curse the Faceless Mage lives with.”

“Okay—that’ll bring on some nightmares,” said Madison, her face aghast as she trembled slightly, “I won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

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“But there is more, Guardian,” said Nehehota.

“Just *great*,” dead-panned Madison, “well, let’s have the rest of it.”

“Although faceless and his strength diminished, do not be fooled, his powers still remain potent and they include all sorts of evil trickery. Those lucky enough to return from the Dark Stroud describe a very devious being, he gets into your head, confuses you, and worst yet, *controls* you. Many a Dineh has seen the Faceless Mage drive a fellow tribesman mad and then destroys him, or once under his control, has the person destroy himself.”

“The Dineh are certain we will find the Relic in the Dark Stroud?” questioned Dwaner, scowling.

Nehehota nodded.

The master-at-arms turned to Drake then decisively said, “Young Dragonkeeper, we have no choice. We must proceed to the Dark Stroud, it is the only way.”

Darn, he’s right. Out loud Drake said, “Yep, I agree.” He looked once more at his map, then addressed King Capac, “Your highness, could we possibly get help from the Amphithears? Maybe some of your guards could go with us, even fly us there?”

There was a collective gasp in the room, it came from everyone except Madison. Even Trilly who always has a happy disposition was shocked. Her cat-like ears, which were just twitching moments ago, snapped facing forward and still.

“What did I say?” Drake asked. Self-consciously, he turned looking at everyone in the chamber.

Dwaner wiped his face with a hand as he stepped forward, then said, “Young Dragonkeeper, dragons do not carry other creatures, only their own and only when they’re sick

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or injured. There's just been one person carried by a dragon, it was Trevelyan and it was only *once* – over thirteen hundred years ago.”

“Alright, alright,” said Drake irritably, “I get the point.” He glanced at the king Amphithear and respectfully asked, “May we get any other help?”

“No,” said King Capac sadly. The dragon in one swift movement flew into his hammock-throne and settled himself down, facing everyone. “I cannot afford sending any of my guards away, with the Cennuds attacking Yasidi tribe towns and the neighboring Bergtrylles becoming aggressive, I must protect my clan –your request is regrettably denied.”

The young Dragonkeeper felt the sting of denial. Drake *knew* it stemmed from his inability to build integrity; the failures of recent days had finally caught up.

“May we have a respite this evening,” said Dwaner quickly, as Drake moped and hung his head low, “before we begin our journey west, my liege?”

“Yes, of course,” replied King Capac strongly. The king dragon glanced at his guards and pointed with a large wing, “Show them to our visitor's quarters, post extra guards and attendants for all of them.”

Drake turned dejectedly and faced the king, then simply said, “Thank you.”

The two dragons who originally found them on the mountain path began to slowly usher them away. They trudged back down the carpet and eventually out into the main hallway. The only sounds heard were the little group's footsteps echoing loudly on the marble floor. Finally, they reached the visitor's quarters; there were enough rooms for everyone to have their own as the largest was given to Rockford. Madison was entering the room offered to her, when unexpectedly, Trilly started giggling.

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“What’s so funny?” griped Madison, annoyed with the gremlin’s never ending mirth.

Trilly answered laughing, “I was just thinking of wishing you sweet dreams.”

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CHAPTER 17: Taken Under

Three days had passed since the little and now ragged group bid their farewells from the Amphithears, making their way west toward the Dark Stroud.

To Drake, it now seemed like a lifetime ago.

Miserable, with sand in his shoes, in between his toes, in his clothes, in his hair, and in other places that made him very uncomfortable, he wistfully reminisced over their short stay in the lair...

After an incredibly restful night's sleep on a bed more comfortable than his back home, he had awoken energized to find his one and only set of clothes cleaned and seemingly pressed. A very hot bath had also been drawn with a huge variety of soap to choose from. Drake had wondered if dragons bathed at all, he couldn't remember reading if they did or not. After a wonderful breakfast with the king and queen Amphithear in their beautifully gilded dining room, they were given additional food and water for the trip across the desert. Unfortunately for Dwaner and Dween, dragons have no need for weapons, so all they carried was food and water as well.

With fully loaded backpacks, bowstaff and short-staff in hand, and the weapons they still had clanking by their sides, the little group exited the lair through caverns leading down to the Fierlan Pass, directly north. Using the Pass, they had made good progress getting through the Equa Mountains which then delivered the group to the Gahida Desert. During this time the journey westward was especially uneventful. No Cennuds, Bergtrylles, or any other evil creatures to speak of were encountered. Despite this they kept vigilant against an attack that

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could happen at any moment. However, the real problem encountered was the quickly dwindling supply of food and water – water being the main concern of the two.

That was three days ago. The situation now had become dismal.

The Gahida Desert was longer north-to-south than it was wider east-to-west, but it was still a formidable terrain to cross. For yet another full day it seemed as though they were in the middle of an endless sea of beige colored sand. Rolling dunes repeated around them to the horizon, dunes which were difficult to walk down from and almost impossible to hike up.

The sand storms of the previous days did little for the group's moral. Now the unforgiving, remorseless sun beat down upon them making the sand apparently stretch even farther, to infinity.

Drake looked at his map for the umpteenth time, it showed a little asterisk, very close to the western edge of the desert. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes, it seemed to him the asterisk was in that same spot only yesterday – he desperately hoped that was just his exhaustion getting the best of him.

Almost everyone else, of course, was irritable.

Rockford had spoken to no one since last night, the dragon muttered to himself cursing the sun and sand in Dragon Runes – Drake was surprised to learn how much of a potty mouth Rockford could become. The master-at-arms was incredibly edgy, constantly scanning the surroundings and pushing the group to move faster. Dween's light-skinned face had become badly sunburned, although the Dvergar acted completely unaware of it. The Lady Protector kept singing to herself popular songs from back home along with practicing defensive moves with her bowstaff. Even though Madison put on a cool face, Drake *knew* she was miserable. Trilly was

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having the worse time of anyone. The little gremlin had always taken extra steps to keep up, but it was much worse and tiring in the sand. She clearly appeared utterly worn out and on the verge of collapsing. Leemstey was the complete opposite, evidently the least affected of all. He seemed to effortlessly glide over the desert, never once taking an awkward step, and unlike everyone else – he wasn't covered in sand. Some of his old self had returned as he winked and smiled once again at both Madison and Drake, riling the Lady Protector because he looked so unaffected while she was so darned hot.

“I can't go on anymore,” cried Trilly, “I'm so tired. There's sand all in my fur and the ground is hot. Can't we just take a short break?”

“No!” Dwaner replied harshly, glancing around to face the gremlin. “We will continue until we're out of the desert, then we rest.”

“I thought you were from around here,” said Madison dubiously, “from Vesperik.”

“I *am*,” grouched the gremlin, “we're just not from the *desert!*”

Trilly began acting very much like a tired child. She walked with her head lolling back, arms limp beside her body, and took slowly dragging steps. With everyone ignoring her, she moaned, “Maybe someone could carry me?”

“*NO!*” yelled Madison and Dwaner, together.

The little gremlin's feelings looked hurt, but not for long. She wiped her watery eyes and approached Leemstey, “How 'bout you? You seem like you're handling this well. Carry me, *please?*” Trilly held back a giggle.

“I *do not* carry gremlins,” said Leemstey, clearly repulsed. The assistant clerk had fingered the jewel on his necklace. “Shut up and keep moving.”

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Trilly then focused her attention on Rockford, whose back was turned to her since he was in front. She was just about to catch up to him and plead when he growled, “*Don’t—even—ask.*”

Dween noticed the look of dejection on Trilly’s sand-streaked face and said, “Yah, I foo woone woold bee honored too careeya sooch a breeve leetle woone. Et speakas weell oof oos Dvergoors.”

“Ohhh, thank you, Dween,” purred Trilly, as she let herself fall back-first to the sand. “You are a prince among the Dvergar’s.”

Dween then lumbered through the shifting ground toward her.

Hearing the word ‘prince’ struck a chord in Drake’s mind, he recalled what they had learned about the Gurgola.

“Rockford, or should I say *my drihten?*” said the young Dragonkeeper, smiling. “Why never mention to us you’re a prince?”

“Because it was his wish,” answered Dwaner.

“*You* knew?” asked Drake, surprised. He looked around at the others and added, “Who else?”

Trilly was still on her back waiting to be carried, Dween had ignored the question, and Leemstey shrugged and shook his head. Madison simply stared back at her brother.

“Don’t look at *me*, I didn’t know.”

With smoke rising from Rockford’s mouth, he said, “The master-at-arms was the only one to know outside of Chu. It’s no big deal, so what, forget it.”

Drake realized that with no integrity it shouldn’t be a surprise he was kept out-of-the-loop. The way things were going for him, he wondered if he ever would have found out if it

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weren't for the king and queen Amphithear. However, since the door on the subject had opened, Drake decided to walk through and learn as much as he could.

“What does *drihten* mean?”

“It's an honorific,” replied Rockford, shrugging. His back was still turned to everyone as the group slowed waiting for Dween to reach Trilly. “It's like saying ‘my liege’ only the term *drihten* is reserved for princes and such – now drop it.”

“So, you're next in line for the – throne, I guess – or does your brother have children?”

“I'm...yeah...next in line,” stammered Rockford, as he slowly came to a halt. “My brother...he has no children, he...it's that...it's complicated, alright? I don't want to talk about it.”

“What is it that you two are fighting about?”

The Gurgola spun around angrily and snarled, “Young Dragonkeeper, what part of ‘drop it’ don't you understand? Enough!”

“I...*I'm so sorry Rockford,*” said Drake sincerely. “I apologize for prying...Please forgive me, my *drihten*.” He smiled sheepishly.

Rockford *heard* the sincerity in Drake's voice. It was like a sing-song that touched his heart and completely softened his anger toward the boy. He also *felt* the young Dragonkeeper's childlike curiosity, much more than the pain emanating from Tighearn Jiro when the dragon visited him last. Although the boy had failed so far in building his integrity, the innate ability of a Dragonkeeper he possessed – to connect inwardly toward dragons, to project his pain, his joy, his *feelings* – was growing strong. But there was something else the Gurgola sensed. He could not put a talon on it just yet, but it was something that strangely frightened him. Rockford began

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sensing the Greylander might very well become the strongest and most powerful Dragonkeeper ever. What this meant not only to his clan, but to all dragon clans alike, only time would tell.

The Gurgola's screwed face quickly relaxed into a barely noticeable smile, Rockford said, "Apology accepted, and please do not address me as 'my drihten' or prince or anything else" – the dragon's eyes scanned everyone – "no-one do so, it's just Rockford, plain Rockford."

There was some inner turmoil Drake perceived from the dragon, it obviously had more to do than how the Gurgola was acknowledged. Since his apology was accepted, Drake decided to let it go for now and not push his luck. Whatever clicked in Rockford's mind to become gracious so quickly, although Drake was happy for, was certainly a strange and noticeable departure from the dragon's normally intimidating behavior.

As Dween nearly reached Trilly, the ground suddenly began to vibrate and then rumbled. Everyone stood still and looked around horrified, as though expecting to be trampled by a stampeding herd. Dwaner instantly recognized what was happening, he yelled, "Move everyone! Move *now!*"

The group ran as best as they could, except Trilly. The gremlin looked up from her spread-eagle position to watch four arms – made out of sand – burst up from the desert floor around her.

"Trilly!" Madison shouted. "Look out!"

The arms closed on Trilly, trapping her, while the desert sand underneath the gremlin swirled like a drain. Trilly was only able to squeak out a "Help!" as the sand and arms pulled her under – and then she was gone.

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“They’re Bralani!” bellowed Dwaner, as he unsheathed his broadsword. “S and beasts of the *Marag*. Keep moving, don’t stand still!”

Bralani surfaced in spurts from the desert floor all around them – one caused Drake to fall and roll away from beside Madison.

Each monster was six to eight feet tall, big and wide with a gorilla-like shape, and entirely made of gritty sand. The desert floor was thrown into the air from where the beasts popped up; sand was now flying everywhere and getting into everyone’s eyes.

Rockford right away pounced on one, it dissolved into the desert only to reform behind the dragon. The same Bralanus smacked Rockford with an open hand that felt like a cinder block – the muscled Gurgola fell, face-forward.

Dwaner and Dween swung their weapons into Bralani merely swooshing through the creatures. All the blood-brothers could really do then was avoid being cuffed on the head.

The Lady Protector shielded herself from two attacking Bralani as another formed behind her. Noticing this, she protected her back and then felt the sand beneath her tremble. Madison then dodged attacking sand-arms surfacing right where she had stood.

Leemstey had somehow ended up next to Drake. The assistant clerk winked and drew nearer with an oddly shaped smile. Then, without warning, a sand beast sprung out between them quickly smashing Leemstey in the chest. The assistant clerk was thrown back several feet, landing heavily into the ground. Drake meanwhile had fallen even further away; quickly he stood up and moved around in a panic heeding the master-at-arms advice.

The sand beast had turned its attention to Drake and began stalking him, forcing the young Dragonkeeper to take frightened steps backward. The features of its face were wickedly

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contorted as it tauntingly spat sand. The young Dragonkeeper thought furiously for a spell, any spell, but once more he drew a blank. He did get an idea to use his staff like his sister's but after watching how her fireballs had no effect, he decided it wasn't worth the try.

Dween, now as a berserker, came to the rescue. From behind the sand beast he swung his hammer wildly while yelling the Dvergar battle-cry. The cross-peen swung back-and-forth in a blur, approaching the beast as if fanning it. Surprisingly, the beast dissolved before their eyes causing Dween to stop his charge and hold the hammer warily by his side. The Bralanus reformed in an instant and rushed Dween's blindside, throwing the Dvergar back and through another sand beast several feet away.

Drake's eyes widened and mouth fell open as an idea brightly lit in his mind.

The Bralanus turned its sights again on the young Dragonkeeper. Drake began to truly concentrate – focusing so hard as the battle between his group and the sand beasts raged around him. As he backtracked from the stalking Bralanus mist started to form beside him. The particles attracted to one another, slowly at first then faster. The young Dragonkeeper had imagined two but only got one, no matter, Drake got what he wanted – a conjured Amphithear – bluish-white in color with totally blue eyes.

Drake then thought one word, *FLAP!*

The conjured Amphithear began flapping its massive wings, blowing a torrent of air at the sand beast. Portions of the Bralanus were simply blown away, it tried to form again only to be scattered completely from existence.

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Wind! Drake thought, as the conjured dragon flapped. *That's why we didn't see the Bralani before today. The sandstorms prevented them from attacking. This is how we beat these guys...*

Drake yelled at Madison, “Sis! Conjure ah—a *propeller*. We need wind, lots of it.”

The Lady Protector looked at the magical dragon and the effect it had. Quickly avoiding the smashing hands of two Bralani, she imagined a propeller from her bowstaff then willed it to spin fast, very fast. Madison easily dissolved the Bralani that attacked her, blowing the sand of their bodies far away and into the sky. She then aimed her conjured propeller against the sand beasts fighting Dwaner and Dween – a simple whoosh and the creatures were blown away.

Dween was stupefied, glancing around and wondering where the monsters had gone. The master-at-arms then gently grabbed the Dvergar by his cape, bringing both of them next to the Lady Protector.

Rockford was being pummeled by two Bralani. The Gurgola was doing his best to defend himself, but the slashes of his talons had no effect on creatures that could change from a steely, hard surface to soft, flowing sand. Through one swollen eye, Rockford saw the Bralani blown away and scattered as the same gust of wind almost knocked him over. The dragon fell to his knees, thankful; he didn't know how much more of a beating he could take. The first soft-skin to reach him was the Lady Protector, he heard the Greylander girl and others grunt and moan as they picked him up and helped him walk.

With two Bralani chasing him, the assistant clerk smartly ran toward Madison and shrieked, “Ah, look here!”

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Still helping prop the incredibly heavy dragon, Madison pointed her magical propeller at Leemstey, scattering the pursuing sand beasts.

Meanwhile, Drake stood a bit envious watching his sister's heroics. With the young Dragonkeeper's attention elsewhere, the magicked dragon stopped flapping then slowly began to vanish. The ground about Drake quickly rumbled then exploded in a stinging shower of sand, several Bralani had surrounded him. A sand beast behind the fading Amphithear engulfed the dragon, pulling it into the desert. With nowhere to run and sapped of strength for anything else (conjuring the dragon had taken everything he had) Drake did the only thing he could, he yelled, "Mady!" Just then, the sand beneath him began to swirl.

Dwaner angrily pointed and said, "Protector, go now, help you blood-brother!"

Madison thankfully dropped the weight of the Gurgola onto Dween's shoulders. She turned and took off after Drake even though the scene that met her eyes shocked her. Still running, she watched in horror as her brother was sucked into the sand, then further taken under by Bralani diving on the spot where he had stood.

"DRAKE! NOOOO...!" She screamed in sheer panic.

The Lady Protector fell to her knees where Drake had gone under, she frantically brushed away sand as though looking for something lost on the ground.

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Everyone then realized all the Bralani had run off. The young Dragonkeeper had been taken – just like Trilly.

Sand was still flying everywhere, lightly stinging her face. On her knees and clutching at the desert ground seeping out from between her fingers, she choked back sobs as tears welled in her eyes. Madison looked about as if expecting to see him, in a small voice she said, “Drake...Where are you little bro...?”

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CHAPTER 18: A Call for the Dragonkeeper

Madison again dug frantically at the sand. She called, “Drake! Drake! Drake!” – over-and-over in a fit of hysteria. No one touched her, or stopped her, or said anything until she realized how comically futile her actions were. The Lady Protector then became inconsolable, still on her knees, she held back tears and hopelessly clutched at sand. She wanted to scream, she wanted to wail, but most of all she just wanted to go home. Madison knew she couldn’t though – she would never return without her brother. The desperation and utter feeling of loss became too much. She began to cry.

“How could you let this happen?” Leemstey berated angrily. The assistant clerk was livid, his face had turned bright-red. “You are his Protector. Why didn’t you go to him first and secure his safety?”

“He was...doing fine,” sobbed Madison, still dazed and shocked. “He conjured that dragon...Didn’t you see? He was doing alright...” She stood up holding her bowstaff and collected herself, then earnestly added, “It was the rest of you that needed help.”

“Foolish, stupid—*girl*,” spat Leemstey. “Now with those beasts, how will we ever find him?”

“*What* did you call me?” She said. Madison wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, then approached Leemstey and sneered, “Listen, *pal*, I told you he was doing fine. The rest of you would be dead if it weren’t for me.” Gripping her bowstaff tight, she moved closer to him. Her dirty, tear streaked face added a deadly seriousness to her now furious anger.

The assistant clerk took frightened steps backward, fingering his jewel.

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“And *you!*” said Madison, whirling around incensed to face the dragon. “This is really all *your* fault. Treating him like you did, you were supposed to give him a chance.”

Dwaner and Dween both opened their mouths to speak but she simply raised a hand and silenced them.

“I don’t want to hear it. He’s my brother and now he’s gone. There’s nothing more to it.” The Lady Protector glared angrily at Rockford with an almost irresistible desire to fight him, regardless of the outcome.

The Gurgola saw anger and pain-of-loss on the Protector’s face, emotions he was all too familiar with. He was charged to protect the Dragonkeeper as well; a Dragonkeeper that despite what girl had said, Rockford was becoming more-and-more dutiful towards even with the boy’s lack of integrity. What he had sensed from the Greylander, although some of it frightening, burned a desire to recover the young Dragonkeeper, maybe more so than the boy’s sister.

“We will get him back, Lady Protector, I assure you.”

“Oh, you *do?*” Madison simpered. “And how do you propose this happens? Start digging our way to find him? *Please*, be my guest, you first.” She motioned to the ground then crossed her arms defiantly.

“Lady Protector, stop,” said Dwaner firmly. “Fighting amongst ourselves will not help find your blood-brother.”

“*Find* him? Surely you jest master-at-arms,” scoffed Leemstey. “The young Dragonkeeper’s in Hifearnan’s hands by now, and no one knows where that is.”

“I do not believe those Bralani are allied with Hifearnan,” said Dwaner.

“*Really,*” retorted Leemstey sarcastically. “Then who?”

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“Dwaner’s right,” interjected Rockford, “if those Bralani were in collusion with the Evil One, they would have finished us off. Hifearnan is a sworn enemy and those not allied with him are promptly destroyed. Or have you already forgotten the destruction and massacre at Hagosda? They would have killed us as certain as the desert ground we stand upon. Instead the monsters took the young Dragonkeeper and quickly vanished into the sand.”

“Those Bralani are more likely allied with the Faceless Mage,” continued Dwaner, after a quick nod to the Gurgola. “We are very close to the Di-See and I suspect the Bralani have routes to tunnels and caverns leading into the mountain. And recall what the Dineh elder had told us, there are caverns believed to travel from the mountain into the Dark Stroud. Knowing what we do about the Faceless Mage, it all makes sense. The ancient monster somehow senses the young Dragonkeeper and would highly prize him.”

“How can you be so sure of this?” Leemstey quizzed doubtfully. “And what does the Faceless Mage have to gain from the boy – uh – the young Dragonkeeper?”

Dwaner wondered momentarily why the assistant clerk corrected himself, then dismissed it as stress and said, “Remember Nehehota’s statements about the Faceless Mage? That it is a very intelligent and devious being, one that still has a great amount of ability. *Think* as it would think.”

Leemstey shrugged, unconvinced.

“Aye, the young Dragonkeeper is the *final one*,” resumed Dwaner. “I know he hasn’t shown it, but he will soon become a very powerful if not the most powerful Dragonkeeper ever. That power is within him right now, granted to him by the Light. The Faceless Mage, a creature of the Marag, can sense this great Light energy and will immediately know how to harness it, use

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it, and violate it for its own gain. If Drake falls under the being's control, the Faceless Mage can once again win the favor of the Father, or worse, the being and Drake together can become an unbeatable threat. Either way, the final Dragonkeeper would be lost and all hope for the Realm as well."

The assistant clerk now appeared convinced, standing silent, thinking.

Madison had not given much thought about hers and her brother's powers. She had become so use to them that it now felt instinctive and normal – to her. She knew her brother was struggling, but also believed he would find a way to get past it. If he doesn't, and becomes controlled by this monster...Madison pushed the disturbing notion from her mind.

The master-at-arm's words had shaken Rockford as black smoke rose from the dragon, twisting and writhing. Was it the young Dragonkeeper falling into the wrong hands that Rockford had feared? He did not think so, unsettling him all over again. Despite this the young Dragonkeeper needed saved, and not surprisingly now, the desire burned even greater.

"Yah, I foo woone agreea wit mee blood-brooter," said Dween, caressing his moustache. "Wee moost feend te yoong Dragoonkipper beefoor hee ees loost foevoor."

The Gurgola pushed through everyone and took the lead, "I for one agree with you— Let's go!"

Another day had passed before the little group exited the desert and then approached the base of the Di-See Mountain range. The Di-See Mountains were much smaller and less imposing than the Equa; this mountain was also much greener and alive-looking. Where the

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Equa Mountains were jagged and barren, the Di-See was a chain of larger-than-normal, rolling hills densely covered with trees and brush.

Without Drake's map or Trilly's knowledge, the group had only Dwaner and Rockford's sketchy understanding of western Vesperik. Dwaner and Rockford argued incessantly as to the location of the Cota Pass. The only thing they agreed on was once the pass was found it would lead them just south of Notama, and then with help, into the Dark Stroud. Dwaner believed the Cota Pass was farther north from their current position, while Rockford was certain it was farther south.

Dween had suggested the pass was directly before them, heading due west. Both scoffed at the Dvergar. Rockford had even sarcastically implied, "How would *Dween* know?" Dwaner silently agreed, barely nodding his head.

Unfazed by their doubt, the scruffy Dvergar politely pointed out the Cota Pass to them – it was clearly there – heading due west. Dwaner and Rockford were flabbergasted, it was *right there* before them, as clear as the sun overhead. The master-at-arms humbly apologized to his blood-brother, asking for his forgiveness. Dween of course accepted quickly with a large and toothy smile. The Gurgola apologized too, though the dragon's was given grudgingly. Under his breath Rockford mumbled something in Dragon Runes about 'dumb luck' or 'being lucky'."

Madison laughed throughout the entire exchange then finally said, "Dween, maybe you should lead us now."

"Yah, I foo woone feel bood foo eenteeroopteeng tear deescooshoon." Dween simply replied. "Boot eet woold bee a deeshonoor too te Dvergoor noot too shoo te paas, teem ees veery shoort."

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Dwaner patted his blood-brother on the back and then smiled teasingly at the dragon.

“Don’t say a word,” grumbled Rockford, as he began stomping toward the pass, “not a single word.”

The last thought that entered Drake’s mind as he was sucked under and dog-piled by Bralani was that he could not breath and was about to die. The next thought he had was surprise for having a thought at all.

Without warning he began coughing uncontrollably and this led to some retching. Drake then wiped his mouth to realize he was completely covered in sand from head-to-toe. He tried brushing off as much as he could, but knew that without some water most of it would stick.

Still trying to clear grit from his eyes, Drake noticed he was a prisoner within a cage made entirely from sand – a cage that was long, narrow, and only tall enough for him to sit up. He realized his short-staff was gone, held by a sand beast which led the group carrying him. Drake then pounded the bars of the cage and found the sand was as hard as metal – there was no way he was getting out of this.

The pounding caught the attention of the Bralani. They violently shook the cage and warned him to stop, speaking in an old language. Somehow, it was familiar to Drake.

“Cease Greylander, you are trapped. No effort on your part will release you, only we can and only when our *triath* orders.”

Drake surprised himself when in the same, old language he asked, “What is a ‘triath’?”

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The lead Bralanus turned and smiled cruelly, “Our triath, our *lord* that we serve, the *Faceless Mage*. He has been waiting for a very long time. We will be rewarded wonderfully for delivering you.” The creature spat sand at the cage.

The young Dragonkeeper was relieved to learn he was not being taken to Hifearnan, but it was fleeting. Instead, his heart began to race realizing he was going to the ancient monster.

Drake glanced around and saw he was being moved through a tunnel, dimly lit by torches fixed to the rounded wall, burning a weak, magical fire. Inspecting the tunnel closely, it looked at most ten feet across and ten feet high, and he guessed they were somewhere within the Di-See Mountains – probably nearing the Faceless Mage. Remembering his map, the young Dragonkeeper began cautiously feeling for it trying not to bring attention to himself...

Fantastic! Drake thought – the map was still in his pocket. He wished desperately to refer to it, but not wanting the map taken away, he decided best to wait.

“How long have I been unconscious?” Drake asked casually, in the old language.

The Bralani did not understand.

Not the brightest of bulbs I see, Drake thought. The young Dragonkeeper then said, “Okay—How long have I been *asleep*?”

“One, maybe two sun-risings,” replied the lead sand beast. “Don’t worry Dragonkeeper, you will soon be meeting our triath.”

Drake brooded silently over his situation, *How am I going to get out of this cage? And if I do, how do I get past all these Bralani?*

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As he sat there swaying with the movements of the cage, he noticed the view far ahead go from pitch black, to dark-grey, and then slowly brighten – they were approaching the end of the tunnel, or some where else.

Panic started to grip him.

Drake told himself to calm down as Sehede's words harked in his mind – '*...remember your training, for very soon you will need it.*' Well, very soon was right now. What had he learned? What did he know that can help him at this moment?

He knew he was still too weak to conjure up a dragon (and forget about trying to call one.) What he needed was something easier yet effective. Drake mulled, *If I get out of this, I'll be sure to build up my stamina.* As the light ahead grew brighter-and-brighter, he thought furiously...

It came to him – not a great plan – but it had to work.

The young Dragonkeeper sat up ready, calmed himself further, and then closed his eyes and concentrated. Taking a deep, nervous breath in, he let it out and cried, "*Abra-Ca-Dabra!*"

Drake's short-staff appeared in his lap with a *pop*, startling the lead Bralanus who held it no more.

Quickly Drake conjured a propeller and then made it powerfully spin. The force of air was so strong it pushed his back hard against the cage. All the Bralani ahead were blown away into a confetti-like shower of sand, and as he hoped, the bars dissolved enough for him to squeeze through.

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The front half of the cage fell crashing down as there were no sand beasts to hold it. Drake turned the propeller off and before the Bralani in back could reach him, he squirmed through the broken bars – he was free!

Some of the scattered Bralani were starting to take shape once more while the ones in back were almost upon him. He scooted between the beasts that were just forming, starting the propeller again while turning around, as something tripped him to the floor. Several Bralani came down like a wave of sand, but Drake had pointed the propeller as he fell and luckily blew them away.

Drake scampered up then walked backwards keeping his wind machine on the Bralani, forcing them to stay back. The further away the sand beasts remained the less affect the propeller had. Sure enough, some of the creatures tried rushing the young Dragonkeeper, attempting to reach him – they never got close – the Bralani were simply blown apart, their sand flung away like a billion angry bees.

“We know how your powers work, Dragonkeeper,” called one of the sand beasts. “You can’t keep it on us forever, soon you will tire and we will be upon you.”

Drake was well aware – the concentration alone for the spin was mentally exhausting and not to mention how tiring it was holding up the staff. He did not answer and kept thinking and walking backwards, making sure nothing sneaked up from behind while the propeller pointed in sweeping, circular motions.

Finally he had reached what appeared like a cave exit, he stopped short of going outside as a plan formed in his mind.

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“You’ll never find your way,” said the nearest Bralanus, “give up and release yourself to us.” The sand beast sounded very agitated and angry.

“No thanks,” replied Drake, thinking of the map in his pocket, “I’ll take my chances.”

The propeller at once disappeared, and for a moment, the Bralani closest to Drake stood in silence – shocked by what he did. Other sand beasts behind them formed and then the entire group of creatures lunged. Drake had calmly aimed his staff at the tunnel ceiling, just before the rushing Bralani. He then shot several volleys of fireballs, hitting not only the ceiling but the walls as well. The tunnel collapsed with loud cracking sounds as rocks, dust, and fire filled the space. The young Dragonkeeper kept shooting fireballs as he walked completely out of the tunnel, closing the cave with an avalanche of stone. With dust flying everywhere Drake pointed the staff at the strewn boulders – an intense, white-flame licked at the rocks, melting the cave’s blocked entrance into one complete, seamless cap.

Hopefully this’ll prevent them from following me, thought Drake.

He stared at the slowly cooling cap, making sure there were no sand beast’s eeking out from a crack or crevice. Convinced of his handiwork, the young Dragonkeeper turned to get his bearings.

Fortunately, the remaining group of Madison, Rockford, Dwaner, Dween, and Leemstey found Notama bustling with life. Unfortunately, their arrival sparked little to no interest among the Dineh – they had walked around for quite a while and still waited for someone to approach

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them. Other than the slight bow of deference to Rockford, not one Notama-Dineh seemed to care this odd, little troupe was freely roaming around.

Unlike the Yasidi of Ocksias, the Dineh of Notama were not preparing for war. Although a spiked, wooden fence was assembled recently around the tribe-town, life in Notama appeared to normally go about its business.

“We need to find someone that’ll talk to us,” said Madison.

“Has either of you seen anything resembling a tribal-leader’s hall?” Rockford asked, looking between Dwaner and Leemstey.

“No,” replied Leemstey, as the master-at-arms shook his head.

Standing almost dead-center in Notama, everyone in the little group looked around the town lost and exasperated. Dwaner was glancing at nothing in particular when he noticed something, “Aye! There may be no leader’s hall but you’ll always find one of *these*.” The master-at-arms had pointed to a medium-sized building with a small porch and doors that were open into it.

“What is it?” Madison quizzed dubiously.

“A *tavern*.” Dwaner responded with a wry smile. “We’re certain to find *someone* in there.”

Dween’s eyes lit up, “Yah, I foo woone coold doo wit a dreenk oof doork beer. Eet woold bee oon honor too shara wit ooll oof yoo.”

“No thanks, Dvergar,” said Rockford, as Dwaner lead them into the tavern, “you can have that nasty swill for yourself.”

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Upon entering, Madison was reminded of taverns she'd seen in cowboy movies that her father liked. There was a long bar with a glossy table-top and a row of old, dirty stools placed before it. Bottles of all shapes and sizes that contained all kinds of colorful liquids were on display behind the bar. And the pub was busy, tribesmen filled all the tables either speaking quietly to each other or they sat alone with a mug in hand.

Dwaner walked straight up to the bar catching the attention of the bar-keep.

“What would you like to drink?”

“Nothing, thank you,” said Dwaner. The master-at-arms sat on a stool, then placed his elbows on the bar while clasping his hands. After looking over both his shoulders, he faced the bar-keep and said, “May I ask if there's anyone here in Notama that can guide us to the Dark Stroud?”

“Is *that* what all of you want with us here?” laughed the bar-keep.

“The boy—or rather, the young Dragonkeeper of the Realm, he's been snatched,” interjected Leemstey, “we are here with his Protector seeking anyone to lead us.”

“This boy or *young* Dragonkeeper of yours,” said the bar-keep, the smile had wiped from his tanned face, “is *in* the Stroud?” Leemstey nodded, the bar-keep then shook his head and continued, “I don't know anything about Dragonkeepers except for there's one dying in Assuwa. And from what I know about the Prophecy, wasn't the Protector supposed to keep one safe?”

Madison opened her mouth to retort but Dween placed a hand on her forearm and stopped her.

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“Please,” said Dwaner, glancing quickly at Madison then returning his focus to the bar-keep, “we have no time to go through and explain our ordeal. Is there *anyone* that may be able to help us?”

The bar-keep was really curious to know what had happened, though noticing their urgency, he simply sighed and pointed across the pub, “Him, sitting right there, Atuludo. He’s the last Dineh within a year to travel into the Stroud and return. He might be able to help you.”

Atuludo was a middle-aged tribesman, not lean but not overweight – some might consider him husky. The tribesman had darkly tanned skin, wrinkled heavily around the eyes, and his hair was entirely white, cut very short on top but long down the back and sides. He wore a raw-hide jacket over a loose fitting, light-brown shirt, and his faded-black, almost gray trousers looked uncomfortably stiff. How the tribesman stuffed the legs of those rigid pants into his shin-high boots was anyone’s guess.

As the group approached the Dineh tribesman, sitting alone at a table with a tall mug in hand, he looked none too happy to see them. Atuludo nodded curtly at the Gurgola, particularly appraised Madison, and then spoke directly to Dwaner.

“Ah, the mysterious group everyone’s been talking about. Have you found what you’re looking for?” The tribesman had grimaced the entire time he spoke.

“People actually noticed us?” Madison said. “Except for the dragon, we’ve been practically ignored.”

The tribesman answered Madison’s question while regarding Dwaner, “We Dineh are not as excitable as our eastern cousins. We know a war is coming and there is nothing anyone can

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do to stop it, nothing.” He had emphasized the last word sourly and then downed the drink from his mug.

“The bartender tells you’ve been to the Dark Stroud recently,” said Leemstey at once.

“We need someone to *take* us...” He tailed off expectantly.

“The last time I was in the Stroud,” said the tribesman, now staring out the tavern’s window, “I almost didn’t make it out—”

“Wait a second,” interrupted Madison, she had snapped her fingers in surprise, “do you know a Dineh called Nehehota?”

“What?” responded Atuludo, he had turned his head to face her. “Oh, yes, he’s my oldest brother. Why do you ask?” He realized the answer immediately and continued, “Of course, you met Nehehota in the Amphithear’s Lair. I’m sure he described some of what I told him, right? So it shouldn’t be a surprise to hear that I will never return, *never*. There are hideous creatures lurking under that forest canopy. Not a single one of them has an interest in being friendly or helpful.” The tribesman shuddered.

“My brother’s in there, we’re certain of it,” implored Madison. “We need your help, please.”

“Didn’t you hear me?” Atuludo retorted gruffly. “I just told you, I will never go back.”

“Listen, pal,” snapped Madison, “I explained the situation and asked you nicely, and now I’m beginning to lose patience.” She unconsciously turned her bowstaff gripping it in both hands, menacingly she added, “Either you help us willingly or I’ll force you.”

Dween tried calming her once again, this time Madison angrily pulled away.

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Dwaner quickly stepped in and said, “Lady Protector, control yourself! This is not how we handle ourselves in the Realm of Faerie. We do not force our fellow-men and women to do things against their will.”

“You’re right,” said Madison, as she lowered the bowstaff to her side, “I apologize, but we don’t have time for this. Drake’s out there all alone, possibly dead. We need to get in there *now* even if it’s too late.” He eyes watered as she choked back tears.

“These *are* extraordinary times, master-at-arms,” said Leemstey, “I actually agree with her – ” he glared at Atuludo sinisterly “ – don’t make us force you tribesman, show us the way at once!”

“*Assistant clerk!*” Dwaner exclaimed. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but I expect you to act as a proper delegate of the Tighearn Dragonkeeper.” The master-at-arms turned and humbly faced Atuludo, he added, “I assure you good sir, this is not how staff members of the council normally conduct themselves.”

The Dineh tribesman anxiously turned the empty mug in his hands, he sighed, “I can see you’re all under a great amount of pressure. We Notama-Dineh know a bit about the Prophecy and the importance of the Final One.” He paused for a few seconds then abruptly stood and said, “I will take you to the southern edge of the Dark Stroud. From there, I’ll point you in the direction where you’re likely to find him.”

“Where would that be?” Madison asked, noticing his tall height.

“The cave where the Faceless Mage dwells,” replied Atuludo gravely. “Where else?”

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Walking away from the sealed cave opening, Drake had taken out his Vesperik map to finally see if it showed his location, as well as that of his sister and the others.

Darn, he thought.

A small asterisk was located at the northern end of the Dark Stroud, centered evenly between the western and eastern borders of the territory. And after some careful checking, he was disappointed to find there were no other asterisks on the parchment.

So the map only shows my location...

Drake realized there was only one course of action – head south toward Notama – he figured Madison and the group would go to Notama and then come looking for him in the Stroud. He also *sensed* that at least Dwaner, if not Rockford or Leemstey, would know the sand beasts were allied with the Faceless Mage and not Hifearnan. Or maybe, Drake was just hoping so.

Either way, he needed to get out, the Stroud was darker and creepier than he had imagined, and he certainly did not want to spend the night. If he walked fast he'd be able to get out soon – before nightfall.

It did not take him long to figure out that traveling through this eerie forest was tough at best and nerve-racking the rest of the time. The grass and weeds was shin-to-knee high, which made walking difficult, this was compounded by tightly packed trees that considerably slowed his progress. Because the Stroud was partly marsh, he found his feet sinking into the soft ground more times than not. Above him were thickly overgrown treetops, helping give the Stroud its first name – even with the sunlight of day it was strangely dark. Naturally, Drake expected it completely pitch-black by nightfall, the thought of this alone truly frightened him. Adding to his

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worries were the distance shrieks of nameless animals and the distinctive feeling he was being watched.

Onward he plodded, trying his best to ignore the sounds of the forest and the fear in his mind growing towards foolish terror. After what he figured was good progress, he stopped to check his map and saw he was somewhere near the middle of the Stroud, or just south. As he placed the map in his pocket – he heard it – a beautiful, lilting voice, whispering in wind, surrounding him unseen and scaring him motionless.

dragonkeeper...

Drake spun around panicked then heard it again.

dragonkeeper...

Someone or something was calling him, was it in the wind or in his mind? He had heard it and *felt* it as hairs prickled on the back of his neck. He looked around and searched for where the pleasant and soothing voice had come from. The young Dragonkeeper then noticed another cave opening, nothing very special about it; actually, the opening was a bit smaller than the one he had just sealed. Though there was a sizeable clearing before the cave, Drake realized he would have missed it if he had not stopped. The tenderly delightful voice called again...

dragonkeeper... come for me... make me whole again... come for
me...

Drake knew better than to enter the cave – he reasoned it was smarter to get back with the group and then return in force. But a growing desire started burning painfully within him, a

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desire of obtaining the Dragon's Eye, of having the Relic in his possession, in his own *hands*.

The feeling was incredibly intense and grew unshakeable; there was no way of ignoring it. The voice called once again...

come for me...

The young Dragonkeeper let out a heavy sigh and then single-mindedly pressed toward the cave.

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CHAPTER 19: Face-to-No-Face

Lead by Atuludo, Madison and the group had finally reached the southern edge of the notorious Dark Stroud. On the one hand it was impressive, however on the other, the grim forest was truly more spine-chillingly imposing – foliage high above grew close together that practically formed a roof while the ground appeared soft and wet. The perfect border of tall, thin trees flawlessly lined where the Dark Stroud began and it then stretched on for miles, like a wall, in either direction.

Right before the group entered, the Dineh tribesman gathered them around. He pointed in the direction they wanted to travel then pulled out a small parchment and crudely drew a map for their use. With his finger, Atuludo circled the location of the Mage’s cave and warned them once more.

“The cursed Cennuds lurk almost everywhere and they are *hungry*. They are also malicious. I have seen and heard many a fellow-tribesman tortured, much to these creatures’s glee, before being completely devoured.

“The Faceless Mage will try tempting the Final One, you must get to him before the monster or his Cennuds find him. Otherwise, he will need to be very strong-willed to survive.”

The tribesman looked at the Lady Protector, “How old is he?”

“Fifteen, almost sixteen years old,” answered Madison.

Atuludo’s face grimaced, he said nothing.

Rockford clomped upto a thin tree, grabbed it with both hands, and ripped it from the ground like a weed, he then growled, “We’ve heard enough, let’s go and find him before it gets dark.”

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The little group had begun its difficult trek into the marshy forest and quickly disappeared from view. As the Dineh tribesman watched them vanish from his sight, he shook his head and hastily walked back to Notama. Nervously, he looked over his shoulder and breathed, “May the Light Spirit help them.” With thoughts of his last trip forming in his mind – he began to jog.

After entering the cave, Drake found it dimly lit as in the other cavern – with weak magical flames lighting the way. This particular cavern was large, at least twenty to twenty-five feet across and at most ten feet high. The cave eventually turned left-and-right repeatedly, and soon the light from the opening was gone. Around one corner he tripped over something; Drake looked closely and was startled breathless at the sight of skeletons – human-looking and otherwise – scattered across the stone floor. Some of them looked old, while others appeared as though they had met their fate just recently. Those “newer” skeletons had ripped and torn fabric still hanging on them, reminding Drake of clothes similar to what Nehehota wore.

A guttural, croaking sound tore his eyes away from the ground – a large frog now stood before him. From his training, he recognized it as an Anura Frog, a Cennud, but he wasn’t entirely sure because the creature was hideously deformed. Its face was misshapen with boils and there were protrusions of bone and scale with the boils oozing a yellowish puss. A third arm had grown useless from below its right and its left leg was wider and distorted when compared to the other. The frog’s skin was dark-green or almost black in color, it glistened repulsively in the tunnel’s dimly flickering light.

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The triath is waiting for you Final One,” said the Anura with a deep, croaky voice. “Come quietly so as not to harm you.” The frog switched a spiked club between grotesque hands.

Truly terrified, Drake’s heart raced as he started to breathe rapidly. *Calm down, man, remember what you know...*

With incredible speed the Anura sprang then pushed Drake to the floor, pinning him by the shoulders. Drake’s staff had slipped from his hand into the shadows while the frog smartly laid its club where only it could reach. The young Dragonkeeper tried pushing the beast off, but it was much stronger and heavier than it looked. The frog’s hideous face was now inches away when it flicked its sticky tongue at Drake’s cheek. *Thwap*. It stung. Quickly the Anura pulled the tongue to its mouth and smacked its crooked lips.

“Hmm...Maybe I will keep you to myself,” said the frog, as puss was about to ooze on Drake’s face.

Instinctively, Drake called, “*Non-Abra-Ca-Dabra!*” The frog’s club disappeared.

The Anura noticed and turned in surprise looking for the weapon. When the beast did not find it, the frog slowly aimed a murderous glare at Drake.

The creature stiffened, it was about to do something...

“*Abra-Ca-Dabra!*” Drake quickly exclaimed. The club appeared, hovered for a second, and then dropped heavily – right on the frog’s head.

The Anura leapt shrieking in pain.

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Drake scurried to his feet looking around frantically for his staff. He saw it, ran to it, and picked it up. He had the staff for just a moment when the frog pounced. And this time it looked wildly enraged.

The young Dragonkeeper pointed the staff at the incoming frog and fired – much to his surprise – a bluish-white, lightning bolt of energy. He felt static electricity in his hair as he used both hands to keep the stick from bucking off target.

The lightning bolt caught the Anura in mid-air and engulfed it in an electric storm. The frog shrieked again in pain, falling to the cavern's floor with a heavy thud.

Blasted by the sickeningly sweet odor of burning flesh, Drake covered his nose and stepped back. The electrical sparks that had covered the frog stopped and all that remained of the Anura was a blackened husk.

Drake looked at it with horror and stunned realization. He had simply thought about shooting a lightning bolt (instead of a fireball) and it happened. Why exactly? He wasn't really sure. But the grand advisor had told him there were many powers he was capable of, greater than what Madison wielded. Though Drake thought Chu had talked about the one's he had shown him, the young Dragonkeeper had actually forgotten there were a hint of others. Standing there sick to his stomach at the smell of burnt Anura, Drake wondered what else he was capable of that he did not know.

Warily avoiding the smoking remains, he continued down the cavern still drawn to the beautiful voice. He then speculated if he had passed a hurdle of sorts. With this new found ability, were there others about to show themselves? Drake searched his mind for any new awareness of powers or skills...He became frustrated realizing that nothing came to him.

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Instead, the young Dragonkeeper was conscious of a worry that had formed deep-down inside. Regardless of his powers, Drake was now very afraid he was capable of much destruction. The strong, nauseating stench of the blistered Anura was proof enough. The young Dragonkeeper grew worried and confused, he wondered uneasily about what he was really becoming – or maybe – what he had already become.

It was tough going for the little group. If they were not getting stuck on branches, they were tripped up by weeds, or their feet sunk into soft, wet ground.

Dwaner held Atuludo's crude map, while Madison constantly asked how much further it was to the cave. The Lady Protector had just about worn down Dwaner's patience to its last nerve. Leemstey withdrew once again and brooded as Dween plodded along without complaint. The Gurgola of course lead the group, angrily plowing through the marshy forest leaving a clear path of bent and torn trees.

"How much longer do you think, Dwaner?" Madison asked impatiently.

"Aye, Lady Protector," replied the master-at-arms with gritted teeth, "I truly have no idea. This map is not to scale, *please* show some patience and let's focus on our hike."

"Yah, I foo woone Leedy Proteectoer," interjected Dween, grinning stupidly, "feel wee weell soon bee tear. Wee Dvergoors coon sensa teese tings." He caressed his moustache and nodded.

Madison strained out a smile, hoping desperately he was right.

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In time, they came upon a sizeable clearing and then took a moment to stop and look around.

“Well, well...” said Rockford, “look what we have here. I can’t believe it, Dween is right again.”

Everyone looked and found the Gurgola leaning on a cave entrance.

“Is this *it*?” Madison asked Dwaner excitedly. “Is this the cave we’re looking for?”

Dwaner referred to the map and scanned the surroundings, he said, “This has to be it.”

A loud rustling of trees caught their attention and stopped them from entering. The little group was surprised to see a large horde of cockatrices, snakes, and frogs emerging from all around the edge of the clearing. There were about twenty of them, each one cursed and deformed with some of the deformities beyond description. Madison gaped at the hideous throng with revulsion and fear.

The nearest creature, a cockatrice, turned its disgusting head and faced the other cursed Cennuds, “Behold my brothers, we feast tonight!”

“Lady Protector, go now!” Dwaner quickly hissed. “Lead the others into the cave and find your blood-brother, but take this – ” he handed her the sword hilt from his belt “ – this is an enchanted sword, I think you remember. You or the others may need it. I will stay here and hold back these monsters, now hurry!”

“Dwaner, are you *insane*?” Madison blurted. “You can’t possibly hold them back alone. We all stay and fight, or we all run.”

The master-at-arms was about to retort when Dween interrupted.

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“Yah, I foo woone weell steey wit mee blood-brooter oond fighta. Wee Dvergoors weell hoold tem baack. Yoo tree goo searcha foo te yoong Dragoonkiper.” The scruffy Dvergar bared his shoulders from under his cape, then crisply turned away reaching for his hammer.

“As much as I’d like to give it to these Cennuds,” snarled Rockford, “they’re right. You, me, and Leemstey can find the Dragonkeeper before the Faceless Mage does. They’ll stay, we’ll go.” The Gurgola pulled Madison by the arm as the cursed beasts stalked closer.

“Dwaner, Dween,” shrilled Madison, pulling away, “please don’t do this, let’s run.”

Dween ignored her as his eyes grew ablaze with the intensity of a berserker. He stared down the closing group of creatures and stepped toward them.

“Madison, it’s all right,” said Dwaner in a reassuring, almost fatherly tone, “we Dvergars serve the Dragonkeeper, this is our duty. It is the only way. Now please, go.”

Rockford gently, yet ever so firmly, pulled Madison away. She let the dragon do it with tears welling in her eyes.

“Guys—please—don’t...” called Madison, while being tugged into the cave. The Lady Protector then wiped her eyes as she pushed her way forward, softly crying.

Once they were out of sight, Dwaner turned and faced the looming mob of creatures with a dogged scowl. He moved his cape off his shoulders as well, and then slowly unsheathed his broadsword.

“Aye, thank you, Dween,” said the master-at-arms without looking at his brother, “thank you.”

“Yah, I foo woone oom prood too bee heere wit yoo,” said Dween, holding the hammer battle-ready. “Wee Dvergoors woold doo eet noo ooter waay.”

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Drake continued following the cavern's main path. Although there were many branches and side tunnels, he kept his focus on the current route somehow knowing it would lead him to where he wanted. Every so often the young Dragonkeeper looked back, making sure no other frogs or creatures of any sorts crept up from behind. There were moments Drake thought he heard something in the distance, voices maybe, but discounted it simply as nerves. As time passed though, none of this began to matter – the deeper he went into the cave, the greater he sensed and desired the Relic. He was now absolutely certain – no matter how strange it seemed – the calls were *from* the crystal object and with every passing step Drake felt as if he was nearer to it, closer.

The calls had stopped but the intense, burning desire within him grew hotter, so much so that even if he wanted to turn and leave at this point, he knew he wouldn't. Drake *had* to get the Dragon's Eye, there was no way of avoiding it, impulsively he pressed forward unconcerned by any trouble he might encounter.

Another series of twists and turns and the cavern suddenly ended, not in a wall, but with a large hole. The hole did not lead outside. In its place was an opening with light noticeably shining from it. Once he reached the opening, the young Dragonkeeper saw it lead into a room and the room was dimly lit by something. This something was beautiful. It was an object that soothingly glowed bluish-white and sat atop a stone pedestal. Drake then carefully looked about the shadow-filled space and figured the object was most likely at the center.

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The only light in the room came from the object and although bright, Drake was unable to see the walls. This implied the room was large, and of course, most of it shrouded in darkness. Holding his staff tightly, he peered even closer trying to see if there was anyone or anything else inside. Though he *knew* not to enter, the aching desire to step in and approach the object was undeniable. So as every cell in his brain yelled for him to turn around and leave – Drake walked in. He approached the crystal-looking object using several more steps than he had guessed. The closer he loomed, the greater the light swelled and even shimmered. It was as if the crystal object became excited by the young Dragonkeeper's presence. Now standing only a few feet away, he truly recognized it. The Relic was stunning, more breathtaking in person than how Chu portrayed to him only days ago. It was so strange yet distinctive. Drake was reminded of a large slice of round cake, tall and wide. The curved top magnified and inverted the light that danced playfully within. Glimmer from the Dragon's Eye gently waved over the young Dragonkeeper's face, as though lovingly caressing him. He wondered once again about its peculiar shape, it was familiar. But how?

Without warning Drake felt a strong rustling of wind, a whooshing sound, and a press of air blow by – it startled him in the surrounding darkness. While at the same time the thunderous sounds of rocks cracking and falling were heard from the opening. Everything happened so rapidly Drake had no time to react. He was now left standing, dumbfounded, while dust hung heavily in the air. Thinking fast, the young Dragonkeeper walked over to inspect the opening as the room had become noticeably darker. Much to his dismay, Drake had found a ton of boulders piled high at the room's exit – he was trapped.

Aw, man—it's gonna take me forever to dig outta here, thought Drake.

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The Relic however, quickly came to the forefront of his mind. He turned around and gazed at it longingly, fighting an overwhelming urge to hold the Dragon's Eye before digging himself out. Then from all over the darkened room he heard a deep and calm, yet commanding voice. As Drake spun looking for the source, he realized the voice was actually echoing in his head.

Dragonkeeper...How I've waited so long for you. Welcome.

From the corner of his eye Drake saw movement into the light-cone of the Relic. It was a tall, human-shaped being, a man by build that *glided* into view behind the pedestal. The being was dressed in a hooded robe, black and tattered. Although the robe dragged at the ground, its sleeves only reached to the wrists. The being's bone-white hands with long, tapered fingers (almost skeletal in appearance) reached for its hood. The young Dragonkeeper gasped slightly when the hood came down, what he saw was like nothing he had imagined. There was no hint of eyes, nose, mouth, or ears, not even a mark to where these body parts were located. Its head was hairless, round, and perfectly smooth with skin so milky-white that it seemed to glow. To gaze upon the being's head was unnerving.

It projected words into Drake's mind once more.

Dragonkeeper...the Dragonkeeper of prophecy...I sensed you in the desert as clearly and easily as I sense you now before me. Your Light energy is so wonderfully strong, and as I expected, even more intoxicating in person...

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*Oh, how I've waited since the times of the Great Daewins and when Glicemax was young, cursed by a deceitful Father, scared of what I had become. Seven hundred years passed while I waited in exile, with no hope of lifting the Father's horrible spell. And then one day that woeful Crotalus came seeking refuge in the Dark Stroud, carrying with it a strange object. Before my followers dispatched the snake, we learned of the story behind the object, the Relic piece, an interesting story indeed. I quickly perceived the crystal was powerful, more than enough to undo the curse, except its awesome potential was unreachable to me. There was something still missing, I needed **something else**, something that could unlock its power and harness its energy. Hundreds of years came and went; I tried everything to access the crystal's power, anything to get out from under this curse, and doing so to no avail. Then Fate stepped in to help when my followers brought word of this new Prophecy. So I took the time to learn about it, to fully understanding its significance, its purpose, its reasons for being. I came to realize it would bestow the something else that I needed. For you see, the Prophecy ushers in the Final Dragonkeeper, it offers **you**. Once I understood this, I then knew all I had to do was wait. And wait—so—very—long, I have done.*

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Drake quickly wondered about two things: First, the Faceless Mage referred to the Dragon's Eye as the 'Relic piece', precisely how the king Amphithear had done. He speculated once again as to *why*. Secondly, the being clearly had a complete understanding of the Prophecy, while he did not. What exactly did Drake *not* know? The young Dragonkeeper felt immediately resentful toward Chu for apparently holding out on him. But before he could ponder any further, the Faceless Mage resounded loudly between his ears.

*Now, after fourteen hundred years, the wait has ended! You have finally come to collect the Dragon's Eye. However, you stand trapped by simple rubble, no doubt wondering how you could get out with the piece and your life. But please, be calm, for I stand before you not as foe but as **friend**.*

Huh? What? thought Drake.

*Yes, yes, you may think about me as your enemy but really I can be your **ally**. With your help we can use the Relic piece to rid me of this curse, once restored, a mighty partner I would be.*

Drake's mind was swimming – he had braced himself for a fight but instead got a truce *and* a proposal – he didn't know what to think.

The Faceless Mage seemed to glide once again, moving from behind the Relic and pedestal then nearer to Drake.

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*Dragonkeeper, together **we** can eliminate the Father's puppet, Hifearnan.*

Without his Evil One the Father of the Marag can easily be defeated by our joined powers.

While Drake heard the monster's words, a number of postcard-sized images materialized, floating between them. Each was sheer and wavy, and each depicted a motion picture: Drake and the Faceless Mage in different scenes of victorious battle over Hifearnan and the Father. It was all rather convincing.

*Do you see how together **we** can bring peace to the Realm of Faerie? Would that not be preferred than all the destruction which would happen otherwise?*

The young Dragonkeeper did not want to answer, yet he felt...compelled. Although the idea was good something niggled at him not to reply, but reply anyway he did.

"Ye—Ye—Yes..."

The tone became more fatherly but still commanding.

Of course Final One, of course. Then together we can unite the Cennuds and the dragons once and for all. They will be under our direction, under our rule.

"Ah—Ah," started Drake, unsure, "the dragons they...they're independent. They want to follow...but remain free."

The Faceless Mage now echoed brashly when it replied.

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*Oh, but that has been the problem from the beginning, fifteen hundred years ago. The dragons **think** they want freedom but they cannot handle it. That is why even one of their own knew a Dragonkeeper was needed. Glicemax wanted a strong Dragonkeeper, one whose word was absolute, one who the dragons, yea, all of Olden Terra would abide too. Instead, the first in a collection of weak Dragonkeepers spoke of unity and peace, when strength and iron-fisted rule were needed.*

This did not sound at all right to Drake. From everything he had learned he knew dragons needed a Dragonkeeper – not to rule over them – but to provide guidance, to foster understanding, harmony, and support amongst them and the other groups.

More sheer images flashed before Drake's eyes, they entered into his mind, bit-by-bit cementing to his reality. The images were horrifying depictions of dragons attacking dragons, dragons attacking Cennuds, and even dragons attacking *people*. He wanted to turn his eyes away but was stuck to watch.

***This** is the **true** nature of dragons, heard Drake, with serious conviction from the mouthless voice. Without a Dragonkeeper, they would revert to their instinctive behavior and destroy **all** in their path. This is why a strong and forceful Dragonkeeper is needed, one that can rule with absolute power, one that even the*

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*dragons would have no choice but to obey. With **me** by your side you **will** be such a Dragonkeeper. Surely this would be better than what you have witnessed, correct?*

Drake was utterly confused at this point. Even though he did not want to believe, the now vanishing imagery was very convincing. During his short time among the dragons he had seen them act aloof and aggressive. He had even personally experienced the daunting power and strength from the largest and smallest of their kind. Yet, deep down he believed – *no* – he *knew* they were just not capable of such monstrosities. Drake recalled the two eras when there were no Dragonkeepers, one much longer in time than the other and although there was much discord and disunity during these gaps, dragons were not off killing people either. Dragons were civilized creatures that simply needed direction and sincere leadership, they were then capable of mediating and resolving disputes peacefully either between themselves or other races – *these* were the dragons Drake knew of.

But something forced him to think otherwise, to believe what he had heard and seen was the cold, hard truth. The young Dragonkeeper reluctantly answered, “Y—Yes.”

You decide wisely Dragonkeeper.

Drake thought he sensed a smile behind the statement. What followed came with urgency and clear sternness.

*What **you** will do **now** final Dragonkeeper is **pick up** the Relic piece. With the immense power contained in it you will cast the spell I have readied to reverse the*

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*Father's curse. Once my followers and I are restored, together with your powers, the Relic, and my leadership, I will place the entire Realm of Faerie under **my** rule!*

What happened to 'we'? Drake thought. He felt a sinking feeling in his stomach.

The Faceless Mage glided back behind the Dragon's Eye, the crystal was once again between Drake and the being. The ancient monster harshly projected, *Pick it up final Dragonkeeper, pick it up!*

Alarms went off in Drake's brain screaming to him that this was all *wrong*. Drake then felt his body forced toward the Relic, his arms lifted reaching for it. Somehow, he found the strength and barely stopped moving.

"I thought...we would lead...together..." he said, struggling to talk.

*Boy, do you expect **me** to take advice from **you**? I have lived for over a millennium, what have you to offer but only your powers? Powers you do not understand or have any control over. That's right, I **know** you've done a few, simple tricks, but those are insignificant compared to what you are truly capable of. Your grasp and usage is so poor you couldn't even defend yourself from my temptation. At present you have free thought but you are **now** physically under my control.*

Drake's eyes bugged out in horror. Not only had the Faceless Mage read his mind but he'd been fooled so easily.

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You do not believe me? The young Dragonkeeper heard mockingly. *Let's see...Scratch your head* – Drake did so – *Turn around* – Drake pirouetted on the spot – *Is that proof enough?*

Soon you will give your mind over to me, and then through you, I will control all your powers. In good time you might learn to like and even enjoy the things I will make you do.

He tried to run, heck, he tried to just move but was simply frozen in place, stock-still. Drake attempted to conjure something, anything, but nothing materialized. No matter how hard he focused or grunted the only thing to happen was the trickle of cold sweat that slowly traced down his spine. Drake was now stuck, berating himself; he had been warned the Faceless Mage was powerful that it was capable of sneaking into one's mind, ruthlessly gaining control. He thought he'd noticed, stop it before it even started, but obviously he didn't.

Once I have full control of the Dragon's Eye, your usefulness will have ended. But do not worry, I will mercifully dispatch you with as little pain as possible. Of course, by that time you won't even be conscious of the fact.

Oh, how I've waited so long for this day. To see with my own eyes, taste with my own mouth...NOW BOY! Pick it up and repeat after me...

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Truly not wanting – but unable to stop – Drake stepped toward the pedestal and reached for the Relic.

Madison, Rockford, and Leemstey raced through the cavern. The deeper they traveled, the stronger Madison sensed her brother. Suddenly the Lady Protector stopped, causing Rockford to almost knock her down as Leemstey stumbled backwards from bumping hard into the dragon.

“I can *feel* he’s in here...” She breathed.

Madison then realized irritably she was still holding Dwaner’s sword hilt. Needing both hands for the bowstaff, Madison impatiently yanked at the hem of her skirted cotehardie, tearing a strip, then using it to tie the hilt to her belt. Finishing the knot while she led the dragon and Leemstey further into the cavern, the Lady Protector muttered bitterly under her breath – the darned thing reminded her how upset she was that both Dvergars stayed behind.

Meanwhile, the Gurgola had also felt the young Dragonkeeper’s presence within this dimly lit and seemingly endless tunnel. But much to the dragon’s shock what he had actually sensed was a horribly frightened boy. Keeping this to himself, Rockford eventually pressed, “Where Lady Protector, *where?*”

After a second’s delay, Madison replied, “Deeper.”

Proof of her hunch became obvious when they came across the charred remains of some creature. Everyone regarded it as the work of a fireball or perhaps some other magical defense.

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“It seems the young Dragonkeeper has learned to use his staff,” said Leemstey, with an astonished yet thoughtful tone. Delightfully he added, “He may be alive after all.”

Despite being slowed by wrong decisions along dead-end branches, they moved as quickly as possible through the cavern finally reaching what appeared was the end of the tunnel – a huge rockfall of boulders impeding their further progress.

“Looks like the cave collapsed here,” said Rockford, as he warily glanced up.

“Is he dead then?” Leemstey asked. “Crushed?” The assistant clerk sounded worried.

“No, no,” replied Madison, annoyed. “This rockfall, its—its closing a—a room entrance, I *know* it. He’s *alive*.” She frantically began pulling at rocks.

The Gurgola joined her and soon larger stones were tossed aside. Even with the dragon’s considerable help it remained a slow and daunting task.

“Hey pal,” barked Madison at Leemstey, who was standing back and watching, “some help here if you don’t mind.”

The assistant clerk rolled his eyes then grudgingly lent a hand, making sure to pick the smaller and lighter rocks first.

Reaching the top of the pile while moving rocks wildly out of-the-way, the feeling Madison had for her brother grew fervent – almost agonizing – she had to get through and get through *now*. As she grabbed at stones with bloodied finger tips, Madison yelled, “Drake, little bro, are you there? Drake, can you here me? Please Drake, say *something*?”

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The young Dragonkeeper took another step forward and was about to lift the Dragon's Eye, the very thing he painfully desired to do, but now, wanted no part of. Still, with every forced step the closer he neared and the nearer he got the more distinctly Drake felt warmth from the flickering light of the crystal. It was at that moment a muffled voice called his name.

Drake, little bro...Drake, can...Please Drake... – it was his sister! She was *definitely* on the other side of the rockfall. This gave him the will to stop; he froze halfway reaching for the Relic.

Grab it boy! He heard the Faceless Mage shout out angrily. *Lift it, **hold it!** You **will** cast the spell...*

The warm feeling of knowing his sister was nearby thawed the control, only somewhat, while she continued to call, *Drake, Drake..!*

*Oh, it's your sister, the **Protector**, of course. Your feelings are only helping you delay the inevitable. I will destroy her easily and then you will do my bidding.*

The Faceless Mage lifted its bone-white, skeletal hands, pointing them at the top of the mound. Drake watched in horror as sparks formed between its fingers.

"...No...!" Drake barely croaked out.

Then *something* jumped on the ancient monster's back. Drake heard the Faceless Mage screech in pain as it was knocked out of the Relic's light. The young Dragonkeeper then only heard shuffling and grunting from both the monster and its attacker. With the struggle in the

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shadows, Drake became aware he was gaining back control of his body. Whatever was fighting the Faceless Mage had distracted it enough to release its hold.

Drake felt a force, a pressure really, let go of his body and mind. He fell to his knees dizzy as though holding his breath for way too long.

The tussle continued—

—exertions from the Faceless Mage—

—lightning bolts fired recklessly flashing around the room—

—panting from another end—

—quick scurrying—

—surprised wails of pain from the monster—

—more lightning bolts—

The young Dragonkeeper had ignored the ruckus while his attention was again lured to the Dragon's Eye. The irresistible desire to possess it came over him like a cool wave of water, focusing his mind solely on the Relic. A passing thought wished it were brighter – a hum – and then the Dragon's Eye exploded into a brilliant bulb of light, a small sun too dazzling to gaze upon that purged all the darkness around him. Once his eyes adjusted, he scanned the room to find the Faceless Mage standing still, his hands covered with sparking threads of electricity. Behind it, holding two knives and panting was a gremlin. It was Trilly!

“Uh, oh,” she giggled, noticing the light all around her, “this isn't good.”

Before Drake was able to react, the Faceless Mage moved with inhuman speed. It spun around and hammered Trilly squarely in the chest using its electrified hands, causing the gremlin

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to fly then crash into the far wall. After she slid partly down and dropped face-first, Trilly remained motionless.

The ancient monster turned to face Drake – the little gremlin had repeatedly slashed at its robes and smooth head. It approached slowly, gliding, while the purplish-black wounds on its pale skin healed themselves miraculously. The monster spoke in Drake’s mind with controlled anger.

Foolish little creature, I will destroy the vermin later. Very smart of you to bring one along, they do come in handy even if their loyalties are misplaced.

Now boy, Drake heard in a tone that became enraged, *you will pick up the Relic and cast my spell, AT ONCE!*

Cringing from the bellow ringing between his ears, Drake realized he didn’t feel forced or under the creature’s control. Quickly the young Dragonkeeper stood then stumbled back cautiously. Feeling woozy, Drake shook his head and rubbed his face trying to clear his mind even further from the hold.

The Faceless Mage recognized Drake was no longer in its command – *N000! You were mine, you were to do my bidding, to release me from this curse* – the sparks engulfing its hands grew larger and turned blood-red – *If you will not do either, then you will surely DIE!* – lifting its hands, it shot a thick, fiery-red bolt at Drake.

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The young Dragonkeeper barely had time to lift his staff and form a shield – one just big enough to prevent the blast from killing him, but not enough to prevent from being thrown against the rockfall. Ozone filled the air while the Faceless Mage kept the bolt of lightning on him, it felt as though it grew stronger, weakening the shield. Drake struggled his best to move or roll away, but couldn't. He was pinned tight by the pressure of the blast.

Drake knew he had to do something, and do it *soon*, or he was going to die.

He called for a dragon, instinctively, not by uttering words or phrases but by expressing his *feelings* – exhaustion, hope, pain, and fear. Hope was the strongest though, hope for any help. The young Dragonkeeper then shook his head angrily at himself, for his foolishness – he knew fully well none were going to come.

With every last bit of strength he had, Drake desperately reached deep within. He delved to the point where he felt disembodied from himself, from the room, from time. He saw two, no, three dragons, all bluish-white in color with solid blue eyes. They were the kind he easily imagined from all his books, Eura dragons, like Burrax – *fire breathers*. He looked at them and simply thought, *Help!*

Drake snapped back into the moment to find the shield weakened even more. His hair was standing from the electricity, now dangerously near. Closing his eyes he accepted this as his end, when...

Aaaargh! The Faceless Mage wailed in pain.

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Pressure from the bolt lessened, Drake opened his eyes to see what had happened. The dragons he just imagined, all three, surrounded the ancient monster shooting thick jets of flame. Drake now spun away from under the bolt and collapsed.

The Faceless Mage angrily convulsed and shuddered, it sent sparks hitting the conjured dragons damaging them. Parts of the dragons plainly vanished as they were hit. As blows were exchanged the dragons became barely visible, wispy filaments – they eventually stopped breathing fire and were soon to fade from existence.

Turning its attention, the ancient monster drifted patiently toward the young Dragonkeeper. The balls of electricity covering its hands grew and connected together as it lifted them, pointing at Drake. Sparks sizzled and brightened as the intensity increased – Drake felt so drained, he knew he couldn't stop the next surge of lightning. The Faceless Mage buzzed in his mind, its tone sounded calm and unemotional.

*Now, **you** will die...*

What took place next caught Drake completely by surprise. It seemed foolish really, but right at the same time. After instinctively reaching for the Dragon's Eye *across* the room – it *flew* to Drake's hands in a blur. In a flash the three dragons renewed themselves, stronger than before.

The Faceless Mage hesitated by what it sensed.

This gave Drake that split second of realization; he quickly rolled out-of-the-way then yelled, "FIRE, *NOW!*"

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All three dragons produced the hottest and purest-white torrents of flames from their mouths. This time it paralyzed the Faceless Mage as it screeched painfully. The heat was so intense Drake felt sunburn forming on his face. He stood and stepped back, almost all the way to the wall, trying to escape from the burning sensation.

The ancient monster continued to wail. It tried shooting arcs at the conjured dragons but these had no effect on the visibly bigger, magicked beasts. The dragons methodically stepped in closer-and-closer, continuing their never-ending blasts of white-hot fire. Eventually the burning body fell to its knees, it appeared to face Drake and say something – the young Dragonkeeper only heard a gurgle and a moan. The Faceless Mage then fell forward with the chilling sound of clattering bones.

“Stop,” said Drake. The conjured dragons’ at once ceased breathing fire.

With the Relic in one hand and his staff in the other, he walked over in the uncomfortably hot room to the monster’s smoldering body. Wiping sweat from his forehead, Drake jumped back in shock when a blackened hand and charred skull lifted from the burning remains.

The carcass that was the Faceless Mage fired a dim but deadly lightning bolt straight at Drake’s heart. Faster than he’s ever moved, the young Dragonkeeper swung his staff and deflected the bolt’s cutting edge, just in time. Before it did anything else, Drake aimed his staff and fired a wide, bluish beam of dazzling light – not exactly what he expected, but he used it anyway. As he swept the beam over the monster’s body, it disintegrated the remains into a fine, grey dust. After a few sweeps, Drake turned off the ray then kicked at the dusty clump of ashes. What he found – much to his relief – was only small bits of bone and cloth.

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Satisfied the Faceless Mage was destroyed, the young Dragonkeeper looked at the conjured dragons and said, “Thank you.”

The dragons then faded to the twinkling sound of invisible chimes.

Before he could ponder his new found abilities, Drake stumbled to a sitting position then suddenly felt light-headed. As his eyes rolled into his head Drake fell backward clutching the Dragon’s Eye to his chest.

Am I... getting better? he wondered sluggishly, a thick haze had crept over his mind. *Or is it this... Relic...?*

The haze relentlessly grew darker until finally, the world turned black.

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CHAPTER 20: The Reunion

In the dimly lit cavern while moving stones, Rockford sprang from his crouched position and then stood spellbound. The Gurgola had heard the young Dragonkeeper's call. Or rather, he *felt* it as emotions – several of them – clearly and undeniably. Drake needed help and he needed it right now.

“Rockford, what's wrong?” Madison asked. She had never seen the dragon act this way.

“Did you hear that?” said Rockford, his sharp, green-eyes fixed at nothing. The call was so strong it had riveted the dragon's senses.

“Hear what?” Leemstey said annoyed.

Still at the top of the rubble, Madison stopped moving rocks and listened.

“Yes...it sounds like a...a battle's going on in there!”

That wasn't the answer the dragon was looking for.

Rockford's mind returned from the overpowering call, the dragon then heard what the Lady Protector was talking about. There was a fight and it raged on – evidently staggering to hear it through the collapsed rock.

Without a single word, Madison and Rockford started moving rocks again – now at a frantic pace.

A mixture of sounds suddenly grew louder-and-louder behind them: Cackling, hissing, and guttural. The noise quickly drew near.

They turned around to find a group of deformed cockatrices, snakes, and frogs, ten in total, all of them battered and bloodied, but still standing viciously before them.

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“Dwaner, Dween...?” said Madison, realizing instantly what the Cennud’s presence meant. She came down from the pile of rocks then took a bewildered step towards the hideous group, “What happened to them?”

“Lady Protector, STOP!” shouted Rockford as he grabbed her by the arm. “We cannot do anything for them now –” the dragon pulled her back beside then scowled “– we have *this* pressing matter to deal with.”

“Those stupid Dvergars,” sneered the lead cockatrice, apparently unbothered by half of its left-wing missing, “you didn’t expect them to hold us all back?” The creature shot a deadly glare at Rockford and taunted, “You can’t run away now, Gurgola. I will take great pleasure in spreading my poison into your veins.”

“Bring it on, ugly” growled Rockford, “bring it on.” The dragon opened his hands and extended his talons with a *snap*.

All at once a deafening roar was heard from behind the cursed monsters. It boomed against the wall so loudly that everyone covered their ears from the piercing sound. Then into view came four large Amphithears, each with its feather-capped tail swaying and their dark eyes quickly scanning the scene.

For a single, fleeting moment no one moved. The Amphithears had locked their gaze to the Gurgola’s, then...

Rockford pounced on the lead cockatrice – the melee began.

Half the cursed Cennuds took on the Amphithears while the rest attacked Madison and the others.

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The Gurgola tore into the cockatrice he had tangled with. Cackles of pain filled the cavern as Rockford slashed and sank talons deep into the creature's body. After maiming it enough, the dragon tossed it aside like trash then promptly jumped on another Cennud. Having become very adept with her bowstaff, Madison quickly destroyed several snakes. All that remained were smoking husks, shriveling before their eyes. Leemstey had tripped on rocks and fell, but there he remained, watching the battle with shifty eyes.

Meanwhile, the Amphithears fought efficiently. Almost with no effort, they dispatched Cennuds ease – a well placed slash here, a neatly placed blast there. It was obvious these Amphithears were highly trained. Watching them with awe, Madison wondered as to how these dragons had luckily happened to appear.

Soon the battle ended and all that remained of Cennuds were three mangled creatures: The lead cockatrice missing both wings, a snake with a good portion of its tail missing, and a blinded frog. They were surrounded by ready Amphithears on one side with Madison the Gurgola and a now standing Leemstey on the other. The Amphithears began to loom closer, surrounding the monsters, moving almost on top of them. Although their faces carried no expression, it was obvious they were about to burn these pitiful creatures to ashes.

“STOP!” Madison yelled. The Amphithears checked and looked in her direction, she then said, “Let's give these creatures a chance to give up, leave with their lives.”

“They'll just find more of their own and return,” said Rockford evenly. “We need to dispatch them now.”

“What do you guys think?” asked Madison of the Amphithears.

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“We are here by orders of King Capac,” replied the Amphithear to her left, “a safeguard for the Dragonkeeper and his Protector. We will do as told.”

Madison sighed and shook her head. A part of her agreed with Rockford, but a greater part had had her fill of all this violence. She just wanted to get to her brother and get out. Yet the Lady Protector felt sorry for these torn-apart Cennuds, she had done enough destroying of her own and was thankful she wasn't bloodthirsty for more. *If they would just go, or at least leave us alone.*

“Well...” said Madison, placing a hand on her hip, “can we release you and call a truce?”

“*Never!*” croaked the lead cockatrice, it sounded near death. The blood-drenched Cennud tried spitting poison at her but it was too badly beaten, disgusting orange-colored goo dripped out of its mouth instead. “We will fight you, the dragons, and your precious Dragonkeeper until you are crushed.” The cockatrice wheezed as the snake hissed in agreement.

“But I'm giving you a *chance* to save yourselves,” implored Madison. “All you have to do is just go and leave us alone. *Geez*, we'll even *help* you outta here as a show of good faith.”

“Leave us here, let us go, or destroy us,” rasped the cockatrice. “It makes no difference. We are loyal *only* to our triath.” The Cennud glared at Rockford and shrilled crazily, “Let's finish our fight Gurgola, or are you too frightened?”

Rockford wiped his face with a taloned hand, exasperated. He then pointed an open palm and tilted head at the creature while sending Madison a knowing look. It was as if Rockford had said, *See? See what I mean?*

The Lady Protector had no choice but to accept the insane single-mindedness of these cursed creatures. She thought giving them some kindness and help might work, but they literally

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tried to spit it back in her face. Now a greater, truly alarming concern spread in her mind, *How do you fight against creatures that have no fear of death? Monsters that are willing to give their lives blindly to their horrible cause?* There was absolutely no point in reasoning with them.

Madison once again sighed heavily, this time, stifling a sob as she rubbed her temple for the on-coming headache. Turning her back to everyone, in a low voice she said, “Okay, Rockford...go ahead.”

The Gurgola nodded once at the Amphithears and said, “*Do it.*”

The Amphithears torched the cursed Cennuds with four bright pillars of fire. They held the flames on them until their shrieks and wails died out. Where the Cennuds once stood was now a large, smoking blister on the ground.

As the screams from the creatures rose then died, with dread Madison wondered, *My goodness, if all the Cennuds are like this...what are we gonna do?*

Trilly’s body jerked where it lay.

The little gremlin then shook her head and rolled onto her back. Eventually, she sat up with some difficulty rubbing her chest.

“Ouch!” she giggled, wincing in pain, “that’s gonna leave a mark.”

Trilly stood up and looked around the room, it was back to the original amount of light before the Relic brilliantly lit up. Still rubbing her chest, she looked for and found Drake. The young Dragonkeeper was lying silent with his back to the ground, the Relic held tight in his left-

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hand against his stomach. Trilly then ran over to him hoping for the best...he was breathing, he was alive! She tittered joyfully with relief.

“Thank the Light,” said Trilly, as she softly tapped Drake’s face trying to wake him.

The young Dragonkeeper woke with a startle – he sat up scampering backwards, looking around wildly for his staff.

“Whoa,” said the little gremlin, jumping back, “it’s just me, Trilly.”

Drake had found his staff and pulled it close to him, now sitting, he looked around the room bleary-eyed for the voice.

“Trilly? Is—is that *you*? Come here.”

The little gremlin approached and before Trilly could do anything Drake grabbed her and hugged her fiercely. Surprised at first, Trilly then hugged him back and purred.

“Are you alright? Can you stand?”

Ignoring her questions, Drake released his hug then rambled, “Trilly, you saved my life. Thank you. How did you get here? How did you get away from the Bralani? How did you...”

Trilly lifted a hand to interrupt him, she giggled and said, “I asked first.”

“Oh,” said Drake, blushing from embarrassment, “I’m okay, just tired.” His face quickly livened as he asked, “Did you see any of what I did?”

“Um, no,” answered Trilly, “the Faceless Mage knocked me out good. One moment the room lights up with a million candles, the next, I’m waking up with this nasty bruise on my chest. You know, I work much better in the dark.”

He looked at the gremlin with genuine happiness, thankful she was alright, “How *did* you get here?”

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Trilly proceeded to tell him the story. How she was captured by the Bralani and then found herself in a cage of rock-hard sand. It all sounded, of course, very familiar to Drake.

“I knew I had to get out of there,” continued Trilly, “or I was going to end up someone’s dinner. I’m a gremlin, so I’m good at getting into and out of things.

“They went bananas when I got out. I simply jumped around and ran through them, I was much quicker than they are. After I knocked off the nearby torches it became pitch-black, since we gremlins can see in the dark, and fortunately the Bralani don’t, I got away quite easily. I then found my way out and tracked your scent. I thought it was strange I couldn’t smell any of the others, it actually worried me. I really hoped it wasn’t for the worse reasons.

“It took a while, but I found your trail leading to another cave entrance. It seemed like an old smell but I followed it anyway. Then much to my surprise I caught up to you just as I heard the tunnel caving in. I quickly snuck in and somehow avoided being sensed by the Faceless Mage; apparently he was really focused on you.”

“That was *you* I felt?” quizzed Drake, surprised. “That brush of wind as the room entrance closed?”

“Yep that was me,” replied Trilly, giggling.

“Boy, you waited a while before doing anything.”

“Well...I ran to a dark corner and watched. I saw him moving and I heard you talking.”

“What d’ya mean you heard me talking?”

“Exactly what I said, all I heard was your voice. Which by the way, you seemed *very* agreeable to whatever he was saying. So I just decided to wait it out.”

“You never *heard* him?” asked Drake skeptically.

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“Nope. Then it became obvious you didn’t agree *and* he had control over you. You should’ve seen your eyes, you looked horrified” – she held back a giggle – “anyway, I quickly put myself behind him and pounced as soon as I could.”

“Gosh, I’m glad when you did, but you sure cut it close.”

Trilly giggled then said, “How about you, how’d you get here *alone*?”

Drake then gave his account of being taken by the Bralani, which they both agreed was very similar to the gremlin’s story. How he was also in a cage of rock-hard sand, how he got away from them (which delighted the gremlin), and how he ended up in this very room.

“*Wow*,” said Trilly, looking wide-eyed at the strangely-shaped crystal in Drake’s hand. She then glanced around and nodded, “Now our next problem is getting out of here.”

“Let’s just start digging,” said Drake, as he stood, “eventually we’ll get through to the other side.”

“Yeah,” giggled Trilly, peeking at the Mage’s remains, “let’s get outta here.”

A stone at the top of the cave-in suddenly rolled down all on its own. Drake and Trilly’s heads jerked in surprise.

A voice called for the young Dragonkeeper, “Drake! You in there!? *Drake!*”

Recognizing it, he clambered up to the opening and yelled, “Mady, Mady! Is that you?”

“Drake, thank goodness,” said Madison with a tremble to her voice, “you’re alive!”

They reached for each other through the hole and held hands, both relieved to see the other beyond measure. At the same exact time, they both noticed something...

“*Eww—*”

“*—what is—*”

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“—*that smell?*”

“Jinx,” said Madison. They both laughed.

“Alright,” said Drake, shaking his head, “ladies first. What *is* that?”

“Burnt chicken, snake, and frog,” chuckled Madison. “How ‘bout you?”

The laughter vanished from Drake’s voice, he replied, “Burnt Faceless Mage.”

With everyone working hard to remove rocks, enough were finally taken so that not only were Drake and Madison reunited, but the rest of the group entered as well.

The emotions Madison had felt over the last day or so finally came to a head. She reached for Drake, hugged him tight, and cried.

“Aww, geez,” said Drake, rolling his eyes. “*Girls.*” He then returned her hug warmly and added, “It’s all right, Mady. I’m okay, everything’s fine.”

Rockford was surprised to see Trilly, “As much as I hate to admit it, you gremlins are amazing creatures. I thought you were dead.”

“No such luck O’prince of the Gurgola’s,” giggled Trilly. “I’ll tell you all about my exploits on the way back.”

“Sure, can’t wait to hear it,” said Rockford dryly. “And *no*, I still won’t carry you.”

Leemstey in the meantime was distracted, ignoring everyone as he hastily searched for something among the stones they just moved.

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The Amphithears had introduced themselves to Drake and told him they were here in his service, sent by the king no less. They also let it known that it was his *call* they had heard, without it, the Amphithears would most likely still be searching.

“You mean you actually heard it?” Drake asked. “I wasn’t even sure I did it right to begin with.”

“The call, *your call*,” said one of the Amphithears solemnly, “was clear and distinct. We utterly felt your fear, your pain, and your hope. Needless to say, we then *knew* where you were. Swiftly we flew into the cavern and through its tunnel, reaching your location with haste, ready to provide aid.” The dragon looked around the dark room, “Though it appears you handled everything quite well.” All four dragons bowed their heads slightly to the young Dragonkeeper.

“Ah, thank you,” said Drake. He turned to Rockford then asked, “Did you hear my call?”

“Yes,” said Rockford, avoiding eye-contact with the Lady Protector.

“Hold on,” said Madison, “so it wasn’t the fighting that caught your attention through the rocks, was it?” She looked at Drake and smiled, “You should’ve seen him, little bro. He popped up acting strange, now it all makes sense.”

“The closer the dragon is to the Dragonkeeper,” said Rockford, pointedly ignoring Madison’s comment, “the stronger it is felt by that dragon. Eventually you will learn to send your calls to groups of dragons, and then in time to individual ones.”

“So my call went out to *all* dragons?” asked Drake.

“Yes,” replied Rockford, “except only heard by those nearby.” The Gurgola then added to himself, *Though I suspect with that call’s intensity, it surely had a far reaching extent.*

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“But my drihten,” said the Amphithear that spoke before, “the call was so strong it could have easily been heard through half of Vesperik.”

“Really?” chimed Drake. “Half the continent?”

The Gurgola was troubled. But why? Here he had the final Dragonkeeper, seemingly stronger than any other Dragonkeeper before him, one that had displayed ability worthy enough to oppose the Father of the Marag and its Evil One. Then why was he so unsettled? Was it the boy’s lack of control over his powers? Looking at the remains of the Faceless Mage told him no. Was it the boy’s lack of knowledge? Knowing the people to guide the young Dragonkeeper such as Chu told him no. Was it the boy’s lack of integrity? Seeing how the Amphithears bowed to Drake and sensing for himself the integrity grow by the moment told him no. *Then what?* Rockford had no choice but to grudgingly admit his concern of a day ago: The young Dragonkeeper was clearly becoming *too powerful*. But what would the dragon do about it? What indeed?

“Hello...Rockford?” said Drake, trying to get the dragon’s attention.

“Huh?” replied the Gurgola distantly.

“Well, do you think the call might have reached half the continent?”

“Ah—I guess—probably so.”

Madison had been gawking at the Dragon’s Eye and was amazed, she interjected, “Here it is. I can’t believe we actually have it.” She wanted to take the Relic from her brother’s hand.

The Lady Protector’s remark focused everyone’s attention on the crystal. It appeared as though all were mesmerized by the Relic, all except for Drake, who shuffled his feet self-consciously as his sister, the gremlin, and dragons stared in his direction.

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Drake used the group's moment of reflection to really study the crystal. It was roughly six-inches long on its flat sides and weighed about a pound. The object emitted a beautiful, bluish-white glow from a cloudy substance, swirling lazily underneath the surface. It was truly a strange, yet at the same time, familiar shape. The edges the wedge-shaped Relic were almost knife sharp, while the rounded-top was perfectly smooth and slightly warm to the touch. It seemed weird calling this thing a "dragon's eye." As he held it up for inspection, viewing it from this side and that, he felt as though something were *missing*.

Although it felt really good to hold the Relic, Drake knew it would be cumbersome if he needed to defend himself. It was then he remembered about the pouch around his neck, the one given to him by the grand advisor. Intuitively, he placed the curved part of the Relic in his right-hand, then took his left and placed it over the wedge. Drake then squeezed his hands together causing the Relic to *shrink*. He stopped when the crystal became a one-inch miniature. After opening the pouch, the young Dragonkeeper placed the mini-Dragon's Eye inside then tightly drew the little sack shut. He replaced the pouch behind his shirt and patted it for good measure – it felt just as good to have it on his person as it was to hold it in his hands.

Everyone who had watched Drake was astounded.

"How—how'd you know to do that?" sputtered Madison.

"I didn't," replied Drake, smiling. "It just seemed right. I'll have to ask Chu about it when we get back."

Trilly noticed Leemstey was still searching for something near the entrance while unconsciously rubbing his neck.

"Something wrong?"

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Startled by the gremlin, Leemstey took a few steps away and curtly answered, “No.”

Madison glanced over and saw immediately what was bothering the assistant clerk. With a touch of solace to her voice, she said, “Oh, no. You lost your chain and your good luck charm.”

“I must have lost it while helping move rocks,” said Leemstey bitterly, “or during the fight with the cursed Cennuds.” He continued to scan the floor.

“You mean when you fell over and hid,” groused Rockford.

“That really happened?” said Trilly, her ears perked and her face beamed.

Leemstey ignored them as Madison walked over and then patted him on the back.

“Don’t worry bud, it looks like it served its purpose. I’ll get you another, what did you call it? ‘Gem of good fortune,’ right? I’ll get you another one when we get back.”

The assistant clerk pursed his lips in reply.

“Alright,” barked the Gurgola, “we’re done in here. Let’s move.”

While everyone was exiting, Madison heard her name called. It sounded weak and gravelly, yet commanding.

madison...protector...

She turned startled and noticed the remains of the Faceless Mage; she heard the voice again, this time scaring her – it had seemed to come from its ashes.

*...yes, protector...let me share this vision...one of you will become **changed**...the other will surely **pass**...*

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The disembodied voice laughed, wickedly harsh, taunting even. It grew louder-and-louder.

Out of sheer anger, she aimed her bowstaff and burned the ashes with a writhing fire.

“Die you monster!” Madison screamed, holding the flame until she heard laughter no more.

Drake and Rockford quickly reentered after Madison’s cry; the young Dragonkeeper was the first to reach her. He looked baffled at the scorched ground as he grabbed his sister by the arm.

“Mady! What the heck’s wrong?”

“*Nothing,*” said Madison, pulling away and turning on her heels. She quickly left the room.

Drake watched after her then glanced at Rockford with concern. The dragon in turn looked at the large, dark splotch on the floor and shrugged.

“What got into her?” muttered Drake, as he trotted out trying to catch up to her with Rockford following close behind.

As the group neared the tunnel’s end, Drake and Trilly recounted their separate, harrowing experiences. Each story of fear but overcoming the odds lifted everyone’s spirits except for Madison and Leemstey. The assistant clerk was apparently still upset for losing his charm while Madison’s bad mood remained a secret.

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Plans were then debated among the group – do they go straight to Notama before nightfall or make camp outside the Dark Stroud. While listening to this discussion, Drake thought of how happy he would be to leave this cave and creepy forest behind when he realized something was not here, actually, make that *two something's*. The young Dragonkeeper was ashamed to admit it but he hadn't noticed until just now.

“Hey, ah,” began Drake sheepishly, “where's Dwaner and Dween?”

“They stayed behind to guard the entrance,” replied Rockford, watching the Dragonkeeper's sister for her reaction. “As you saw, you weren't the only one to come across cursed monsters.”

Madison abruptly stopped the group and addressed the Amphithears, “Did any of you see two Dvergars as you flew into the cave?”

The Amphithears looked at each other, the one that spoke earlier said, “None of us saw Dvergars or Cennuds. We were flying too fast toward the cave to notice anything but the opening.”

Madison turned and stomped away angrily.

Several steps later, the Lady Protector gasped when she reached the exit. The rest of the group charged from behind and found the scene that had waited for her.

At the almost-center of the clearing, with dead bodies of cursed Cennuds spread about, a red, puffy-eyed Dwaner cradled the lifeless body of Dween.

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CHAPTER 21: A Spy Uncovered

Madison and Drake raced to Dwaner's side, as soon as they reached him they knelt down slowly in shock.

"Oh—my...is Dween *dead*?" asked Madison, choking back tears.

"He's just barely alive," croaked Dwaner.

Madison then quickly looked Dween over: His helmet and face were covered in dirt and blood while his clothes were completely torn to shreds. The only part of his cloak that still remained was a short piece tied around his neck. Dween's injuries were too horrendous to look at as several, long gashes bled over his entire body. It was amazing the scruffy Dvergar was still alive.

Wiping tears from her eyes, Madison now focused on Dwaner, she asked, "Are *you* okay?"

"I'm fine, Lady Protector," replied the master-at-arms stoically. He then began to softly rock his brother.

But what from Madison saw, Dwaner was far from fine.

The right sleeve of Dwaner's tunic was ripped away at the shoulder, exposing a long and deep wound on his arm. His once beautiful, emerald cape was ripped and bloodied, now muddy-brown in color. And everywhere skin was exposed, especially along his face, was covered in large purple and black bruises.

Drake had a difficult time looking at either of them, instead he glanced at their surroundings and noticed the dead bodies of cursed Cennuds all around.

"What *happened* here?"

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“Aye, Dween almost single-handedly,” replied Dwaner, nodding once to his blood-brother, “defeated the cursed Cennuds. His actions today would rival that of our Great King Dwight’s. He fought a valiant battle, never once tiring or showing fear as he dispatched these monsters with ease. Dween even saved my life on three different occasions.” The master-at-arms sobbed several times then composed himself. “But there were *too many*. At one point I was thrown into the woods. The Cennuds must have thought I was dead since none of them came to finish me. I was unconscious for I don’t know how long, but once I awoke I made my way back and found Dween here, in this state. He still breathes but with difficulty.”

Madison and Drake noticed it was shallow and ragged, and there was also a gurgling sound when he inhaled – not a good sign.

“Although we stopped many here,” continued Dwaner, as the dragons, Leemstey and gremlin circled around, “we knew some got passed us. I sat here thinking all of our effort” – he looked at Dween sadly – “all of *his* effort was for naught.” The master-at-arms raised his tear-filled eyes at Drake and said, “But I see you’re alive and the others as well” – he forced a smile at Trilly – “even you little gremlin.”

Trilly looked back at the master-at-arms with her sad, soulful eyes – there was no giggling from her now.

“Did you find the Dragon’s Eye?” Dwaner asked of Drake.

“I have it,” said Drake, showing him the pouch, “it’s in here.”

“Then all was not in vain,” said Dwaner, as bravely as he could, “we have succeeded. Dween, did you hear that my blood-brother? The young Dragonkeeper has the Relic.”

Dween remained lifeless as a rag doll.

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“Prince of the Gurgolas,” pleaded Dwaner, “is there anything you and the Amphithears can do?”

Rockford hunched over Dween and inspected the Dvergar’s injuries – even the battle-hardened dragon was disturbed by what he saw. The Gurgola placed a great hand on Dwaner’s shoulder and consoled him.

“There is not enough life-blood between me and the Amphithears to make any difference, Dween’s injuries are too many and too severe. Now if we only had more dragons...” He trailed off letting the conclusion sink in then added, “I am sorry master-at-arms, truly sorry.”

From directly opposite the cave opening, sounds of trees ripped and torn apart surprised everyone. Suddenly, eleven more Amphithears crashed loudly through the last wall of foliage and into the clearing – the lead dragon was King Capac.

Apparently having heard the exchange, the king dragon simply said, “Maybe we can help.”

It was a very close call.

The addition of King Capac and his royal guards to Rockford and the first four Amphithears provided just enough dragon’s blood to save Dween from the brink.

After administering the thick, healing liquid to Dween (as well as some to mend the master-at-arm’s wounds) Drake conjured simple shirts and pants to replace both the Dvergar’s tattered clothes. Then by using the thin trees from the forest, Dween was secured safely to a makeshift stretcher and carried along by Rockford and his blood- brother.

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Even though the Amphithear guards led the way by clearing a wide path, their progress was slow and methodical as they trudged south through the Dark Stroud.

Drake tried peering through the high, forest canopy. Was it daytime or was night approaching? He just couldn't tell – the tree tops were so dense and intertwined, he might as well still been in the cave. To take his mind off the creepy surroundings, Drake decided to speak with the king Amphithear. Leaving Madison to walk beside the stretcher, with Trilly at her side and Leemstey opposite them, Drake jogged up to King Capac. The royal dragon was leading the trail freshly cleared by his guards.

“My liege,” started Drake, “may I please speak with you.”

King Capac answered by blowing light smoke from his nostrils. Drake wasn't sure but he took it as a 'yes.'

“Why did you send the four Amphithears? The last time we spoke, you said you couldn't.”

After more smoke billowed out of his nose, this time darker, in a matter-of-factly tone the king said, “Once our lair was secure, I began to sense your integrity growing. I don't know what you were doing or had done, but I began to truly accept you as the final Dragonkeeper. At that point I was compelled to honor your request; as soon as I could, I sent what I could spare.”

“Oh, I see,” said Drake slightly embarrassed. “Well, ah, thank you then.” After a few silent, awkward steps, he added, “I do have another question, if you don't mind –” King Capac bobbed his head once “– Okay, what brought you out here with your guards?” In someway Drake knew the answer even before he asked the question.

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The king Amphithear stopped walking as smoke billowed freely from his nose *and* mouth. He stood there, seemingly enraptured over a thought or memory. Everyone stopped in their tracks as well. His own guards had stopped leveling the forest; they quickly came and stood beside their king with concern. So much time passed waiting for the dragon that Rockford and Dwaner softly put down Dween to rest their arms.

“I—I sensed your temptation by the ancient monster,” said King Capac, at last. “I don’t know how it was possible. Your feelings came from so far away, yet it was as though you were right beside me.” He then appraised Drake with worrisome eyes.

Rockford’s face turned dark noticing the king’s reaction; he knew what the royal dragon was thinking. *I am not alone, he senses it too! He had felt the boy’s seething power and it surprised him.*

The king dragon glanced at everyone regally, using the moment to collect himself. Once his dark eyes returned to Drake’s, he continued, “I felt you somehow overcome its ruse of temptation, but more importantly, I heard your call. It was so clear, so desperate, yet so full of integrity that even *I* could not deny it. With the captain of my guards protest, he felt he should be the one to go, not me, I selected ten more soldiers and flew here with post-haste.”

Drake recalled from his books that the Amphithears were the fastest flying of all the winged clans. Flying at speeds believed impossible, it was almost certain that with a little magic (and no surprise) they were here.

“You should be proud of how you handled yourself, young Dragonkeeper,” said King Capac. With a puff of smoke twisting high above his head, the king firmly added, “My *hope*

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now is that you are as wise as you are as strong, and that you will *lead* more so than *dictate* to the dragon clans. I look forward to you guiding us well.”

“Ah—wow,” said Drake, blushing. “I appreciate the props but Trilly deserves some thanks too. If it weren’t for her help I would have remained under the Mage’s control.” His eyes smiled at the little gremlin.

“*Props?*” asked Dwaner, as his brows pinched. “What is that?”

“You know, it’s like...” replied Drake, making circle motions with his hands, “all the nice words –” Dwaner stared back, unconvinced “– ah, never mind. Just thanks.”

“Don’t forget Dragonkeeper,” snickered Trilly, “your sister helped out too.”

“I did?” said Madison, making a surprised face.

“He didn’t mention this earlier,” giggled Trilly, “but it was really when he heard your voice through the rocks that he resisted. Good thing too, it gave me that extra second or so to get behind the Faceless Mage.” She laughed to herself.

The king turned to address Trilly and was about to say something when the gremlin unexpectedly felt dizzy and staggered. Grabbing her head in pain, yelping, Trilly stumbled backwards and then fainted. Fortunately for her, Madison scooped her up before she hit the ground

As this occurred, Leemstey walked over to Drake motioning to ask him something.

“Viperinor!” squealed Trilly, as she jumped suddenly out of Madison’s arms. She then pointed crazily at Leemstey, “Viperinor! He’s a viperinor!”

Leemstey melted to a formless glob then twisted and transformed before everyone’s eyes into a very large and very red cockatrice, it was a sickening sight to witness. Venomous drool

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dripped syrupy from its sharp-toothed jaw as the viperinor that was once Leemstey yanked Drake away from everyone. Knocking Drake's staff into the clearing, it swiftly placed the talons from its forewings across the young Dragonkeeper's throat.

"*What—the—heck?*" Madison exclaimed. "Leemstey was this—this—*viperinor* all along?" She glared at Dwaner and added, "How could this have happened?"

Dwaner looked at the still dizzy gremlin and wondered the same thing. The little creature was supposed to sense these dangerous changelings among them way much sooner than this.

"No, stupid girl," replied the viperinor, "I dispatched him the night before leaving the palace, to gather his shape. It was your assistant clerk that spied for Hifearnan, he was the one that let the Dragonslaver know this journey was happening. And he was the one who snuck me in so I could impersonate one of *you*. Unfortunately for him, his usefulness had ended, so he was chosen as the one I would be."

"Why would Leemstey do this?" asked Madison, glaring at everyone as if demanding an answer.

"Aye," began Dwaner calmly, "he was no doubt still resentful towards dragons after one accidentally killed his mother, years ago. I always thought he should have been relieved of his duties, but Straddleham argued otherwise. Said he'd keep an eye on him, was a good worker. Now I'm certain what happened back at the armory was not an accident."

Trapped standing still with two, sharp talons against his neck Drake recalled all too well how the enchanted Dvergar sword hilt, held seemingly innocently by Leemstey, produced a blade that almost pierced his heart.

"Where is the body now?" demanded Dwaner, scowling at the creature.

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“The assistant clerk is in his chamber,” sneered the viperinor, “and the chamber is magically sealed. He is most certainly rotting by now, the stench trapped in the room by a locking spell.” It cackled wildly.

Rockford took a step forward, talons extended.

“Stay back!” shrilled the changeling, while roughly pulling Drake closer. The claws on his neck pricked him – Drake realized with horror they felt surgically sharp.

“You kill him,” quavered Madison, “you’re as good as dead.” She began to inch slowly toward her brother.

“Nothing would bring me greater pleasure,” taunted the viperinor, “for all that I have suffered in that weak form and on this forsaken journey. But do not worry, I want my reward from Hifearnan. As I speak I am sending my experiences to my associate. When it reaches him, he will take me and the boy from here. Not only will I be able to deliver the final Dragonkeeper but the Dragon’s Eye as well!”

Both Dwaner and Rockford took an urgent step closer.

Noticing them, the changeling replied by digging its talons into Drake’s neck. The young Dragonkeeper then felt a trickle of blood roll down his chest and into his shirt.

“You wouldn’t dare kill him,” said Dwaner, stopping instantly.

“You wouldn’t dare risk it,” the creature replied dryly.

“Viperinor, let the young Dragonkeeper go,” ordered King Capac. “The Cennud alliance with its imposter Tighearn is doomed to failure. It has been so since day one of his traitorous coup attempt against the real Tighearn. Your misguided allegiance to his cause is already lost.”

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“Idiot dragons and race of men, can’t you see the era of the Marag and rule of viperinor is upon you?”

“Right,” said Rockford sarcastically, “the same, old, tired story from you purple-blobs.”

While the viperinor retorted and the group argued with it, Drake began devising a plan. If he was to get out of this it was going to need his involvement. The young Dragonkeeper then thought hard and fast knowing that at any moment he would be ‘taken away.’

Quickly he glanced at everyone and everything around him, searching for anything that could help.

He saw it.

He then stared Madison down.

The Lady Protector, who had moved as close as she dared to get, felt her brother’s stare and returned it in kind. *What does he want?* thought Madison.

Drake knew he’d only have one try to get it right, and he’ll need for two things to go exactly as he imagined them. *The viperinor will react one way or another and then Mady will have to do the right thing.* Anyway he looked at it, he was risking his life.

Madison watched intently as her brother spoke silently to her with his gestures. He lifted and lowered his chin, tilted his head one way then back, and moved his eyes back-and-forth as though pointing at something. Drake repeated the motion. He kept eye-contact then broke it, kept eye-contact again, then broke it, over-and-over *pointing...*

Oh yes, of course, Madison thought, as she nodded ever so slightly. *He wants to use the sword hilt. But how?* Remembering it was still tied around her waist, Madison gradually undid the strip of cotehardie she had used. She worked on it ever so furtively, trying not to draw

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attention to what she was doing. After what seemed an eternity, Madison finally freed the hilt and then clutched it tight in a white-knuckled hand.

Not wanting to give away his sister's effort, Drake watched her ready the sword hilt from the corner of his eye. He then hoped beyond hope Madison would do *exactly* what he needed done. As the viperinor finished its latest rant, Drake readied himself.

"...soon it will happen. The boy and me will be taken and all your beliefs in prophecies won't matter—"

"Abra-Wang-Li-Pa!" shouted Drake.

He disappeared.

Startled, the viperinor opened its wings and looked down to where Drake should have been.

An invisible Drake quietly shuffled behind the viperinor's cockatrice shape, he then shouted, *"Non-Abra-Wang-Li-Pa! Mady NOW!"*

Faster than the viperinor could react, Madison flung the sword hilt to a materializing Drake.

He caught it, envisioned what he wanted, and thrust it at the cockatrice body. The hilt produced a blade of pure, cutting fire, hot and bright which Drake plunged into the creature's side. At once the viperinor convulsed as it changed in spasms to different shapes – a snake, a frog, Leemstey, and other strange animals. All the while Drake held the sword tight and sunk it even deeper, turning it for good measure.

The convulsions now came rapidly and with a horrid blend of forms: Leemstey's head on a frog's body, a frog's head with human arms and snake's tail, and a greenish glob with body

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parts disfigured. The shapes became less and less recognizable and more disturbing to gaze upon.

Twitching madly for a few seconds it then froze in its cockatrice shape. The viperinor's expression was one of shock and fear as it stared out with cold, dead eyes. Then suddenly, it burst in a spill of purplish-black liquid.

The changeling was no more.

With the fiery sword still in hand, he stood overtop what looked like a thick and grainy, oily mess. Using the sword Drake tapped the liquid in disgust instantly evaporating the remains. A potent odor of rotten eggs then lifted into the air.

Madison was the first to reach Drake, she hugged him. She then put him at arms length and asked, "Drake, are you okay? Lemme take a look at the cut on your neck..."

"I'm alright, I'm alright," said Drake, embarrassed by her fussing. "It's just a little cut, I've probably stopped bleeding. Who you really need to check is Trilly. Is she okay?"

"I'm doing much better now," giggled Trilly, "the dizziness has passed and the headache's all gone, thank goodness."

"Well done, both of you," said Dwaner, as he walked up in between. He glanced at each of them curiously and asked, "How did you know what the other one wanted, or would do?"

Madison and Drake glanced at each other and smiled, together they answered, "*Oh, we have our ways.*"

"Aye, indeed," said the master-at-arms, rubbing his chin. He then observed the weapon in Drake's hand and added, "I'm sure glad I brought the Fire Lock sword. I had a feeling we might come across viperinor's, just not the way we did."

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“This is called the ‘Fire Lock’ sword?” said Drake, as he softly shook it causing the fiery blade to retract and disappear into the hilt. “I don’t know why but I gravitated to it.”

“Good thing you did,” replied Dwaner. “It’s the only weapon Dvergar’s have ever created that is effective against the shape-shifters. The blade of magical fire, as you saw, disrupts their ability to change forms until they basically dissolve, and you did the right thing to finish it off. *That* viperinor won’t be troubling us or anyone else ever again.”

“We’re definitely keeping this little thing around,” said Drake, holding the sword hilt up for everyone to see. He handed it to Dwaner and continued, “Now I want to know something. How was it Trilly couldn’t tell there was a viperinor around until a few moments ago. *Hmm?*”

Everyone stared at each other, then eventually settled on Trilly.

“I don’t know,” snickered the gremlin. She pranced around a couple of Amphithears, obviously feeling better.

“The *gem*,” blurted Madison, snapping her fingers. “That gem of good fortune he wore around his neck.”

“Aye, the Lady Protector’s correct,” said Dwaner. “While Leemstey wore the gem Trilly did not sense anything. But soon after losing it, the gremlin uncovered the changeling.”

“It normally takes us,” interjected Trilly, bouncing on her heels, “anywhere from several minutes to a few hours –” she jumped to Drake “–to sense a viperinor nearby, but that gem –” she jumped to King Capac “– it did something to me –” zipping now to Rockford “– as soon as it was gone –” in one bound next to Dwaner “– it seemed the sensing I had done from the start –” the gremlin ran to Madison “– came flooding in all at once. It *hurt*.”

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“Yeah—we see the effect it had on you,” grumbled Rockford, as Madison patted Trilly’s head while the gremlin purred.

“I’ve never seen or heard of any sort of gem that can hide a viperinor from a gremlin,” said Dwaner irritably. “No doubt it’s some form of Marag, dark magic. If there are any more of those gems, it could become problematic. Think about it, viperinors would be able to hide amongst us *easily*.”

Everyone that stood in the cleared path looked at everyone else for a moment. Was there yet another changeling that stood here with them? One which carried another form of Marag – unnoticeable – and waiting for the right moment to devour them all? Everyone reasoned to themselves: *Probably not*. But it didn’t stop the entire group of dragons, royalty, Dvergar, Greylanders, and one little gremlin from observing each other very carefully.

“The Amphithear’s,” said King Capac, breaking the silence, “will be certain to deliver this information within our own clan and those of our brothers. *All* of us here must then distribute this finding quickly so the *entire* Realm of Faerie becomes aware.” Gazing down upon Drake, the king added, “Young Dragonkeeper, whatever assistance you request I will gladly sanction.”

Drake pondered this for several, long moments. He paced a little, thinking, and then realized how physically tired and mentally drained he was. The young Dragonkeeper had no desire to walk back to the Vesperik Residence or Notama for that matter. A passing thought entered mind which made him chuckle, *Hey, why not? What’s to lose?*

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“You know what I’d like,” began Drake, “and I’m sure the rest of the group would too?”

He paused, spreading a mischievous smile across his face then said, “*Fly us back to the Dragonkeeper residence.*”

A murmur of disbelief that *that* question was asked came from the king’s guards, with several of them burping in surprise. A deafening silence then dropped over them, thick and palpable, as everyone waited for King Capac’s reply.

“Young Dragonkeeper,” said Dwaner quickly and nervously, “we have already gone over this, dragons only carry their own—”

“Excuse me master-at-arms,” interrupted King Capac, “but I will answer him.

“Young Dragonkeeper, I feel your connection to dragons. A connection that has grown stronger from the moment me and my guards started our journey here. A connection that grows more compelling with every passing second.”

Rockford couldn’t help but shuffle nervously as the words rang true and troublesome.

“And now, after learning and seeing what you have done, and what you are capable of doing, at least among my clan your integrity as grown as well.” Sternly the royal dragon then said, “*No* Amphithear has carried anyone from the race of man in over one thousand years, and I believed we’d never do so again.” His intelligent, dark eyes glared at everyone until finally stopping at Drake, “But that was until today and the events that transpired to change my opinion greatly. As the dragon privileged to be king of the Amphithears, allow me first to offer *my back* to your service, my Dragonkeeper...” King Capac bowed solemnly to Drake.

All the king’s guards then followed suit, offering their backs to the little group.

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Soon they were in the air and traveling at an unbelievably high speed. They were flying to the East and toward the residence, and in just a couple of hours they would be there.

Drake was on King Capac, who led the formation, with Madison to his right enjoying the view, as Rockford flew comfortably to Drake's left clearly having done this before. Dwaner's dragon meanwhile followed immediately behind, and unlike Madison, the master-at-arms was not enjoying himself. Carrying a frightful expression of horror, Dwaner had earlier said, "We Dvergar's are not meant to fly!" Right before his dragon took off like a shot.

Dween had thankfully recovered enough from his injuries; he now sat upright and strong with a childlike smile on his scraggly face. Trilly shared the same dragon-back, to watch over him, and spun fantastic tales of what he had missed while injured. The entire time of course, she giggled.

It amazed Drake that even though they were traveling incredibly fast, it only felt as though a soft, ocean breeze tussled his hair. Obviously these dragons and other the clans had some magic within them. He wondered what other things he would learn in the days to come about these magnificent creatures...

But at the moment none of this really mattered. The only thing that did right now was the awesome feeling of flying with the dragons.

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CHAPTER 22: The Evil One's Vow

Hifearnan reviewed the plans as his chest swelled with arrogant pride.

This attack will spread fear in the hearts of all dragons and their allies, thought Hifearnan, a true stroke of brilliance.

“Tighearn Dragonslaver,” said Iseen, entering timidly and bowing, “your force is ready and awaiting orders.”

Slightly irritated of having his boastful thoughts interrupted, Hifearnan said, “Yes, yes, very well Iseen.” He turned away quickly from the map-wall and in two loud steps he was towering over his advisor, “Have you heard from Cruthlum?”

Before the old cockatrice could answer, the monkaat Hifearnan took everywhere began thrashing wildly in its cage. With mock surprise the Dragonslaver called out, “Ah, Cruthlum! Has your associate contacted you?”

The dangerous viperinor entered the dank, fire-lit chamber through its lone entrance, arriving in its favorite human form that of a lead palace servant with wide sash and polished boots for effect.

“Yes he has Dragonslaver.” Cruthlum sounded angry, agitated.

“Well, what is it?” barked Hifearnan, sensing the viperinor’s irritation. “What did it have to say? Did it have to kill the boy? It would have been gratifying to have the Greylander here, for torture, but if it *had* to dispatch him then that’s quite alright. However, I still demand to know *why* and I want *proof*.”

Cruthlum morphed several times from his human shape to other forms and back – a clear sign that a viperinor was irritated.

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“No Dragonslaver, he failed *and* he is dead.”

Hifearnan stood stiff and blank for a moment. Then his face turned beet-red as the vein down his neck throbbed and he bellowed, “*WHAT?! IT FAILED? HOW DID IT FAIL?!?*”

The viperinor waved for Hifearnan to follow him to the far side of the war chamber. As they walked toward a simple table, Cruthlum angrily said, “My associate was only supposed to send his most relevant experiences once he captured the boy.” The face portrayed by the changeling appeared reluctant to reveal something, but it grudgingly continued anyway, “Viperinors can share experiences with each other, but they are not shared until *all* the experiences transmitted are received. As a result, the more that is shared the longer it takes for the transmission to complete. I don’t know why he transmitted what he did. My only guess is that he was under stress and simply forgot our earlier agreement. He ended up sending the majority of what he experienced, this delayed his communication to me and cost him his life.”

They had reached the wooden table placed against the far wall. Cruthlum touched one corner and with a grave voice said, “Let me show you what I mean...”

The tabletop wavered as though it was melting and then it blindingly lit up for a second. The plain wood was replaced with a clear but wavy surface, as if looking into a pool on a very sunny day.

Moving images began flashing for Hifearnan to observe while Iseen came up from behind. The cockatrice had watched Cruthlum warily but then became more interested in what was being shown. What the old Cennud set his eyes on surprised him as much as made Hifearnan insanely angry.

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The pictures all started with the viperinor's murder of Leemstey, the subsequent storage of the assistant clerk's body, and then the magical sealing of the room. It then covered everything the associate had witnessed: The battle against the sea serpent, the destruction at Hagosda, the fight against Bergtrylles on the mountain side, meeting the king and queen Amphithear, the grueling journey through the desert and attack of Bralanis, and the visit into Notama. It ended with the group's trip into and out of the Dark Stroud, and then the viperinor's demise at the hands of the boy with help from his companion.

After the last image flashed by, Hifearnan banged the tabletop in fury. The desk creaked and splintered from the punishment while its surface returned to its original form.

"Did you see what *happened*?" he bellowed angrily. "Do you *know* what this means?"

"Yes, my Tighearn," said Iseen boldly, "the boy and his companion still lives."

"No, idiot!" replied Hifearnan, enraged. "Not *that*—"

"The Prophecy is real, Dragonslaver," interrupted Cruthlum, after sending a wicked glare at Iseen. "The final Dragonkeeper, his Protector, and the Relic, *all of it true.*"

"How could I have been so blind to the truth?" roared Hifearnan. The Dragonslaver pushed Iseen aside and began walking aimlessly around his war chamber, he thought, *Oh no, wait until the Father finds out...* Then nervously he added to himself, *Why has he not said something? Does he not see?* He quickly realized his disrespect, *No! Of course not. He see's everything...Father is testing me, testing to see how I overcome this setback...He is observing, waiting...*

Cruthlum and Iseen watched him pace madly around the room. It appeared as if the Dragonslaver was talking to himself without uttering a word. Iseen looked at Hifearnan and

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wondered what exactly the Dragonslayer was doing, disturbing the old cockatrice greatly. The viperinor on the other hand watched with amusement as the so called 'Evil One' seemed more like the 'Crazy One.' Quickly though, the changeling got bored with Hifearnan's antics and sighed.

Hifearnan suddenly had stopped pacing and then abruptly snapped around, the golden breastplate he wore skewing comically on his chest. The cockatrice then cowered while the changeling remained motionless and unafraid.

"Iseen, Cruhlum!" shouted Hifearnan.

"Yes, Tighearn Dragonslayer," peeped Iseen, as Cruthlum's human-face lifted its eyebrows expectantly.

Scratching his chin, Hifearnan stared directly at Cruthlum and said, "Your associate was strong enough to kill one of our allies, the sea serpent of Lake Bigead, yet not smart enough to capture or dispatch the boy." He paused to glower at the viperinor then acidly continued, "Make sure you find a *smarter* associate, if I *ever* ask for one again. Understood?"

"Absolutely," replied Cruthlum, with a trace of sarcasm to its voice.

"Iseen!"

"Yes, my Tighearn."

"Tell the attack force to begin as soon as possible, remind them to show no mercy, destroy everything and everyone in their path."

"Yes, my Tighearn, right away."

Iseen exited the room bowing and walking backward as he kept a passing eye on the shape-shifter.

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Hifearnan marched to the table, motioning Cruthlum to follow. The viperinor then twisted into a snake and quickly slithered behind the Dragonslaver. Once reaching the small desk, Cruthlum turned back to the lead servant and glared at Hifearnan with unveiled anger.

Talking almost to himself, Hifearnan said, “I vow to kill the boy, this final Dragonkeeper and his so-called Protector, his *sister* no less” – he had emphasized ‘sister’ with disgust – “and I will have this Relic, the Dragon’s Eye, for my own. We will *take* it from him and end the threat to *my* absolute power and future rule!” Hifearnan sounded maniacal by the end of his statement. Now facing Cruthlum, he assertively added, “I must understand all of the Prophecy, since you know it so well my wicked advisor, you will tell me *all*. Leave no fact, no matter how insignificant it may be, out of your telling.”

“Very well Dragonslaver,” said Cruthlum, with a menacing smile, “we can *finally* deal with the problem at hand.” Touching the tabletop’s corner, the viperinor added, “Now look, listen, and learn...”

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CHAPTER 23: The Whole Truth

Several days ago the little group had arrived to a heroes welcome. Word had reached they were successful in retrieving the Dragon's Eye which caused the entire palace and neighboring towns to prepare a momentous greeting. Under the grand advisor's direction palace staff, guards, and Dvergar's from the armory had readied the promenade for festivities second only to a Dragonkeeper's coronation.

After arriving through palace portal from the Dragonkeeper residence in Vesperik, Drake and Madison, under heavy guard and by direction of Straddleham, were whisked away to their quarters for some well deserved rest and privacy. Chu had met them at their rooms and told them to enjoy an evening to themselves that tomorrow they should expect a celebration in their honor. He even suggested they dress casually for the party. The grand advisor mentioned they would find clothes from home in their closets and if there was something not there they wished for – well, arrangements were made so they could get to what they wanted through the magic of the closet.

“Do not worry about formalities for tomorrow,” Chu had said, “there will be enough time for that later.”

The day of the celebration was truly a joyous one. Drake and Madison had felt the electricity of anticipation in the air – the same feeling one has when they're on their way to a long awaited trip or destination. Greeted by Chu and Straddleham and still under heavy protection by not only palace guards but Dvergars as well, the young Dragonkeeper and his Protector had staffs in hand while they were led through the winding and gilded hallways to the front entrance. Drake had put on his stylized-Dragon t-shirt and jeans from when he first arrived,

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while Madison of course took advantage of the magical closet. She had fetched back jeans of her own with a white blouse and short-suede jacket, remembering it had been cool the last time they were outside. Drake had shaken his head when he saw she was wearing her best flip-flops as Madison smiled and strutted on by.

Outside, the scene that met them was simply unbelievable – thousands upon thousands of people, dragons, and assorted creatures lined both sides of an enormously long and wide promenade. It was truly an incredible sight to behold.

The last time Drake and Madison had exited the building, they stepped out of the west-southwest corner of the compound unable to really see the palace's opening face pointing southeast. The promenade floor leading upto the palace was made of the same perfectly white marble that circled the compound. There were enormous, bleached, wooden pillars, easily wider and larger than any they had ever seen bordering the walkway. The pillars were intricately carved with inscriptions, drawings, and strange symbols – not a single one matched. These columns were placed perfectly across from one another and spaced tens of feet apart, they stretched along with the promenade to the outer reaches of the compound's border – clearly out of sight. Way above their heads the pillars held up a heavy-looking lattice roof that rose to a single line in the middle. The lattice work above was intertwined with what appeared as rich, red poinsettias in their full glory of bloom. There was a strong, energizing fragrance that emanated from overhead, laurel maybe, it seemed to remain just as strong even with the day's cool breeze gliding between columns.

Once the massive throng caught glimpse of their appearance a deafening and raucous cheer was let. The cheering, along with joyous roaring and other strange noises, continued on

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for quite some time as dignitaries from the Realm of Faerie came into Drake's and Madison's view.

The Council of Dragon members warmly received the young Dragonkeeper and his Protector, each one taking a turn to greet Drake and Madison in their own customary way. The original believing clans of the Frost, Eura, and Lung treated them as though they were royalty – they each showed deference by bowing and took the time to engage in small chit-chat like ‘You look well rested from your ordeal...’ and ‘*Those* are interesting clothes...’. Burrax especially gave a greeting that was normally reserved among the fire-breathers – a quick but long burst of flame into the air. Although, Drake noticed, the original doubting clans of the Amphithears, Gurgolas, and Marsagons treated them better, these representatives remained more reserved. The only delegate not in attendance was Gahiji. Drake imagined the very independent and private clan of Wyverns was not so easily coaxed for these spectacles regardless of the reason. Yet the young Dragonkeeper felt that there had to be more to it. Do they not accept Drake? Or does the completion of this quest bring up other questions these private dragons needed answered?

With the roar of the crowd quieting down and at Straddleham's impatient insistence, the grand advisor stepped forward and started the festivities.

“Let the dignitaries ENTER!” Chu had said, clapping his hands loudly over his head.

A procession suddenly appeared, much to the crowd's gasps and squeals of delight, with a parade line that stretched down the walkway as far as anyone could see. The king and queen Amphithear led with an enormous entourage of princes and princesses and the assorted hanger-ons that were inevitably found in these troupes. Following them was the Dvergar delegation

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with two of their members guiding the way. The first Dvergar was Dwaner, proudly dressed in a new emerald-green cape and unsoiled cross-laced boots, the weapons by his side clinking softly as he walked. Beside him was a beaming but almost unrecognizable Dween. Wearing pressed clothes and sporting a clean haircut with trimmed moustache and beard, Dween looked recovered from his injuries except for a slight limp. The brave Dvergar had carried his battle-hammer in both hands, holding it up every so often to the thrill of the crowd and the screams of victory from the Dvergars that followed. Drake had smiled when he saw the two-person, or rather, two-creature group that followed, it was Rockford and Trilly! But what made him rub his eyes in disbelief was Trilly *sitting* on the muscled Gurgola's shoulder. *Rockford was carrying the little gremlin.*

Drake quickly looked at Chu to explain the significance of this sight when the grand advisor held up a hand.

"I know young Dragonkeeper," the grand advisor had said smiling and without returning Drake's look, "that gremlin is a lot *smarter* than anyone gives her credit."

The rest of the procession then trailed, walking towards the palace entrance with strange creatures neither Drake nor Madison had ever seen, but imagined they eventually would. As the Amphitheatre entourage, the Dvergars, the gremlin, and the Gurgola stood at the foot of the steps, Chu made another announcement.

Once again clapping loudly above his head, the grand advisor shouted in a megaphone-like voice, "Let the celebration and feast for our young Dragonkeeper and his Protector BEGIN!"

Hundreds of long and wide mahogany tables had appeared at the end of this announcement. Several were arranged at the foot of the steps while the rest were set in rows of

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four or six down the length of the promenade. From above, the tables appeared placed in a huge ‘T’. As chairs appeared around each table of different shapes and sizes, food magically materialized as well. So much food was piled on, there seemed to be very little room for the plates and eating utensils that were placed before each seat. And not only was there food in the form of main dishes, but there were appetizers, breads, fruits, and the most extravagant and delicious looking deserts they had ever seen. The massive spread had astonished the crowd to almost silence in addition to making Drake and Madison gawk in awe.

Chu had then turned around and smirked, “Well, what are you two waiting for? Go eat and celebrate, you earned it.”

Sitting at the middle of the center table and facing toward the promenade, Drake and Madison noticed no one touched the food as *everyone* waited until the last person or creature was seated. Even then, no one began eating as they looked expectantly in Drake’s direction.

“They are waiting for you,” whispered Chu, leaning every so slightly toward Drake.

Drake murmured back, “Oh yea, of course.” The young Dragonkeeper had then nervously stood and boomed louder than he expected, “Everyone, please, eat and celebrate!”

During the feast, the Gurgola, who sat at Drake’s and Madison’s table along with the king and queen Amphithear, Straddleham, Trilly, Dwaner, and Dween, had asked about Leemstey.

“Grand advisor,” growled Rockford, “what have you learned about the assistant clerk’s treachery.”

Drake and Madison then proceeded to learn everything Chu had deduced and discovered. How, for example, the grand advisor and Burrax suspected a spy in the palace for quite some

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time. Chu had actually suspected Straddleham for a while (upon hearing this the chief clerk's expression soured as his heavy-lidded eyes rolled) and would have eventually found out Leemstey had it not been for Jiro's health worsening. He thought sending the assistant clerk with them would help prove he was the spy, or not. Chu had never expected for Leemstey to become a pawn and ultimately Leemstey paid the price for his treason. The assistant clerk should have known better – Cennuds have no integrity. The grand advisor had also learned how Leemstey used the palace portals to meet Iseen or other Cennuds to pass information to Hifearman. How else did they know to find them on their way to Hagosda or the Amphithear's Lair? And it was the main reason the portals became grouped in a heavily guarded room. Drake and Madison also learned that before their return Leemstey's quarters were magically unlocked and the gruesome discovery cleaned thoroughly. The grand advisor had ordered an unceremonious burial for Leemstey's body outside the compound, and then began researching the jewel worn by the viperinor the moment word arrived from the master-at-arms. At the moment, Chu had no idea what form of Marag was able to provide such a shield of detection, but he was working on it.

Being able to do nothing about this now, Drake and Madison focused on reveling in the moment and enjoying all the attention heaped on them. Everyone had settled in to eating and drinking and rejoicing in their success, there was laughter and cheer, and a few, *tall* stories were told, even the normally brooding Gurgola had whooped it up with the devilish, little gremlin. It appeared everyone around their table (and all the others for that matter) was having a wonderful time that was everyone except for the grand advisor.

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Although Chu had acted happy at times, it was very reserved. He was not as jovial or talkative as everyone else and did not celebrate with the same abandon to formality that even Straddleham had shown. Drake and Madison had both noticed there was something not quite right with him. Soon, they would learn.

Toward the end of the evening's festivities, after hearing Dwaner's slightly drunken account (for about the twentieth time) of how his blood-brother had saved his life (and Dween of course listened raptly and blushed as the story was told), the grand advisor took Drake and Madison aside and asked them to meet in Tighearn Jiro's chamber, in the morning.

"What about?" Drake had asked, noticing the seriousness on Chu's face.

"There is much to talk about and even more you need to know," replied the grand advisor. "But for now that is all. I will see you both, promptly, in the morning." And with that, he turned and walked away.

Looking at his sister Drake wondered aloud, "What the heck's going on do you think?"

"I think," said Madison, while watching the grand advisor return up the steps to the palace, "we're gonna finally learn the whole truth." She faced Drake and added, "You know that feeling we've had he's been holding back on us. I guess we're ready now to hear the *rest* of the story."

Early the next morning they were each awoken politely but firmly by palace servants.

"The grand advisor is waiting for you in the Tighearn's chambers, please hurry."

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After bathing and then grabbing a quick bite of breakfast, they met each other outside their rooms. Drake decided to dress formally in a long-sleeved, white-cotton gambeson with the sleeves decorated in a style similar to the crossed laced pattern used by Dvergar shoes. His pants were dark-purple velvet with boots worn at calve-height, and the boots were accented with a series of straps and attached rhinestones. To finish his attire Drake wore his Dragonkeeper's cloak – it still amazed him at how light it felt on his shoulders. Madison wore the golden dress she had used for their meeting with the Council of Dragons. Once again she wore it with her hair down, and looking absolutely stunning in the floor-length, crushed velvet gown. And they each carried their staffs knowing they would feel completely bare without it.

“Chu's not wasting any time, is he?” Drake said breathlessly, while jogging through the guard-lined hallway to Jiro's chamber.

Once at the entrance they were escorted in by palace guards dressed differently than they had seen before. Each guard wore an open black-leather jerkin with the sash underneath also black instead of red. Inside the bed chamber there were many long faced servants as well as grim looking guards – all of them wearing black sashes across their chest. Sitting back on his thick tail was a puffy-eyed Burrax, who acknowledged them with a slight nod of his head. Across the bed from the head dragon stood the grand advisor, he was dressed in his emerald-green Mandarin suit and cap with his hands and arms crossed inside opposite sleeves.

As they approached the bed Madison noticed the ring she wore, the very same one Jiro had given her, pulsate several times as though it sensed something. Looking closely at the bed, the Lady Protector gasped – a body was completely covered in clean, white linen except for a logo centered about the chest area. It consisted of a stylized three-dimensional man with light

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shining from within, the symbol chosen by the Dragonkeeper's cloak for Jiro. Before Drake and Madison could say or ask anything, the grand advisor calmly spoke.

“The Tighearn Dragonkeeper Jiro, sixth in a long line of illustrious Dragonkeepers, seventh in total, has died. May he find peace in the Light.”

Drake and Madison stood there stunned.

“When—when did this happen?” Madison said in a small voice.

“Yesterday,” replied Chu, “before the celebration. We continued with it as a last order from Jiro. He felt the peoples of the neighboring towns, the servants, the guards, they all needed to rejoice in your success. There will be plenty of time now for mourning.”

After a moment of silence Burrax's great tail pushed him forward and with great formality he announced, “Let it be known that the Greylander known as Drake Wallace, the same as foretold by Glicemax, is now the seventh Dragonkeeper the eight in total.” The head dragon looked at Drake, forced a smile, and then added, “Young Dragonkeeper, we normally would have a coronation ceremony but the events of the past day and those that we suffer with currently prevent us from doing so. We live in the times of strife as predicted by the Final Dragonkeeper Prophecy. Time is short and we must change leadership quickly in hopes of saving the Realm of Faerie as explained to us by the foretelling.” The head dragon then nodded once to the grand advisor.

“Behold!” bellowed Chu stepping forward and facing the room. “Henceforth from this day forward Drake Wallace shall be known as...*Tighearn Dragonkeeper Drake!* May the Tighearn live long and lead us all in the Light.”

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Drake's head was spinning, everything was happening so fast he felt like he was going to lose his breakfast.

Several palace servants and guards left the room – they were told by Burrax and the grand advisor to begin spreading the news. Soon all of Olden Terra would know it had a new Tighearn Dragonkeeper as the dragon's uniter.

“Okay, slow down,” said Madison to the grand advisor, “tell me we're still fine because we *have* the Relic. We should be able to defeat this Hifearnan guy, right?”

“This is only one of several items we have for you,” replied Chu, “the rest of which must be explained.”

The grand advisor motioned for Burrax, Drake, and Madison to leave the Dragonkeeper's chamber and move into the study next door. Upon entering, Drake saw one wall was an enormous bookcase filled with topics on history, magic, and dragons. The other walls were covered with drawings and actual pictures – each depicting a young Jiro through the early stages of his reign. Although the pictures were only in black-and-white, Drake and Madison never recalled seeing a camera in all their travels around this strange world. The grand advisor placed his arms into opposite sleeves then went and stood beside an old wooden desk before continuing to speak, it appeared as though he had put himself there out of habit.

“Foremost, you can now hear the whole truth behind the Dragon's Eye crystal, the Relic. No doubt both of you have questioned each other about it. I *have* been evasive, and although I felt it was important to keep the details from you, the time has come to reveal more history for you to understand.”

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Madison at once became angry – she *knew* he had kept something from them all this time. As her irritation grew, she crossed her arms and waited with an irate-look to her face. Drake meanwhile looked eager to learn more, casually leaning on his bowstaff and then focusing intently on what would be said.

“Fifteen hundred years ago,” began Burrax, with a billow of smoke from his nose, “the Realm of Faerie, Olden Terra, was created with aid from the Child of the Light by powerful members of the Race of Man known as the *Great Daewins*—”

“*Yes*,” interrupted Drake, “I just heard about them recently.” This quickly reminded him of the Faceless Mage in the caved-in room – he shuddered.

Burrax continued as though Drake had not spoken, “—to escape the lawlessness, fighting, and disregard for nature in the Realm of Grey. They did so by not only creating a whole new world, but the realm portals to reach it.

“And then for fifty years inhabitants of the Realm of Grey who were deemed worthy of this new world were sought. Races such as the Yasidi, the Dineh, the gremlins and many, many others you have not met. They were given an opportunity to start anew in this clean and good world, a place where individually and together they could all reach their full potential. Yet as their situation improved the situation for creatures of Faerie worsened. These were creatures considered less than worthy by the Great Daewins, even hated, but the Child of the Light took pity upon them. These creatures were *us*, the dragons, and our cousins, the Cennud.

“We were then given a chance by the Child. A chance that was wasted and lost because we lacked...*integrity*. Not only were dragons unable get along with each other, but we couldn’t even get along with our cousins or the more worthy inhabitants of this new, beautiful world.

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Adding to the problems was the Father of the Marag, an evil which somehow entered into Olden Terra and brought with it all of its hideous beings – creatures that motivated dragons and Cennuds to fight amongst themselves and between each other. It soon became obvious that something was needed, or better yet, *someone*. A stabilizing force, an authority that could contain and restrain the dragons, the most powerful of these creatures, and bring to understand a destiny that was greater than war. This authority was discovered by the Great Daewins, Glicemax, and the Child and it became known as the *Dragonkeeper*. Once he was found and placed into power, the first Tighearn Dragonkeeper Trevelyan, helped to forge alliances and friendships with the dragon clans and Cennuds. The more his integrity grew the more these very independent dragons, even the Wyvern, came to listen to him and *allowed* him to lead.

“Nevertheless the first one-hundred and fifty years of Trevelyan’s reign was fraught with evil trying to destroy what he, the Great Daewins, Glicemax, and the Child were building. Eventually a war ensued, a war so horrible, so costly in the number of lives that we seldom speak of its pure violence. The combined powers of Trevelyan, the Daewins, and the Child were just enough to banish the creatures of the Marag, but unfortunately, they were only enough to weaken the Marag and its Father. It was believed at the time that *all the evil* was eradicated. How sadly mistaken they would later discover.”

“You know,” said Drake as though thinking out loud, “we’ve heard some of this before in one way or another, whether it was from Sehede, Nehehota, or Dwaner. Heck, even the stinkin’ Faceless Mage had a story from around this time.”

“Correct, my Tighearn,” replied Burrax, bowing. Drake then blushed upon hearing his new title used for the first time.

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“So, then, what happened?” Madison asked. “How’d they discover the Marag and this Father dude weren’t banished after all?”

“Thirteen hundred years ago,” resumed Burrax, “the Great Daewins mysteriously disappeared. In reaction to their disappearance Tighearn Dragonkeeper Trevelyan, with the help of Glicemax, formed the Council of Hil—”

“The Council of *Hil*?” quizzed Madison. “What about the Council of Dragons?”

“Lady Protector,” said Chu, “let the head dragon finish. He will make everything clear shortly.”

“Okay, okay,” said Madison, raising her hands up, “I’ll shut up. Sorry, go ahead.”

Burrax smiled and said, “The Council of *Hil* was formed with delegates from each of the seven dragon clans in addition to the races of Cockatrice, sea serpents, snakes, and frogs. This ushered in the First Age of Peace and lasted for the next one-hundred and fifty years.”

“Oh,” uttered Madison knowingly, “the *First Age of Peace...*” She recalled the visions of the Second Long Age of Peace, learning about the Third False Age, and remembered wondering about the first. Now she finally knew. Distantly, Madison added, “So what happened? How was it?”

“It was a wonderful time,” said Burrax wistfully, “dragons and Cennuds in cooperation, not only with each other but with all the races of the Realm. Olden Terra had finally become the splendid haven everyone had wanted and hoped for. Even as Trevelyan passed and the second Tighearn Dragonkeeper, Dveal, ascended the peace and prosperity continued. The harmony was so great and widespread, it made what eventually happened that much worse to accept and endure.”

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“Let me see,” said Drake, “if I’m right, this is where Meltyn comes into power.”

“Very good, Tighearn Drake,” interjected Chu approvingly, “very good. Apparently you did more than just walk around the library.”

“The peace that cost so many lives,” continued Burrax angrily, “took so much to secure, and seemed as though it would last forever, ended with one act of treason. A treason that seemed unthinkable, aided by a source long believed dead. The third Tighearn Dragonkeeper, Meltyn, disgraced himself by turning to none other than the Father of the Marag. Tempted with the promise of absolute rule over not only dragons, but *all* of Olden Terra. With the Father of the Marag’s aid, Meltyn rekindled ages-old feuds between dragons and Cennuds using jealousy and fear. But worse yet was that the Father and its Marag were alive and well, using the past centuries to grow strong, waiting for someone weak of mind but strong of power to fall to their temptation. Creatures once banished because of a weakened Father and Marag resurfaced. Together with the Cennuds, Meltyn dissolved the Council of Hil and attempted to make himself supreme ruler. But fortunately Glicemax, who said he was helped by the Child of the Light, united the seven clans and defeated Meltyn and his allies.”

“What about those shape-shifters?” asked Drake, remembering the one that had been Leemstey. “Where do they fit in all this?”

“Ah, the *viperinor*,” said Burrax with disgust. “This is where they first showed themselves, coinciding with the Father and the Marag’s return. At first we speculated they were a new creature of the Marag but they associated themselves more with the Cennud. Where they came from and what exactly were they, we did not know, and to this day we still don’t.

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“When Glicemax and the clans defeated Meltyn, the Cennuds, and the creatures of the Marag, the hideous monsters were all banished again. All that is except for the viperinor. Even though the Light grew strong and weakened the Father and the Marag once more, those changelings unexpectedly remained. They are so cunning and evil, it was, as you can imagine, a great disappointment to us.”

Drake and Madison both nodded their heads in sober agreement having seen one up-close and in action.

“Knowing this time the Father and its Marag were only weakened,” said Burrax, “but also knowing that as long as the Light remained strong there would be no way they could return, Glicemax showed mercy by banishing the Cennuds to a lower portion of Aphrike. They were to remain there in exile, but as history sadly repeated itself with the traitor Hifearnan, they have spread everywhere.”

After several moments of silence passed, allowing Drake and Madison to digest everything just told to them, the grand advisor cleared his throat and spoke.

“Do both of you remember, back at your house, how I mentioned Glicemax was given the Relic by the Child of the Light?”

Drake and Madison nodded. They recalled how the Child actually directed Glicemax where to find it, how Glicemax then shaped it, and how it was entrusted to the dragon clans.

“What I never told you is that there is literally more to the Relic.”

“I knew it!” Madison blurted. “I knew you were holding out on us! What *is it*? It’s cursed, right?” She stepped away and spat, “*Just great!*”

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“No,” replied the grand advisor calmly, “I said there is literally *more*. The Dragon’s Eye crystal around Drake’s neck –” Chu removed his arms from within opposite sleeves then motioned a circular shape with cupped hands “– is only *one piece of a larger whole*.”

Drake looked at the pictures on the wall, aimlessly, lost in thought. He rubbed his chin contemplating what to say next – when he snapped his fingers.

“Of course! Why didn’t I *see* it before?”

The Tighearn Dragonkeeper fumbled with the pouch until he eventually dropped the shrunken Relic to an eager hand. Using his right-hand he placed it above the small chunk of crystal then lifted it causing the Relic to expand to its normal size. It looked like a nice quarter-sized piece of cake or pie, but with a rounded top. The Relic’s inside was shimmering as if filled by water with a beautiful and floating bluish-white glow. It was absolutely mesmerizing.

Burrax mumbled something about Glicemax and the Child of the Light, straightened himself, but kept staring at the crystal.

“Do you see it?” Drake said to Madison. “I can’t believe I didn’t notice earlier. Man, am I dumb.”

“See what?” Madison griped. “Just tell me, smart one.”

Drake glanced triumphantly at the grand advisor and said, “This is only one piece of a larger *sphere*.” He pondered for an instant then added just as triumphantly, “That means there’s eight of these.”

“Although you are technically correct,” said Chu, “we really are only concerned with seven of them, let me tell you why. Originally you were told that Glicemax was directed to find

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the Relic that it was shaped by the great dragon's own breath and that it was entrusted to the clans."

Drake shook his head vigorously in agreement as Madison watched Chu through suspicious eyes.

"What you do not know," continued Chu, "are the details. How we never discovered where he found the Dragon's Eye, how using his own breath he shaped it into a sphere, how using that same breath he cut it into pieces like the one you now hold, how each dragon clan was given these strange pieces for safe keeping, and how the remaining portion was returned to where he originally found the crystal."

"What about that last piece?" Drake asked, confused. "The Relic won't be complete without it."

"Remember the Prophecy..." said Burrax, still gazing at the Relic piece in Drake's hand, "*Only when the final Dragonkeeper makes the Dragon's Eye whole, understanding he must give of himself to become more and no more, can the Father of the Marag and his Evil One be vanquished.*"

"Oh, geez," said Madison, shaking her head in disgust, "more mumbo-jumbo. Are we holding back, *again?*"

"No, Lady Protector," replied Burrax firmly, "this is the last of the Prophecy, its closing statement."

"Listen, I wanna help out," said Drake slightly exasperated, "but I need some help here. How the heck am I supposed to make it 'whole?'"

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“*That* exactly,” said the grand advisor, “the Prophecy does not say. We simply assume you will know when the time is right.”

Drake glanced at Madison, who simply stared back with pursed lips. The Tighearn Dragonkeeper then smiled, shook his head and said, “So, this is what you kept from us all this time? Even removing stuff about the Dragon’s Eye and Prophecy in the library? And let me guess, the museum holds information you didn’t want us to see that’s why we couldn’t get in there, right?”

Chu bowed slightly, without a word.

“Let me get this straight,” said Madison, as she realized the implications of what was just told to them, “if there are seven pieces to the Relic and we need *all* of them for Mr. Dragonkeeper here to make it whole, then that means—”

“You must still search and retrieve,” interrupted Chu, “six more pieces before we have any hope of defeating Hifearnan.”

“Do you know how much time it took us to find this one piece?” Madison said, glaring at Drake and pointing to Dragon’s Eye in his hand. “It’ll take all summer. And *Mom and Dad*? Wait till they hear about this.”

Drake shot back a smile and replied, “Didn’t *you* give them a hard time about being involved in causes as long as they didn’t have to do something? *Hmm...?*” While he spoke, Drake shrunk the first piece back to its miniature size and then placed it in the pouch hanging from his neck.

Madison opened her mouth to retort, closed it, and then said, “Okay, I get your point. But it doesn’t change how Mom and Dad will react when they hear this.”

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“Your parents know the situation and are...supportive, if not overjoyed,” said Chu. “The last time they were here had an effect on them, especially Dr. Clark, your mother.”

“Really?” Madison said sarcastically while raising her eyebrows. “*Supportive?*”

“Your parents understand the dangers involved,” began Chu calmly, “but as you yourself have said, they have raised you to fight for causes, and the quest for the Relic is a great cause.” The grand advisor’s tone became serious as he continued, “Make no mistake, your mother still fears, but she knows our allies will assure your safety as she also knows that the Light and the Child of the Light are watching over you.”

“Does the Child of the Light still give her visions?” asked Madison, she felt a twang of emotion for her mother.

“I do not know,” replied the grand advisor, “the Child’s reasons for who to speak to and when is enigmatic.”

“So Mom and Dad are okay—good,” said Drake. He then made sad face toward Chu and continued, “Why did you hide the whole history from us? The truth about the Dragon’s Eye? The rest of the Prophecy? All of it...”

“Would it have helped to know the truth?” stated Chu matter-of-factly. “Would it have made the journey and trials you faced any easier? *No*. You were given the information you needed to get you started. There are still some details not given, but I assure you they are not important. You will learn those details over time. What is important is that you are Tighearn, and that you and your sister are accepted as prophecy fulfilled. You must see this through not only for the sake of Olden Terra, but for the Realm of Grey as well.”

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Drake and Madison exchanged knowing glances as he shrugged and smiled while she let out a tired sigh.

“Are there any other items to go over?” said Madison, raising a hand wearily in question. “Anything else?”

As smoke billowed from Burrax’s mouth, the head dragon said with disgust, “The traitor by now knows the truth about the Dragon’s Eye and Prophecy he had denied so much. He most likely accepted this truth from his wicked advisor, a viperinor hated by all clans known as Cruthlum. With this new understanding he will become nervous and scared that you and especially your brother will deny his rule over the Realm of Faerie. The Evil One will now try even harder to destroy both of you. The attempt with the viperinor, while well planned, did not expect either of you to be so well prepared. He will take that into account next time.”

“In addition, Hifearnan will now go after the remaining pieces,” added the grand advisor. “Therein lies the urgency, to quickly collect them *all*.”

“Can’t he find one piece while we’re looking for another?” Drake asked.

“The pieces will only reveal themselves,” replied Chu,” in the order they were given to the dragon clans” –Drake recalled how he heard the piece call for him. It was eerie and had sounded desperate, but it was also painfully beautiful and most frightening of all, *irresistible*. He rubbed his head and then returned his attention to Chu– “...Hifearnan has already lost the first piece, you have it. All he can do is take it from you. His other option is to get the second piece. Until it is found, the third and subsequent ones cannot and *will not allow themselves* to be retrieved.”

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Drake was going to ask the obvious question when Chu raised a hand and stopped him, the grand advisor said, “One more item. Late last night we learned of an attack in southern Aphrike by forces of Hifearnan, it was against one of the largest settlements in that continent, one that does not have neighboring Wyverns nearby. The settlement was completely and utterly destroyed, every building leveled and there are no survivors.”

Horrible images flashed in their minds of Hagosda. The burned buildings, trampled ground, and the terribly sad feelings of hopelessness and despair standing among belongings scattered everywhere they had looked.

“No survivors, everyone...?” said Madison dolefully.

“None,” replied Burrax through smoke shrouded teeth, “the town was already a smoldering ruin when the palace guards we sent and the Wyvern that met them arrived.”

“Hifearnan without a doubt planned this strike and chose the location well,” said Chu. “Those poor villagers did not know what was happening until it was over. That is now two separate attacks on settlements in two different continents. We are clearly at war.”

“These successes will only embolden the Evil One to continue,” insisted Burrax, looking at Chu.

“We need your approval, my Tighearn,” said Chu. “We request sending palace guards to warn all of Olden Terra and to help protect tribes and villages as well.”

Burrax and the grand advisor then looked at Drake expectantly.

Not knowing what to say, Drake simply looked back with a blank expression.

Madison pushed him softly and said, “Smart one, they’re waiting for you to give them the okay.” She then shook her head and rolled her eyes.

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“Uh—yea—of course—proceed,” stammered Drake. “Is that enough?”

Burrax had let out the familiar, guttural laugh of dragons, as Chu said, “That will do, thank you, my Tighearn. The order will go out immediately.”

Oh boy, I still have a lot to learn, thought Drake, making a pained face.

“Now let’s go back to the question he was going to ask,” said Madison, pointing at her brother. “Which clan got the second piece?”

Behind them, the doors leading out to the hallway slammed open. In stomped a fierce looking, angry faced dragon.

“Rockford!” Drake and Madison exclaimed. They quickly went over to greet him.

“The second piece was given to the Gurgolas,” said Drake, looking back at Burrax and Chu. The Tighearn Dragonkeeper meant it more as a statement than a question.

“Correct,” said the grand advisor, nodding with approval. “Exactly why the prince of the Gurgolas is here. We have asked him again for help on this second quest.”

Rockford’s face grimaced – temporarily flashing a jaw full of razor-sharp teeth – then said, “As much as I will regret to do this, once I learned the whole truth about the Prophecy I couldn’t let you two go at it alone with my family. My ancestors, like all the dragon clans, were given a piece of the fabled Dragon’s Eye. I have not heard nor seen of it ever. I doubt my brother, the king, has either.” The Gurgola’s face softened but remained uneasy, he continued, “Yet, he is the king, and he’s privy to knowledge only the Gurgola monarchs can know. We will need to speak with him, and you coming in person” – Rockford looked at Drake – “*might* help.”

Appearing jovial now, Burrax said, “Surely your brother will accept the new Tighearn and help recover the next piece.”

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“He *should*,” began Rockford, sounding strangely unsure, “but my brother...the king, he can be...difficult at times to deal with...because...” Rockford’s face tightened back into its more familiar scowl – a clear sign the topic of conversation was over.

“Tighearn, Lady Protector,” said Chu, as he smoothly centered himself between all of them, “please rest for the next couple of days. We will then train and learn more about your abilities while we seek to discover the fate of the second piece. Meanwhile,” –he turned his attention to Burrax and Rockford– “we will take leave of your company and perform our duties in preparation for the next journey.” Chu then bowed solemnly as the head dragon and Gurgola bowed as well with respect.

Drake and Madison had walked silently from the moment they left the Dragonkeeper’s study. Followed by several palace guards, they slowly marched to their bedchambers lost in their own thoughts. Drake could not believe what had happened during these last several weeks – from the end of school, to summer break, and then straight to *this*. Although he was nervous about recovering the next piece (the first one wasn’t easy) he reminded himself that he had a whole world of people by his side, but more importantly his sister was around to help. Madison’s thoughts were less self-assured. All she could think of was the hassles and near calls they had had during their journey. And nevermind what the Faceless Mage had said to her last...she quickly pushed *that* thought out of her head. Instead, she desperately wondered if there was an easier way of doing all *this*...

As the doors to their bedchambers came into view, Madison sighed, “Oh well...”

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Drake waited for her to continue, but when she remained silent he responded, ““Oh well’ what?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Come on, what’s buggin’ you?”

“I just wish,” started Madison, “there was another way to do all this. You know, something else to get our hands on those crystal pieces, something a little less difficult.”

They were now just a few steps from their rooms. Drake had stopped short from entering his bedchamber when he flashed his sister a mischievous smile.

“Mady, nothing worth doing is ever easy.” He opened the door and added, “It’s the only way.”