

Legends of Clal: Skyland's Rising

Chapter 1: The Dream

Two cloaked forms leapt from off a small ledge onto the sandy shore; one pursuing the other. No moon was shining, nor were the stars lit. It was black, the world outside, and the world inside. Only the fire of their torches carried them across the lengthy stretch of path where the land meets the sea. Smoke and wind twisted about them and the sea foam was as black as ash. Lights appeared before them and the second ran passed the first.

“Go,” said the bearded man. “Everything is written there in the scroll there, the coming of the One, a marked lineage...” Several small boats awaited their arrival.

A rope was untied and the younger of the two boarded.

“Father, but what will you do here?” He stood in the boat then leaned to one of the men. “Make room.”

“I do not know,” he said ignoring his son's request to the man, “I have much that I must yet do to minimize this harm of evil. It is in the veins of the future that we will find hope.” In a distant voice the man said, “Remember the scroll.”

As they spoke the boat was pulled away by the waves and they watched each other, father and son.

A distant voice spoke, “Remember the scroll. The veins of the future that we will find hope...find hope...hope...hope... home...home...let's go home...Clal...home.”

Clal was awakened by a familiar voice. It was the voice of his sister, Ansa.

“Get up Clal. The wagon is leaving and you're supposed to be on it.” She ran over to him. “Day dreaming again, I suspect.” She smiled and bent down to lift Clal up by his arm. She wiped off his grass covered back.

“Day dreaming, Ansa,” Clal dusted off his legs, “It's always worth it.” They both laughed loudly. Arm in arm they headed down Crescent-Keep mountain by the only trail that existed. The stream that ran down it's face seemed to keep up with their conversation with a few words of it's own. Their descent was speedy and soon they were running through the wild grasses. They arrived at the small, simple house of the Winden's, their home.

Ansa followed Clal as they entered the house. As Clal did so, the words and images that he found and remembered from his dream still had not left him. He decided that now would not be the time to ponder their meanings or remember the details, so he put them aside for a time to make room for his partings with his family. Clal and Ansa were going to travel to Eldan Vyum, the central Kingdom of Illia; Illia was the world that they now knew. This was the kingdom that governed all other kingdoms. Clal was going for the examination. After the examination, Clal would go to work. Ansa too was going with him, but only to work.

“Hello Mum, I'm back,” Clal said once he was in the main room. “Father, I'm here.”

Ansa picked up her belongings then gave Clal his.

“Oh, Clal, Ansa, I wish the best for the both of you,” Already wet with tears, his mother's deep brown eyes smiled as she walked into the room. “Our wishes and hopes will be with you.” His mother was loosing not one but two of her children for a few months, and it would be the twins at that.

Clal's father came into the room along with Turl, his older brother. His father gave him a hearty embrace then gave him a slip of paper and said, “Here is the name of the man to seek out for hire, once the examination is over, of course.” Clal nodded.

“Clal,” Turl said, “Good luck.” He gently placed his hand on Clal's shoulder. “The first year is always new and *scary*. Don't worry.” He smiled.

The driver of the wagon's voice trailed in through the front door, “Are you twos comin'? There's a time a waistin'.”

Clal turned around and looked out the door, then turned to his family. Ansa was standing in the doorway behind him. With a final pat on the back by his father, and a kiss from his Mum, Clal left his house and boarded the wagon. Clal watched his family until around a bend their wagon traveled, then, they were out of sight.

(Old Chapter 2 space, but now part of Chapter 1)

They were silent for a long time, their bodies moving with the sway of the wagon moving over uneven ground. Heavy was the journey's end upon their minds. The aspen trees waved at them as they traveled through the forest, slow with sounds of the sea. The breeze carried a scent of summer leaves and berries. They were approaching the edges of where Clal ever wandered. Instead of adventuring out to the east of their land, he would frequently climb old Crescent-Keep Mountain or travel to the Crescent Hills below it. The furthest he'd ever venture to travel was within a half a day from the sea.

The driver chewed on a piece of grass and occasionally spat out its pieces. The donkeys bore the weight of the wagon and the twins continued to ride along in silence. Ansa too was studying the scenery. They traveled next into the valley of Lyrune where the crescent hills were kept safe by the Crescent-Keep, or so the legend goes. The lane was wide. It was here that Clal found himself dozing off, being rocked to sleep by the ease of the wagon's wheels upon the road.

Ansa turned, and seeing Clal's eyes closed said, “Clal!”

With his back flat on the wagon bed he first twitched, then jolted onto his side.

She giggled then said, “awaken by your sister two times in one day?”

“I wasn't asleep.” He turned around away from her and tried to hide his smile. “I was thinking.”

“And what were you thinking about?” Emphasizing the word thinking. “That dream you had earlier today?”

“No.” Clal's answer was short, for now he remembered how he wanted to think about the meaning of such a strange dream. Veins and hope. It was quiet but did not seem like just, any other dream. There was some depth, weight it had claim upon.

Clal sat up and turned toward the edge of the wagon. He crawled over and sat at the end of the wagon. He let his feet dangle over the edge and he leaned his shoulder against the wagon's side. There he watched the road drift away like a river. The world was turning and he was moving backwards, the wrong way.

He thought of this very thing, happening in his dream, at the end, when the man, the son, was drifting away in the boat, away from his father, as he himself was now. There was that darkness in the sky, and the black depths of the ocean, not unordinary in the dark of night upon the shore. Clal's thoughts continued. *Who were these two? What were they doing? What was written on the scroll? What had they said about there will be hope within the veins...* He thought about some of the details and remembered that they had been traveling through a countryside. The father was staying behind to fight off some evil of some sort. And this is all that he could recall for now.

Ansa had moved and sat beside him by this time. She was looking at the ground too, mesmerized by the living earth, moving and swaying as they moved across it.

“I'm sorry Clal.” She quietly said. “I didn't mean to cause any rift between us. We have a long trip and I was hoping to make it a good one.”

“I'm not angry, just thinking.” Clal said. “Your words put me into that sort of mood. It's alright.”

“Well, can we talk about Eldan a bit.” She smiled and her eyes squinted.

“Of course.” Clal winked.

All her life she'd waited to come to Eldan Vyum, and now, she's halfway there.

“When we get there you'll be going in the direction of the examination place, er, what do they call it.”

Clal chuckled, “quarters, Examination quarters.”

“Right, quarters.” She continued. “I'm supposed to finish my journey on the other side of town and pay the wagon driver as I leave his services. I am to house with the woman who I will be working with for several months.” She clasped her hands. “Dresses Clal, dresses. I'll be making dresses.”

“Yes, Ansa.” He shared in her joy. “And you'll do a fine job.” He grabbed one of her hands and said, “The skill of a fence builder and rock thrower will surely come in handy with the needle.”

She tore her hand from his grasp and threw a fake but comical frown on her face.

“You!” She said. They both laughed and the driver turned to look at them. With a shake of his head he halted. “It's time for a break. I must water my mules.”

As the animals were lapping at a nearby pond, Ansa scooted closer to Clal.

“Clal,” Ansa began, “Do you suppose we’ll be okay? It’s been such a long time since we’ve been apart. We need each other. It’s never the way you imagine it...the road you end up traveling against the path you thought would be yours.”

“Yes, we’ll be okay. It’s all new, but Turl said it all seems to work out in the end. Or something like that.”

She slowly nodded.

“Besides,” he continued, “once the examinations have concluded, I’ll be off to work in the blacksmith, which I understand is not too far from where you’ll be.”

“Right.” Her face had changed. Clal was suspicious, but would not probe for the answer now.

After a time the driver climbed on and led the mules onward toward Eldan Vyum. It was getting dark so they both settled in for the night. The summer sun had warmed the air and Clal fell asleep almost instantly. But Ansa had not, so deep in thought was she. She could only watch the stars dance beyond the trees. Overwhelmed with so much to happen yet, she began to shed quiet tears. She felt alone, the final state of her waking moments, but some of the first tears she will shed before her journey is through.

Chapter 3: Of Myths and Legends

Clal awoke with a start. He had almost forgotten where he was until he heard the monotonous creakings of the old wagon and the occasional murmurings of the driver. The forest was still darkened but the sky was a blanket of powder blue. The sun was at their rear, barely peaking over the much smaller Crescent-Keep mountain. He knew that Eldan Vyum was straight ahead. Turl had told him of the wonders of the examinations and of the details of his journeys to the center kingdom. His father had instructed him regarding the history of the event and why it was performed or organized each year. 'It's the only way that had been devised and conjured to find him who has been named keeper of our fate.' But to Clal, it was a quire thing required of the people of Illia and didn't quite understand the details of the whole ordeal. For now he put it out of his mind. He knew things would make sense sooner or later.

Clal turned to see Ansa stirring. He never could get away with awaking or anything with his dear Ansa sensing her brother's whereabouts. She opened one eye and turned her head to Clal.

“I’m hungry” she said.

“Then eat” Clal replied. He smiled as she felt for her pack and pulled out some bread. She ripped off a piece and sunk her teeth into it. She closed her eyes while she chewed.

“Mmm,” She tore off another piece. “Here, Clal. Try some.”

He took her offering gratefully and chewed on their mother's finest baking. “Thank you,” he said once finished.

“Your welcome,” she said.

Ansa stood up in the wagon and propped her arm on the side of the wagon. She looked far and near, eyes squinting. She had spent many days in the forest and had even taught Clal a thing or two. Her eyes were keen and her ears like a fox. Ansa was respected among her kin. She was, however, somewhat thin but had beautiful golden brown locks. Her face was as welcoming as the warm, summer sun and when here bright brown eyes gazed upon you, her charm was unmatched.

Clal also stood up and walked toward the front of the wagon. "Driver?" he called. "How long until your next stop?"

The driver jumped, almost out of his seat. Clal and Ansa looked at each other and silently held back their laughing.

"Two miles till we reach old Meldin" he said, though mumbling.

"And how about Eldan Vyum." Clal continued.

"Well, tonight," he said, sounding more awake, "if things go as planned."

And so, for two miles Clal and Ansa conversed about many things, mostly of home, and of the things they would miss most. Clal included those they would miss the least. This part of the conversation was unmatched in length by the first topic of discussion for their parents were intent on bringing them up right. 'Fields to till and animals to tend to,' Clal said with his face and voice made to imitate his father's stern instructions. 'Ansa, you're knees are dirty and theirs sticks in your hair,' Ansa puffed out her cheeks in imitated frustration as her mother so often did. They both laughed as they were accustomed to playfulness almost constantly. Their laughing was hushed, however, by the abrupt halt of the wagon. The driver blew his horn as he did each time to call the next boy to board.

Clal could see through the trees a small cottage. It was given away by the soft puffs of smoke that filtered through the leaves of a nearby tree. The driver waited a moment then blew his horn once more, this time longer. After another long pause the driver waved his hand in the direction of the dwelling and whispered, "to your own undoing." He picked up the reins and flicked his mules to a start. But Clal saw something moving in the distance, behind, no, amid the trees.

"Driver! Stop!" Clal said.

"I will not," the driver replied.

"Look." Clal pointed toward the home.

"Whoa," he said to his mules who halted.

There among the trees a young man was running, waving his hand frantically; his voice was faint but clear.

Clal motioned for the bounding youth to join them. The boy stopped waving his arms and sped toward them. He was soon at their side.

"You've brought your payment boy, haven't ye'."

“Oh yes...sir,” the boy bent over, taking his fair share of the morning's crisp air, “I have indeed.”

After a moment or two, he walked from the back of the wagon where Ansa and Clal were standing on up to the driver. He pulled from his pouch a few gold pieces and gave them to the driver. The driver looked at the money for a moment then said, “The fare was half this amount...”

The boy turned the driver's fingers to cover the gold and said, “Keep it fair driver. The word around here is that you are a good and honest man.” The boy smiled. “You can thank my mother for the gift.”

“Well then, bless you lad.” The driver tossed the coins up in the air, grabbed the reins and began to whistle a merry tune. The young man waited for the wagon to pass him then he hopped into the wagon and threw his belongings inside.

A few moments went by and Clal was already suspecting that the boy was fast asleep. But as soon as he had settled it in his mind, the new comer raised himself up and sat upright.

“My name is Ryth.” he bowed his head slightly. I and my mother are a few of the only dwellers left to occupy the beautiful lands of Meldin.”

He looked at Clal and then to Ansa, then back to Clal. “Where do you call home?”

“The Crescent hills just at the eastern foot of Crescent-Keep Mountain.” Clal said. “Have you been there?”

“I've heard about it some” Ryth replied. “But, never been there, though I'd like to sometime.”

Ansa was nibbling on some cheese and had begun to daze off as she looked at their visitor.

Ryth continued. “So, are you going to the examination too, uh...what did you say your name, names were?”

“My name is Clal Winden,” Clal pointed to his sister, “and this is my sister, Ansa,” She scowled at him, “uh, twin sister.”

“Pleased to meet you both” Ryth said.

“To answer your question, this is my first time going to the examination,” Clal looked down for a moment. He could not hide his anxiety concerning the fact.

“Well, I can show you around a bit” Ryth straightened his back and gained a few inches in height because of it. “Last year was my first year. It is interesting, but things won't be as others have told you, if they have at all. Each year seems to be different, they say. I don't know how that could be since, it seems pretty simple and this examination has been going on since,” Ryth looked up above him, “since the beginning of time, I suppose.”

Clal found Ryth's speech confusing. But he listened. As they traveled through forests and valleys, passed lakes and rivers, Ryth spun the tales of Eldan Vyum and all that goes on there. The more he spoke the less he answered their questions and the more questions Clal had. Ryth didn't fully understand the purpose of the examination, but he told them everything that he knew about it.

Since, Ryth lived in such a short distance from Eldan, it wasn't uncommon for him to travel there several times a year.

"I would go there for festivals in the fall and spring," He continued, "and take jobs for weeks at a time to support my family."

"Then why didn't you take your own wagon to the city?" Ansa asked, truly puzzled.

"Well, my mother has to leave this year because she needs to care for her sister who recently had a baby. She lives some miles away across those hills over there."

"Well, Clal, what do you like doing over there where you're from?" Ryth settled in a bit leaning back and grabbed an apple from his satchel.

Clal looked out into the forest then back to Ansa then to Ryth. "I love adventure." Clal smiled. "I live for it."

"You know," he continued, "you hear so many stories, legends, myths, folk tales. But don't you ever wonder if they are true?"

"Yes." Ryth answered. "There's so many that I've often wondered about." Ryth produced half a smile. "Like Gulnerye's legend or...the Pale Forest."

Ansa leaned over to join the conversation. "Yes, I love the legends of the Island that disappeared to somewhere and the mountain that was moved."

"Maybe they've met up a time or two." Ryth said and they all laughed.

"My father once told me about some magical desert in the (west) not too far away from where I've been living." Clal said.

"Now that sounds interesting," Ryth squinted his vision to a far off place in the sky and said halfway to himself, "a magical desert."

"And then there's the story about turtle rock and the stairs into the sea." Ansa said. "I've always wanted to go to the sea."

Then Ryth leaned in toward Clal and Ansa. He stole a glance at the driver who was whistling through his teeth. It was well past noon and the daylight was darkening. In somewhat of a whisper he began.

"Do you want to hear about my favorite legend?" Clal and Ansa both nodded. "Have you ever heard of the legend of the Dark One Lurking?"

Just then a flock of black birds bolted into the sky from beneath a nearby cluster of bushes. Ansa screamed.

"What?" the driver said leaping into the air and losing his hat to the wind in the process. "Dear girl, there's no need to get excited now. Birds are birds. They come and they go as they please. Don't you

have those kinds of animals back home?" His gruffy voice ended abruptly.

Ansa didn't answer. She simply turned to Ryth and gave a faint smile through her red cheeks.

"Anyway, the dark one lurking..." Ryth was speaking in a whisper.

"The dark one lurking?" Clal said.

"Yes." Ryth said getting a little frustrated at the interruptions. "Here's how the legend goes. Long ago there was a prized possession that a boy wanted very much. It was owned by his father and he could not have it. When he realized it would never be his, his lust sealed itself to the eternal pursuit of obtaining it. From that day, poison began to drip drop drip drop into his once pure heart."

"How utterly sad," Ansa said as she raised her hands to cover her lips.

"What was it...or...is it? The thing he wanted?" Clal said.

"I'm getting to that." Ryth looked from one side then to the other, then to the driver. He continued.

"The thing that he most desired was the great power that was within his father's possession." Ryth held out his hands and formed like he was holding a large ball. "It was a stone, solid and alive. All of earth's secrets and time's mysteries were contained therein."

"It was enchanted!" Ansa exclaimed and gave two small claps.

"Yes, well...no..." Ryth looked confused, "I don't know about that, but it held great and grand power. In fact, there was none greater."

"Okay, okay. It's powerful and really important," Clal whispered with his eyebrows lowered, "Sorry, but what happened to it?"

"Right," Ryth held out his hands and continued to gesture while he continued to explain the legend. "He never obtained it."

"Never?" Clal said.

"Never." Ryth said. "He tried to, but he was banished in the end. He was banished from it and from his father's kingdom."

"But how do you know?" Ansa said.

"Well, look around us." Ryth raised his hands into the air. Clal and Ansa looked in all directions.

"What?" they both said in unison.

"Is the world destroyed yet?" Ryth smiled.

"No," Clal replied, "Not at all. It's beautiful."

“Exactly.” Ryth continued. “This means that he's probably still out there...somewhere...still waiting for someday to destroy all that is good.” Ryth tossed his, now, very narrow apple core over his shoulder. It made a soft thud sound as it landed in some grass.

Clal and Ansa cast their eyes upon the shadows of the forest. The sun had gone down and the trees were chattering in the wind. Day's light had fizzled out just minutes ago, except for the ever increasing star population in the sky.

“But that also means that,” Clal sat up, “the enchanted ball is still out there too...”

“...but if they somehow meet, the dark one lurking and the great stone of power, our world will surely become one miserable place.” Ryth opened his sack again and shuffled his hand around inside of it.

“Or, at least that's how the legend goes.” Ryth concluded now holding a small flute in his hands.

“I have never heard that legend before.” Clal said turning to Ryth. “Shouldn't everyone know about it. I mean, it's almost like the whole land of Illia depends upon whether it's true or not.”

“Yeah.” Ryth said. “You're right.”

“And shouldn't there be things that we should be doing to...”

“Well there is.” Ryth suggested. “Like this examination we'll be at tomorrow. It's how they, King Nelbeird and his mighty knights, have decided to, I guess, prepare for what might be instore.” Ryth thought for a moment. “Although, if they find the one person they are looking for, I think that person, will bear most of the weight.”

“So tell me, what goes on there at the examination?” Clal began.

As they continued to talk well into the night, Ansa listened to their voices but mostly to her heart. She had been huddled into the corner of one side of the wagon for some time now, unnoticed to her brother and their shortly acquainted friend, Ryth. Every part of her hated the thought of a dark one somewhere, let alone him *lurking* around. She didn't know exactly what that meant but it sounded terrible. The trip from home began so peacefully and like one of the many dreams that she had had for months before their departure today. Now it has turned out nothing like she had expected.

As Ansa began to doze, she noticed through the star light that Clal was now laying down. Ryth was was sitting erect but Ansa couldn't tell what he was doing. Then, she knew. The air lifted with the sound of a **garbin** flute. It was a soft melody, simple but sweet. He played for a long time and Ansa seemed to hear the language of his heart, his thoughts, as he played. He played many songs and they were all so different. It softened her heart and her displeasure regarding the legend he had told them was now replaced with an instant love and admiration for his music. That night she dreamed of silver clouds and with golden wings and of flying upon the winds above.

Chapter 4: Eldan Vyum (The City of Many Moons)

They all awoke within a few minutes of eachother to a brisk and chilly morning. The sun soon warmed them up and they shared their food with eachother.

“Ho, Driver,” Ryth said when he finished his meal, “Are there any more stops between here and Eldan Vyum?”

“One lad,” the driver exclaimed, “then we'll hurry along and be there by noon.”

Before they knew it, the driver was calling out for his team to slow. Three boys were standing on the side of the lane. One was kicking rocks, another searching through his sack, and the other just waited and watched.

“Examination boys?” the driver asked.

“Yes sir,” they said in unison.

“Payment?” the driver said holding out his calloused and fat hand.

They paid him.

“Okay now,” he swung his hand with his thumb out back behind him. “To the rear.”

The boys waited as the wagon rolled past them. Then Ryth extended his hand and helped them each in. “Welcome,” Ryth said.

The trip from then until the arrival at Eldan Vyum went fast. The new comers were not much for talking. One slept the whole way there, another was content with looking at the scenery. The other was fidgeting with some split wood on the side of the wagon wall. Clal wanted to talk with Ryth about legends again but, the new company prevented him to. He would have pressed his company for conversation, but he was busy with his own thoughts and intentions. He had had dreams last night that furthered his understanding of his dream. There was more to the story there. More dialogue between the two men, father and son. In the dream Clal seemed more aware and was able to look around at his surroundings, like he controlled the scene just a little bit more. He still hoped to tell Ansa about the details, but he didn't seem to feel that the time was right to do so.

“Look Clal,” Ansa shouted. “That must be Eldan Vyum, the central kingdom.” She clasped her hands together and raised her shoulders slightly. “It's beautiful.” And it was.

The city had been established in a valley that was near a mountain range in north. There were clusters of buildings close together connected by roads and paths. Smoke was rising from several establishments and there could be seen people in the distance moving about. Today, however, was the day before the examination and the town was busy and bustling. There were wagons and an extra influx of Illians. There were yellow and blue bannars, merchants in the streets, and songs upon the breeze.

Clal almost didn't notice the great castle of the city. It was located high upon the chief mountain in the mountain range. It was half way up the mountain. The pathway up to it zig-zagged from the city to its front gates. It was gray with white lines of stone that had been placed carefully by design. There were many spires and look out points. Clal stared in disbelief and wondered how many years and men it took to create such a masterful structure. Instantly, Clal had a desire to step foot inside the castle and experience the splendor and magnificence that it would surely offer. He noticed Ryth smile and turned

to ask him about it.

To Clal and Ansa it was spectacular. To Ryth, he looked for something anew and changed within the all too familiar festivities. He was, however, amazed in a different way.

"It's the celebration that you see, Clal," Ryth said, "the festivities for the examination." Ryth stopped thinking for a moment. He looked into the sky and thought. His gaze then went to his boots, which he shifted. Finally, his gaze swept over all that were in the wagon. "In recent years the festivities and celebrating have overwhelmed the event's original meaning and purpose...which was to find the one; he must be named."

"Have you been there?"

"Yes," Ryth said, "And you will too, within the hour."

"That's where the examination is held?" Clal looked surprised. It had never occurred to him that the examination would be held there, within the castle.

"Yes Clal, it's that important." Ryth looked puzzled. "The finding of the one must be a success. He's got to be found, and soon." Ryth pulled Clal closer to him.

"There are signs, things happening that suggest evil is gaining on the good of the world." Ryth stopped, "Listen, once we get there...well, if I've got answers, I'm glad to provide them." He smiled. "And since you've got questions..."

"Okay, it's a deal then." Clal said.

The old man's wagon climbed a small hill carrying six young youth, five lad and one maiden. The three boys stayed sitting down, but Clal, Ryth, and Ansa all stood up together. All was quiet as except for the usually squeeking of the wagon and the swishing of the mules' tails. They approached the gate to the city and as they passed through, Clal and Ansa looked at each other and said in unison, "We're here."

As they continued to move through the main parts of the city, there were streets that stretched in every direction, this way and that. Houses and buildings lined every street. Clal turned around and noticed that other wagons were following them with other boys that were just like him. Some had old drivers, but some had younger drivers. And still, there was one woman driver, thin and weapy.

"Clal," Ansa said tugging his arm then looking at her paper. "I think this is where I stop."

Ryth put out his hand and motioned her to hand him the paper, "May I?" Ansa obeyed. Ryth read the note then scanned the city. "I believe it's a bit out of our way. So I suggest we get off this wagon and set you up with your Madam Prinkle, and Clal and I travel up to the castle before the sun sets.

"I say it's a good plan!" Clal said. "How about you sis?"

"Yes. It'll be fun to walk around a bit." said Ansa

"Hey, driver, good sir. We'd like to get off here." Ryth said.

“Whoa. Whoa.” He stopped his mules. “Right here at this very spot? What dya et fur breakfast lad?”

“Well,” Ryth stuttered, “Nothing yet...bu...b...that' not the point sir.”

“Well get on with it then.” The driver was beginning to look cross and impatient.

Clal stepped in front of Ryth. “Have we paid you in full sir?”

“Yes, I believe so.” the driver said.

“Well then we thank you for your services.” Clal said smiling a wide smile. “Good day sir.”

“Oh,” the driver replied as they jumped off the wagon and began walking. He held up his hand with his reigns in his clasp and said, “I'm supposed to give an eye witness accounting of your safe delivery to the King's men. Now this will complicate things. These three lads might need to serve as witnesses, if they must.”

Ryth waved, “Oh don't worry, we'll make it there by night fall.”

The driver whipped the reigns and the mules started up their trotting again. The three young men were all staring at the Clal and his companions. The clip-clop of the mules' hooves slowly died away.

Chapter 5: Through the Castle Walls

Ryth led them along a journey of winding ways through the city. Occasionally he would ask a person on the street for directions. Some would put up their hand and shake their head, others would point. It was a very big city. When turned to position himself in relation to the Eldan Castle, it was now the size of a small stone upon the hill sized mountain; a toy.

On and on they went. Though Ansa knew the driver could not have brought her directly here, she didn't anticipate having to travel so far. Finally, their hopes were dashed when, after having finally found “Madam Prinkle's Stitchery”, the place was empty.

“Uhg,” Ansa said as she stomped her foot on the ground creating a dust cloud. She sat down and began to cry.

Ryth stopped walking and stared. His experience with the females was entirely different. He'd never seen his mother cry. She shot and killed as many deer and boar as Ryth himself. And his aunt, he's only met once.

“Ansa.” Clal waited to speak until she looked at him, “I know you are anxious and scared and are feeling many other things. You've had a long journey so far. Please don't cry.”

“But what are we going to do, Clal?” She said wiping her face with her sleeve. “

“Well,” Clal thought. He sat down beside his sister. “Father sent you here to Eldan to work, am I right?”

“Yes, but...”

“And he sent you to work for Madam Prinkle's Stitchery, right?”

“Yes.” she said.

“Ansa I think we should find out more about this Prinkle woman.” Clal said.

“Maybe she's out for the moment, or off for the day. How does you father know this woman anyway?” Ryth added.

Clal didn't know, but Ansa replied. “Mother has known Madam Prinkle for years and sent her letter this past April. Mother mentioned that I was getting old enough to work and inquired on any places she knew of who was accepting work. Madam Prinkle wrote back informing her that she had aquaired a stichery shop and could use some help. Her invitation has brought me thus far.” She let her hands fall and flap against her thighs. She shook her head.

Ryth looked around, “Suppose we find you a place to sleep for the night, then we'll meet you in the morning. But where to go there's no knowing.”

“Oh, there must be some place to sleep in this town, an inn, a tavern.” Ansa said.

“It's funny,” Ryth began, “As we walked through town I noticed many buildings that one would call an inn. But being the celebration of the examination, their windows had signs that said, “No Room,” or “No Beds Left.” Ryth shrugged, “Finding a place to stay could prove to be nothing short of a miracle.”

“Well you just can't leave me...” Ansa said.

“...Ansa, we'll figure this out.” Clal said standing up and pulling her up along with him.

Clal led them. He had seen a few inns and taverns along the way. He thought that he might be able to find one. They walked down main roads as the stars moved in the sky above. There were homes, and shops, and fields on the outskirts. But only a few places had lights on still. There was one place in particular that shed the brightest light. It was upon the door of this one that Clal finally knocked.

The light blue sign that was attached on the door read, “Haven's Inn”. It was graced with a yellow flower. The dim glow that had shown in the window increased in brightness. The door lever turned and there before them was a squinting older woman waving them in.

“Well hello young travelor's,” the inn keeper studied her new arrivals. “You look a bit worn in ware and spirit. How many I help you? Are you looking for room and board?”

“Yes, mam,” Ansa began. She was timid but confident. “We were supposed to be...er...the place where I was to go was all closed up. The lady wasn't there. So now we are looking...or...that is, I am looking for a place to sleep for the night until I...or we figure out this whole mess...”

“I understand deary.” She was nodding slowly. “I'm old enough to be your grandmother and I think I'll treat you as such, if that's alright with you.”

Ansa looked at Clal who looked at Ryth.

"I do have a room open on the second floor. With all of the hussle and bussle going on for the examination, that's my only one left. Granted, I am a small inn."

Ansa nodded, "Okay, I'll take it!"

The old woman walked behind the counter leaving the three of them in the entryway. "Fine, fine." She said. "The cost is twenty pieces of silver a day," she winked, "at the most."

Ryth began digging in his satchel.

"And how long can I expect you to stay here?" the lady asked.

"One day, I believe...or maybe two." Ansa folded her arms and shifted her stance. "Well, I'm not sure."

"How about one day, then we'll go from there." The woman nodded.

Ryth handed the twenty silver pieces to the woman swift as a bird in flight. As the twins turned around in protest he put his hand up. Without a word Clal and Ansa accepted the offering with their smiles and they all turned to the woman.

"My name is Gwenaea, long time owner and operator of Haven's Inn." She smiled the widest smile Clal had ever seen. "And what might your names be?"

"I am Ansa this is my twin brother Clal. We are from the crescent hills to the west."

"I've come for the examination then to work."

"And my name is Ryth, a dweller of Meldin."

"Ah, Meldin," Gwenaea's eyes lit up. "I've been there a time or two. It's a beautiful place and rich in resources."

As Ansa was shown to her room the boys followed. They talked with Gwenaea all about their travels and their plans. She was a good listener and seemed to have a great measure of wisdom. Before long it was obvious that the three were ready to part.

"Well, you are wonderful people. I am very pleased to meet you and to learn all about you." Gwenaea patted Clal on the back, "Clal, I will take care of your sister until the time comes that things change in her better fortune. She's safe here, not that she's in any real danger here in Eldan Vyum."

Clal nodded and Gwenaea descended the stairs and was gone.

"Okay Ansa, here's what we'll do. Ryth and I will attend the examination, finish up with the festivities, and so forth. I'll stop by the blacksmith's simply to make contact, confirm that he'll take me on as a hired hand, and to drop my things off. Then, we should meet up with you by night fall."

"Okay," Ansa cocked her head slightly, "but what'll I do in the meantime?"

“Well, try to find out more about this Madam Prinkle lady. You still need a job, don't you?” Ryth said.

“Yes. But...” She stuttered.

“Okay, it's scary and confusing and new, I know,” Clal said. “But you're a Winden, and that makes all the difference.” Clal sighed, he didn't want to leave Ansa like this, emotionally spent and confused. He really didn't know what to say. Then a comforting thought came and he knew that would be the doorway for all of them to continue upon their semi-self appointed journey. Clal continued, “Gwendaea seems like a real nice lady, a friend springing up like a yellow flower out of desert soil.”

“She'll take care of you.” Ryth said.

“She will, can't you feel it. She's just what we needed,” Clal said, “and maybe we can help her in some small way in the process. And Ansa,” She was sitting on the bed with her belongings sitting on her lap still. Clal took both of her hands in his, “any time you're feeling worried or don't know how to find Madam Prinkle, just come back to Haven's Inn. It will work out. We'll come and find you here.”

Ansa broke in, “Okay, okay, I feel better.” She smiled. “You boys can go now. I don't know how they're going to let you into the castle now.”

“Right. Well...” Clal stood up and Ryth walked through the door. “Take care and we'll see you tomorrow evening at the latest.” They embraced, then Clal walked out of her room and followed Ryth down the stairs.

Just before her room door was out of sight he turned around. She was standing under the door sill her smile now sunken and her eyes were twinkling. He knew those were tears. He waved. Ansa's hand waved a slow small wave. Clal tried everything, but he knew that it was only in her heart that she could find the springs of hope and laughter.

New Chapter:

It was night fall now, and Clal could see the crescent moon shining off the castle walls. Ryth was leading Clal up the long and ascending path way to where they would soon be in front of the castle gate. The examination was tomorrow, and as accustomed, the king's knights would be found standing in front of the gate all night instead of closing the gate at dusk.

They were approaching a flat part of their ascent when a man leapt out in front of Clal and knocked him to the ground. The attacker had hit him in the side of his head with a stone. Clal struggled to raise himself and was grateful for Ryth's aid in this endeavor. He brushed himself off and looked all around him. He spun around one way with his arms out, then he jumped yet in another direction. Ryth watched with his hands on his hips. He noticed that Clal had a natural ability or had developed it, the ability to protect himself and defend himself with his body. He thought he might try his strength and agility some time to test it. But, all the while, the scene was comical like a cat chasing his tail.

“Clal, what are you doing?”

“That man,” Clal said out of breath. “Where did he go?”

“There wasn't anyone. No one attacked you.” Ryth pointed. “Just look to your right.”

Clal turned. The crescent moon was reflecting off of a statue, of a man, holding a sword in one hand and his other arm raised in the air.

“It's the statue of Seldonolum.” Ryth said.

“Seldonolum?” Clal whispered.

“Seldonolum. There are many legends left untold and some told and retold. And now we've added yet another legend to share. This here is a statue made out of the finest stone that illia has, deep, deep in it's virtues; it's called heart stone. Generations ago the psalms of the White Princess were heard through out the land,” Ryth raised his arm and pointed to the statue, “and she sang of him.” Ryth began to sing.

O Seldinolum, O Seldinolum
The North Star calls for you
The leaves are falling for the good
That you will bring anew

O Seldinolum, O Seldinolum
The west wind calls for you
Your feet will shine above the land
Each step will bring the truth

O Seldinolum, sweet Seldinolum
The southern country sings
Of one who's task will save us all
Give place where new life springs

O Seldinolum, our Seldinolum
The eastern shores do hum
The tune of hope that truth prevails
By that Seldinolum

When finished Clal looked at the face of the man. It was half in moonlight and half in shadow. The man was in the middle of an attack with sword swipping downward and face curled as if in pain or exerting much physical force. But somewhere, inside of Clal he smiled, and small flame ignited. He knew that this man would mean more, to him some day.

As Clal looked upon the stone figure, his gaze passed by it and fixed upon another statue. He then turned, and there was another, then another, five in total. One in the middle and four surrounding forming a square. “Ryth,” he said, “What is going on here? What is this place?”

“It's the place of Amnber. There's the Dragon's Perch...”

“Dragon?”

“...and the place of the five stones...and the lady of Illia...”

“What is all this?” Clal whispered rubbing his eyes.

“...and an inscription which is called “The Prophecy”...and finally, a statue called “The Four Lost Guardians.”

Ryth walked over to Clal and put his arm around his back, “We best be getting off up the road. If we don't, that driver is going to be in a whole mess of trouble claiming he brought us when really, we never showed up.

They walked up the road and were soon before the castle gate.

Ryth approached the knight blocking the entrance. He looked at Clal and then back at the knight. “Sire, we're here for the examination.”

“Your name please.”

“Ryth Willowback.”

“Clal Winden.”

As soon as Clal said his name there was a sudden rustling noise in the trees and Clal jearked his head toward it. He thought he saw some movement, not low upon the ground, but higher up, perhaps the head of a man. He wasn't sure.

He was took a few steps that direction but just then the knight's voice pulled him from the moment.

“You are free to enter.” He then nodded toward toward one of the knights. Two fell out of rank and led Clal and Ryth up the stone walkway and down several halls. Clal could only see what the knight's torches illuminated. Shadows danced and provided unknown depths to their darkness. Soon they approached too gigantic wooden doors. The guards there lifted some levers and heaved it outward. The hinges were silent. Though the doors were large, the hallway behind was narrow and descended until they reached a flat surface. The torch of the guards lit up only a part of the room. But as his eyes swept across the scene, it's size was enourmous. Far to the back, to the right, to the left, and he even thought he saw some other placed that could be some stairs, maybe five or six that led up to another section of the room. He'd never seen the likes.

“Clal,” Ryth whispered, “Let's put our packs here just like the others.”

Clal looked at the floor now. There were hundreds of sleeping boys now in view; all of them there to be examined, maybe one of them to be named this year. In all the wonder he had forgotten the whole purpose he was there.

Clal took about his sack and layed it on the straw mat the guard had provided. As soon as his head lay atop his pack, he slept and his dreams stretched far out over the world.

Chapter 6: No Stranger

Clal awoke during the darkest hour when the crescent moon had retired over the western hills. His eyes were wide open staring into the blackness until they adjusted. There was alarm in his heart. He put his hand on his chest then down to his stomach, then to the small knife Turl gave him a few years ago.

Ryth was sleeping, mostly snoring and grumbling; and since this kind of secretiveness in a foreign place was new to Clal, he didn't want to embarrass himself if it turned out to be nothing. But it was something. The desire to get up and begin walking was stronger.

Clal noiselessly lifted his tired body and slipped on his shoes. A crouched figure darted to one hallway and began to descend its steps. Clal continued walking down the steps and hoped that the echos of his feet would be unnoticed. He stepped lighter thereafter. There were a few other hallways he could have gone down, but he knew which way to go, like he had already been playing out the details of this scene. It was to the left that he must go. Clal turned and began walking.

There started to be a fouler smell down in this portion of the castle. *This couldn't be the floor where the dungeon lies. It's not far down enough*, he thought. He continued to walk. He was confident that he was getting closer. Doors on either side of him began to pass by. They were all closed, except for one. He only noticed it too late.

A large hand came from out of the darkness. It grabbed, caught hold of Clal, and pulled him into the black abyss. The door clicked shut.

Clal felt no need to fight, but only to wait. However, his heart was beating fast and he was afraid.

A torch burst into flames and bearded man's face appeared in the corner of a very small room.

"I am Morgreth," his face was exprescionless. "I am a wizard and gaurdian of all things that are of peace and goodness."

As Clal watched he did not get this impression whatsoever. The flame that danced upon the torch caused the man's face to seem to shift in and out of shadow. Clal did not feal peace.

"Why am I here?" Clal said.

"Why *are* you here," he paused, "Clal?"

Clal froze. He had heard his name. That is when the peace began to flow into his heart.

"I wanted to be here." Clal said, "I had to. I almost could not help myself." he paused, "but I wanted to come, more than anything." Clal's voice trailed off.

The wizard's torch suddenly increased in brightness and Clal could see the full extent of this Morgreth. He was tall but broud shoulders. He wore a robe traditional to what little folk lore Clal has heard heard about such individuals. A gray cloth pulled over his green garb beneath. He had a hood which was at his back. His sleeves were wide and open. The beard was well kempt and a mixture of brown and grey. Many wrinkles lined his face yet there was a sense of youth in his eyes. His hair was long down past his shoulders.

"I brought you here tonight because you and your friend are in danger." He then whispered. "Grave danger."

"But how? Why?" Clal said.

Morgreth quickly hushed Clal.

"We've not been in this city for more than a few hours." Clal whispered.

"This danger that I speak of is not against who you are, but against who you will become." Morgreth said.

"I don't understand."

"I am the examiner, I have examined every boy from ages 13-16 for many many many years. I know every name of each boy and have looked into every heart," Morgreth whispered to almost no sound at all, "And I know the souls of these. There are boys like Ryth and Turl, and your father, and his grandfather, and those who have passed to upward fly. I know them as if we had spent a life time together.

"For generations has this examination been performed, all for the purpose of finding the markings that the one would bare. This very year, the stars and moon alligned in ways I cannot explain, nor would I try, none the less they told me that this would be the year that the One would come forth. So, there was only one way into the castle, and Morgreth had spent all day summoning the boys to him with the orb, but no one would come toward him. He almost lost hope, quested self, confused but the Clal and Ryth came, Clal turned and almost walked over, but didn't. Clal heard a rustling, and the wizard sped off to prepare to summon Clal before the examination.

"My father Felsawn was given a stone that would bring out the marking. He malted a hard stone and placed the stone in the ball. This I have used ever since the activity of looking for "the one" has been established.

"This is what I use to find their marking, I place it on a few places of their skin, kneck, forehead... I also gain a look at the boy's heart and have their name etched into my memory. And so, here is where we are tonight, why are you in danger?

"About forty-three years ago, a boy named Emish came for the first time. When I had done with many other boys Emish sat before me, gave me his name, and I proceeded. In moments a vision of a heart overflowing with blackness was cast upon my mind. I knew, then, that all he wanted was to be the one, and if he wasn't, he'd wait for the one who would some day be named, and destroy him. No one suspected him, the darkness, and so he went away, rose up in power, and became a mighty king of the (north), King Emish.

"Clal," Morgreth leaned forward, "King Emish is here, all of the kings from the land are here every year in council. This why you're in danger."

"But I'm not the one that it talks about in those words you said." Clal said, "Am I?"

There was a flash of light and there before Clal was the very same ball of stone that Morgreth had just described in the wizard's hands. "Clal, only the one would have come to me amid a dark and deep sleep. A bit of this stone's heart is reflected in your fleshy heart. However, the law states that no boy must be omitted from the examination." Morgreth stood up. "It's time."

Clal did not resist. He stood still. Morgreth touched the orb to Clal's forehead and neck. Immediately a burst of light poured forth, small rays that cast light upon the stony walls. The light was blue and was shaped in an odd formation. Though he could not see what his neck had reacted, he felt warmth.

"Clal," Morgreth said after another few moments, "Let us talk."

At this point the light issuing from Clal had ceased replaced by the bright light upon the flameless torch.

Just then foot steps were heard as someone passed by the door of the room. The break in the stream of light that came through under the door was unnerving.

"On second thought, you must return to your sleeping place quickly. If we are found out here, a web of danger may issue forth."

"But what about King Emish, and Ryth?" Clal said.

"Many questions are answered rashly. But some of the best answers come when they're least expected." Morgreth showed a faint smile and said, "Leave to me the rest of the details. Stay close to me tomorrow and watch those around you. In fact, keep Ryth near by also." Morgreth paused then turned to Clal and said, "I have a plan. Expect my first few instructions during the examinations."

"I understand." Clal said. He quietly slipped out the door and was gone. When he found his back in the examination quarters he noticed that one mat was vacant.

Chapter 7: The Examination and the Examinor

When Clal awoke a few hours later, the great hall was buzzing with noise; talking, laughter, and even an occasional shout or two. Some boys were still sleeping, some were sitting down on the ground reading or writing, and still others were standing up in pairs or in groups sharing recent news or discussing the examination. Some boys were taller and looked older and stronger, then there were some that were small and skinny with permanent expressions of uncertainty on their faces: shifty eyes, isolated, quiet, or weak looking. Clal mentioned these to Ryth.

"Those must be the new ones, the 'First Years', as they've been termed." Then Ryth smiled and said, "Don't worry Clal, you don't look at all like any one of them."

"Good," Clal smiled, "with a guide like you, how could I?"

"True," Ryth said puffing up his chest.

They both continue watching the scene and chat about what would happen today. "Once the examinations are over, there will be a great feast here in this hall in honor of those who travel near and

far.” Ryth squinted his eyes. “But, I don't know what will happen if the One is named this year. It's never happened before.”

All of a sudden there was some manner of commotion on the far side of the room. Boys were flocking over to it, almost trampling others in the process.

“What's happening?” Clal said in a voice of concern.

“It's the posting,” Ryth said, “They've posted the order of those who are to be examined. Who will be seen first, then second, and so on.”

Just then, two boys, older and taller, approached Clal and Ryth while rest of the boys, save a few, raced to the posting wall. The boys that approached didn't introduce themselves but only spoke with harshness. One of them, dark haired and thick eye browed, spoke first. “Ah, a couple of first-years, looks like.”

Ryth only responded with a stern face as Clal found himself fending off feelings of anger and confusion.

The other boy continued. “Have you ever wondered what goes on here at the examination?” He gave a wry smile. “Well don't wonder too much, that could get you in a whole lot of trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Clal said moving closer to one of the boys. This boy then turned to the first.

“Where'd you go last night? Why did you snoop around?” The boy appeared to think himself wise that he caught Clal with an uncomfortable question.

Ryth looked at Clal in confusion. He knew that the question was unfair and that Clal didn't want to answer it; that was only his concern, not theirs. Ryth was confused himself not knowing that Clal ventured around. But he thought on a way to help his friend. He knew that last year, shortly after the names were posted, the examination would begin. A man would speak to the group first, however. Stalling others with his speech was one of Ryth's peculiur gifts, and here would be a perfect time to use it.

Ryth grabbed Clal's arm the others unaware of his jecture. “Well, what business is it for you to learn the whereabouts or the reasons why people do what they do. Why accuse my friend when there are dozens and dozens of others that could have, might have, or were the ones that you saw to, go somewhere other than to dreamland while laying on their mat. Besides, who are you? We have no business with you. If you came to make friends then I would suggest a more friendly approach. If you came to make trouble or to do any other kind of mischief then I would say to you 'move along.' But to answer your question once again, why would we tell anyone anything about who we are before we knew who that person was and how that information will be used. All I'm trying to say is when you have a question, it's best that you...”

“To all who are gathered here today in this great hall of ancient and timeless magnificenss: Thousands upon thousands have padded these floors with their weary feet and...” Several boys started to sink back to the ground as they peered up to the top of the double staircase balcony. Ryth stopped talking and both him and Clal picked up their things and stuffed them into their sacks. Not looking back at the indruding boys, Clal and Ryth weaved their way through the crowd until they were closer and the

speaker's voice was more clear. They both continued to listen. Clal hung on to every word.

“Many moons ago there was, as the great legend goes, a dark enemy of all good things. He tried to gain the power over all things that were, that are, and that will be. Eventually, his plan was foiled and he became hated, banished, but not forgotten. And we have reason to believe, he's still out there, raising armies, sending spies, in whatever frame or fashion, and conspiring against us all.

“And so, we come to you, and some of the second-years and beyond may know, you are part of the finding of that One who will lead the fight against the Dark One Lurking.” The crowd began to buzz with voices for a moment but was soon hushed by the raise of the man's hands.

“You may not know it, often at your age you do not understand your destiny, and even few of you ever realize your destiny in your waking hours if you did find out what it was.” He stopped and cleared his throat. “Nevertheless, there is a bloodline where the One would come through, and it is linked to the Dark One. When the Dark One's threat is beginning to boil and fester, then the blood of a true hero will shine forth with the brilliance and luster of power and hope. This is why each year, the boys who do not yet know their destiny come to be examined. The questions are, 'Is the Dark One upon us?' and 'Do we have a worthy opponent to face him?' Even the strongest among us could prove to be the weakest before the Dark One Lurking.

The old man turned and scanned the vast congregation of young men. “We have the tool to find the One, unlock the symbols upon him, and to place him upon his path.”

He stopped speaking then turned and whispered to a man behind him. It was Morgreth. He stepped forward with Morgreth by his side and simply said, “I now present to you, the examiner.” The old man smiled then walked through an archway and was gone.

“Greetings visitors.” Morgreth began scanning the group. Clal knew that he was looking for him. “Our examinations will begin momentarily. Locate your name on the list over there remember your number as that will be how you we will call the next examinee.” Neither Clal nor Ryth had looked yet. “We will go in order, file in along the wall into this doorway here after ascending either stair way.” After searching Morgreth and Clal's eyes met, but Morgreth seemed not to notice. *Was it all a dream?* he wondered. “Bring your belongings with you. Return to this room after being examined...” Morgreth smiled, “...and find something to do. You must stay within the walls of this room, however.”

Morgreth walked back into an archway and was gone. “Come on Clal, let's have a look.”

The crowd around the lists were thick again, but they went anyway. Clal reached over one boy in particular and scanned the list with his finger. It was written with a quill so was difficult to read unless quite close. Under number fifty-seven he read Ryth's name and right beneath was his own.”

“Ryth,” he said, “You're right before me, number fifty-seven and I'm fifty-eight.”

“How did that happen?” Ryth said.

Clal didn't have to think long. He assumed it was Morgreth's doing. “I don't know,” is all he would venture to say.

“Well, what do we do till our turn?” Clal said shrugging his shoulders.

A deep voice boomed across the hall, "The examination has now begun. Number one." A boy was seen running to the foot of the stairs and bounding up them. The balcony swallowed him up and he disappeared.

"Image that, someone so determined to want to be the hero; fame with deathly danger in between the obtaining of it," Clal said.

"Odd, huh?" Ryth responded.

"The fate of a continent, a people, everyone and everything, all resting on your shoulders," Clal continued

"Number two."

"Well, the truth is, a hero or someone with a great task to perform, often is not sought after, shares the burden, the glory, the pain, and the danger. No hero has ever managed to fulfill their calling without the powers of nature and the possession of friendships to sustain them." Ryth raised his eye brows.

"Number three."

As the numbers continued to be called, Clal and Ryth slowly headed for the ever growing queue of boys. By asking a few they found their place and leaned their shoulders against the stone wall. Clal took this opportunity to learn more about. Meldin had been his only home since birth. His father died when he was seven but he never knew why. Before his death he remembered a gentle caring man, one that would work tirelessly, most of the time for weeks at a time laboring in Eldan Vyum or across the countryside. But always he came home. He always had a gift for his son. They loved each other, mother, father and son. "But things change as they often do."

Ryth told Clal of how broken both him and his mother was. Ryth found his father laying halfway in and halfway out of the house under the door frame of the back door. Mother screamed and pulled her hood over her face. Ryth said he just stood there, looking at his father's face, staring deep into his father's eyes, hollow, the flicker of the light of life had gone out.

"I just hung my head, kneeling before him, and sobbed. I held my mother's hand, and right there, we began a new life together forging the strongest mother son relationship. I admire my mother." Ryth said. "She's a fountain of strength and goodness to all."

"Well, well." Clal said, "I see where you get it from."

"Get what from?" Ryth said.

"Fifty-four," came the booming voice again.

"So fast." Clal said.

Ryth turned to Clal after looking up at the balcony. "So how about you Clal, what are you all about. Come on, let's here it."

Clal thought for a moment in his usually stare into the air above him. His eyes shifted in that direction for a moment then back at Ryth. "I want to live a good life. Not that living a simple life isn't good..."

"Fifty-five."

"...but, there's more out there for me, and I won't stop looking for it till I find it." The line was getting shorter now and there were only a few ahead of Ryth.

"I've often sat atop old Crescent-Keep and looked in every direct. There's so much out there. But I know I just can't wonder, I have to have a reason, or reasons to travel near and far."

"Fifty-six"

"I bet the view from the heights of that mountain of yours is fantastic." Ryth gasped. "Oh, I'm next." He pointed off in one direction. "Let's meet over there where we first slept when everything is done. Good luck and don't worry about."

"Well, okay..." Clal hadn't even begun to answer Ryth's question. He wanted to dig deep inside himself and answering such a question was a good motivation.

"Fifty-seven," came the voice. It seemed to echo louder and longer this time.

"I'm off Clal," Ryth said as he waved while in a brisk walk. His ascension up the stairs was less youthful and more calm and seasoned. He too disappeared into the archway.

"I wonder what's next for him," Clal whispered to himself, "for me?"

After a few moments that sound of his assigned number cut him to the very core. "Fifty-eight" the booming voice said. He began to walk when right in front of him, just before the stairs, the same two boys jumped out and grabbed his one arm each.

"There's nothing for you up those stairs but trouble. We can show you a bit of trouble ourselves. Either way, trouble is your fate," the dark haired boy said. "Clal Winden," he spat.

Panic broke out inside of him and surely on his face because both boys smiled and looked at each other. Their grips on his arms began to tighten and Clal winced. They started to slowly force him to walk to the side and Clal could see a doorway heading to some hallway where no one was currently occupying. Just as Clal's confusion got the better of him, a figure stepped out of the shadows.

"Number fifty-eight, you better hurry. You can play with your friends later." The boys quickly released Clal and watched him bound up the stairs. They sped off with tight fists and gritted teeth and disappeared into the crowd.

Clal caught a glimpse of Ryth entering a dark room at the end of the only hallway that existed there. Clal knew it was the ancient hallway dedicated for this very task. Many tapestries and murals and paintings were present on the walls. The tiles and wood were carved, all in the theme of the naming of the One and of the Dark One Lurking and even of the beginning of the Legend. Clal stopped where there was a guide who motioned to halt. As he turned around his mouth dropped.

There to his right was depicted in exactness the dream that he had had a few days ago and the details that he remembered. Clal turned to the man there and said, "What is this?" Clal pointed.

"Shh!" the man said. He bent a bit closer to Clal. "Don't you know boy? Why it's the beginning of all of this, the legend, the stone, the battle of the stone seed, it's called 'Wizards' Awakening.'

"Wizard's Awakening," Clal whispered to himself.

A door opened and a man motioned for Clal to approach. "Number and name please."

"Number fifty-eight and my name is Clal Winden." The man usured Clal in.

Morgreth was standing behind a chair. As Clal approached the chair was carved and made of stone, deep gray with flecks of silver. The man motioned for Clal to sit there. Morgreth looked at Clal but showed no signs of recognition.

"I am Morgreth, the examiner," He began. "You've heard and understand the process and the details of the examination?"

"Yes."

"We will begin," he said.

Clal heard Morgreth pull out something from his robe. "this is the tool, a simple ball with a measure of natures wonders. I will place it on a few parts of your neck and head. First keep your eyes shut the first time, then open your eyes as I repeat the process."

Clal nodded. He noticed two men in the corner of the room. These must be the witnesses. He shut his eyes right before he felt the warm stone touch his neck. What happened next was a bit hard to describe.

Though his mind passed many scenes, but he was forced to review them like he was watching on the other side of a window. Morgreth placed the orb on his forehead. Again a similar thing happened, but this time it ran into his heart. A flood of emotions crowded his senses and overwhelmed him with memories both of hope and despair, joy and pain, guilt and confidence.

Morgreth pulled the ball away. "Open your eyes," he said.

Clal saw nothing new around him, but he noticed that his shirt was drenched with sweat and he was heaving and straining for air.

Morgreth crouched beside Clal. "What happened boy?"

Clal waited till he could regain his strength to answer the question. "I don't know. It's hard to describe. My mind was full...full and I was traveling fast...time...where was I?"

Clal realized how foolish his speech had sounded. That's all he wanted to say and so he kept silent.

Morgreth waited then walked behind Clal. "Please keep your eyes open for this one."

The wizard-examinor first placed the ball on Clal's forehead, then upon the skin of his neck. This time he only did so for a moment, then he stepped back. There was a moment when all hope faded, doubt prevailed. *How could he be named the One? Who was he to be called a hero? Was it just a dream, last night down where Morgreth and Clal first met?* But all doubts vanished as a light in the room began to grow. It was blue and silver, shaped in intricate designs, and moved each time Clal adjusted or tilted his head. The light pulsed with Clal's heart beat, which made the phenomenon all the more extraordinary. Clal turned to Morgreth who smiled.

"You are the One, Clal Winden," Morgreth leaned over and put his hands on Clal's shoulders, "...the very one."

The witnesses knocked on a small door to the side of the room that Clal hadn't noticed before. It swung open and there, walking in, was a man with a golden gown and summer robes.

"King Nelbierd," Morgreth exclaimed, "alas, the One." The king looked at the two witnesses then deep into the eyes of Clal.

"Are you sure?" he said.

Morgreth placed the orb once more upon Clal's forehead. This time the light shone almost immediately.

The king gasped. "So it is true." He then put his finger to his mouth and whispered to himself, "It is true."

Without a second thought the king nodded to his witnesses and to Morgreth. He was headed straight for the balcony. One he was there, he leaned over to the one who had been announcing the numbers. The man approached the balcony first.

"The King would like to address the audience." A few of the boys began to kneel, then a few more, until all were kneeling in the presence of the King. "My dear boys, youth of our country, the time has come for days of conflict and victory, confusion and strength, valor yet death. We will name the One, to you this day, the One destined to vanquish the final foe of our world." He motioned for Morgreth to bring Clal to the balcony's edge. "This is Clal Winden...the One!"

As the room erupted in a variety of responses, gasps, claps, and so forth, Clal found himself searching for Ryth. His memory of where they were first ushered in to their sleeping space was keen. As he fixed his gaze upon it, Ryth was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 8: Danger!

Ansa awoke later than she had planned. The sun had climbed high into the sky and her room was already warming up. She sat on the bed for a moment. Ansa peered into the mirror across from her. She was amazed, it was a window to the truth of her she had never seen. The only reflections they saw of themselves was in the pool of water at the end of the babbling brook. She looked dirty, tired, and would have spent more time studying her current physical state, but there was a knock at the door.

"Ansa, have you awoken?"

“Yes,” Ansa yawned then stretched, “I have.”

“Come down when you're ready.” Ansa heard foot steps fade away until silence returned. She washed her face and hands in the water basin beneath the mirror. Putting on fresh undergarments that Gwenaea had provided, she gathered her things and left the room.

Gwenaea was in the kitchen cooking lunch while a few of her tenants were sitting in a lounge room. Ansa approached her.

“Gwenaea?” She said. “Good morning.” Her voice quivered.

“Good morning Ansa.” She said without turning from her stirring in her pot. But she stopped after a moment then turned.

“Ansa, you don't sound right.” Gwenaea stared into her eyes. She was an inquisitive and keen old woman.

“Clal's in danger,” She said, “I know he is.”

“Alright, go on. Tell me about it.” She smiled.

“Well, there's no reason for it, but there doesn't have to be.” She said.

“Has this happened before?” the woman asked.

“The feeling has, a few times during our youth. This time there's no comparison. I know it more than I know what I see in front of me.” She looked around the room. “I've got to go...”

“...to the castle?” Gwenaea finished.

“But I don't know what I'll do or if I get help. I don't even know how to get there.” Ansa sighed, “This is all too much to think about. Things are so wrong, so different than how they were planned when we left our home.”

“Will you...”

“Yes,” Gwenaea once again broke in, “I'll help where I can.” Then Gwenaea jumped back almost pulling the pot over with her mixing spoon. “Ouch!” she said.

“Oh, may I help?” Ansa said.

“Sure. Bring those bowls out to those people. We'll serve the soup to them, then talk about your plans.” She put down the dark wooden spoon, picked up the pot by the handles, and walked out of the kitchen. “It sounds like we've got some details to sort out, and quickly.”

Ansa followed Gwenaea into the other room carrying the bowls. The people were soon served up, and they met once more in the kitchen. Gwenaea took off her apron and washed her hands.

She pointed to a small chair in the corner. “Sit...please, Ansa. I've some ideas.”

First, Gwenaea drew a map of how to get to Eldan Castle from Haven's Inn. Major shops and houses, key turns and roads, and city monuments of the like. Ansa noticed how far she would have to travel. "Maybe an hour on foot at most," Gwenaea had explained. Never had she experienced such loneliness, a small village girl in the largest establishment known to the Illian people. Ansa watched Gwenaea as she hunched over the small table with quill in hand scratching out the directions. The parchment she wrote upon looked old and frail, but when Gwendaea slipped it into her hand, all doubts of ever damaging fluttered away.

"Here." Gwendaea said. She turned, "Wait there, dear." Soon she was filling Ansa's pack with all softs of breads and cheese rounds. There were dried meats and a few pieces of fruit. And just when Ansa thought she could carry another thing, Gwendaea came out with something quite unexpected.

"Now I know this might seem quire, but it really isn't. It is our times, where goodness has never seen such foes." She raised up a dagger, bright and sturdy. Then she slid it into the sheath and attached the belt around Ansa's waist." Ansa was stiff and had not yet accepted the gift wholeheartedly.

"You said," Gwenaea continued, "That you go to the castle because of this feeling that you feel. Follow that feeling. You don't have to convince yourself for you know it's measure. But you feel danger, and other feelings even you have not shared or have not felt as of yet. Where there is danger, the weak ones often fall.

Her serious face bent into a smile and Gwendaea pressed her hand on Ansa's face. "You are a sweet girl, now. Much too young for any danger. And though I've just met you, your brother, Clal, and your friend Ryth, I sense something more there then just innocent youth.

She pointed to the dagger, and said," This was my mother's dagger, and she passed it on to me. I do what I will with those things that are gifted to me. It is made of fine silver with gold laden hilt. The metal comes from the hills in the north, just before the land meets the sea. Inscribed thereon is a flame both red and blue. It's lineage was lost among many other secrets it might behold."

Ansa looked down at her waist and adjusted the belt to fit her comfort. "I thank you my Gwenaea," and Ansa thrust herself upon the woman and wrapped her arms around her neck. "You are too kind." They embraced for a moment and the bond that had begun to grow between them was now sealed. When Ansa drew back and was standing erect on her feet again Gwenaea turned to Ansa once again and said, "Now, if Clal is truly in danger, I think you're prepared to meet the conflict."

They both turned around and Gwendaea walked out of the kitchen first. They were soon outside in front of the inn. Ansa held the map in her hand now rolled up like a scroll. "You and your kin are always welcome here at Haven's Inn."

"I thank you." Ansa nodded. "I hope to meet you sooner than later Gwenaea. Good bye."

As Ansa began to walk, she turned and looked behind her. Gwenaea was wringing her apron in her hands but waved as she caught Ansa's glance. Ansa waved then turned back around.

"Forward, step forward," whispered Ansa to herself. As she did, she quitely imagined climbing Crescent-Keep moutian and forcing herself to move on, but everytime she had, the prize was always won by the beauty from the top and the view of it.

Chapter 9: The Council Feast

The room of waiting was full of small tables and chairs. The food had been cooked and had now been readied for serving. The king gave a short speech, encouraged those to be fat and glad, then walked toward the great hall, the throne room. This is where the real feast and council would be held. Prior, the food had already been placed in the middle of the table awaiting its consumers. Once the King had sat down, the rest had sat down and the blessing upon the food was said by the bishop. The attendees then began to fill their plates as well as their bellies.

As Clal filled his plate, Clal's mind was full of fury and confusion, suspicion and fear. *Ryth? Where was he?* This was all unexpected for he did not imagine in his deepest desires to become the deliverer, the One. Then, Morgreth who was seated to Clal's left, somehow, sensed this tension within Clal, and underneath the great oval table, he put his hand on Clal's wrist and turned. A nod and a gentle smile followed along with a healing peace that swept over him. Clal sighed.

He looked around the room. King Nelbierd sat upon the grandest chair in the room, one that almost replicated his throne that was sitting far down the great hall in the darkness. There was no Queen beside him for she had fallen ill at the birth of his only child and son. They both had been buried upon the castle grounds. Then, across from Clal was a burly black haired man with most of his face all beard. He was more a bear than a man, with arms as thick as tree trunks and a laugh that matched their sound when they fall. King Nelbierd was engaged in a lively conversation with him. One king, for those who were present Clal assumed were Kings, was younger than all of the rest. His beard was shorter, and bore a less worn face, though still a fair older than Clal. He wore simple colors but always laced with gold and silver threads. He seemed thoughtful and wasn't engaged in any sort of conversation. There was something about this one, his comeliness, or was it his command over self, or the way he was stiff with poise. Clal could not put his finger on it, but he knew that there was honorable character running through the young King.

There were others, only a few more, however. But Clal soon laid aside any other curiosities. Sitting at the end of the long table, was a noble king and an equally noble maiden. Beauty and wonder spun about her. She had auburn hair; her many braids shone golden in the sunlight. The crown she wore shimmered and shone. It had a slight green tint which matched the various layers of clothing she wore. Her eyes were deep brown and seemed to behold great wisdom. Her small hands and thin finger were resting on the table and her napkin she held with both hands.

For a time the room was full of chatter. Clal did not say anything and neither did the others. What do you say to the One who was just named? Where do you begin? And what does the One say when he didn't ever imagine he'd be named as such? What is there to say across such a flowing river of newness and uncertainty? The King had his own idea.

"Now, if I have not welcomed you sufficiently enough, I wish to welcome you to our council, or so we might call it." He gave a simple smile, dabbed each corner of his mouth, then put it down in front of him. He nodded to a servant who immediately removed it from him. "I trust that the food was acceptable?" there was a low hum among them. King Nelbierd looked down to his right. Morgreth was sitting erect and looking straight in front of him, past the black bear king, as Clal now called him. After a moment, the king looked up.

“There are many things that could be said here today, and they would all be in the greatest of intentions. Instructions, the advising of what should be done now, the pathway upon which this young lad's feet should trod, even who should go with him, for of course he cannot manage this endeavor alone. Or, what he should do as the One. Indeed there is much to discuss and we all have different feelings and thoughts about what occurred today. We cannot carry him, like a babe, all across this land, along his way, picking up the pieces as he falters and falls. There is a destiny for Clal Winden, and you nor I can begin to imagine it.

The King sat forward in his chair. His voice decreased in volume however which caused most of the others to lean forward also. “Yet, I believe the time is right and that there are forces that have been set into motion. Our first folly would be to disturb this grand design of which we aren't meant do not fully understand.”

The King stood as well as Morgreth. “This is Morgreth, guardian of the light of peace and the great wizard of our world. He wields the powers that were meant to walk with the One in all his days. He was chosen in ancient days for this one task.”

Morgreth returned to his seat. Clal glared at the wizard. Then back up to King Nelbierd.

“It is he, the servant of light that is a friend to Clal.” King Nelbierd grasped his drinking cup and raised it up saying, “Who will be a friend to this One...to Clal Winden?” The room erupted. “Who will give their aid and blessings to him.” There was less noise now. King Nelbierd waited till the cheering ceased, “And who will give their lives for this One, for the future of our freedom?” King Nelbierd and Morgreth cheered in unison. The other kings were quite. The young king sat down harshly in thought. But the king at the end and his daughter both stood up and said, “I will.”

King Nelbierd was astonished. He expected that his speech would convert them to the cause. But asking for someone to give up their lives, over a young man who had been claimed to be the One and give all up, this took some thinking and consideration. “Where is your allegiance?” He stammered. Fists raised he pounded them down, cup knocking over spilling on the table.

Then Morgreth stood, tall and with his garment falling down to his side. The room seemed to brighten and a veil of peace set upon the scene. He turned to the King to address him. “Gracious king,” he began, “I believe that every one in this company have shown and will continue to show their allegiance to you as their king. For is not that why they are here and are ready to display their allegiance in their service? But it might be wise to consider how deep their commitment would have to be to give away that one thing, their life, freely and wholeheartedly.” The king was now leaning on one hand, in thought.

“I believe, if I might venture to say, that we ask these here to commit to any aid, help, or means or anything whereby Clal might complete his task to the very saving of our world,” Morgreth nodded in mid sentence then slowly sat down, “...for we can trust the Kings of Illia and in their noble natures.”

The king nodded and stood. “Morgreth has spoken wisdom and truth. Give what you may, and for all the aid may the blessings of your king attend you.”

King Nelbierd turned to Clal, “Rise!” he said. “While here at Eldan Castle and in Eldan Vyum we will provide what ever you and Morgreth decided that is needed to begin your journey. We are honored to serve you here.”

The kindly man at the end of the table then stood. "Sire, Queen Levnora and I are bound to this cause. We've waited many a long year for this day and have much to give and to offer. We have bought a few gifts for the One, now named Clal, and would like to present them during the presentations of the gifts tomorrow." Clal looked at Leara who was looking at him. She broke out of her gaze and shyly looked back at her father who sat down.

"Very well," King Nelbierd said.

The young king to Clal's right then arose. "I am of the western kingdom. If ever you pass my way you are welcome into my lands and castle as long as you please. My halls will fill you with the finest of mutton, my armories will clad you with strength and protection, my beds will bring to the weary dreams of peace and solace, my store houses will fill your packs and saddle bags with overflowing, and my stables with steeds of swiftness. I am King Edelber of the west." He bowed low and returned to his seat.

The king waited for any others to speak, but there were none. Morgreth stood.

"Now, it has come," he said, "the time of the telling of the prophecy. It will be my priveledge to do so." Morgreth's stature increased then, as he moved away from his chair and stood near the king. His head was erect and it was pleasant to look upon him. Then, he began to speak, like the rushing of the wind and the pounding of the water falls. "This is the prophecy."

"Look to the East to find The One
Who only can unlock the Sun.
The powers of this world await
Who holds the key to open fate.
And when is found this One to name,
And take his place beside his fame,
Remember this, that with his time
Comes danger, mischief, vicious crime.
For not too far from this world's birth,
There is one who roams the earth
Awaiting chance to stake his claim
Upon each heart that has a name.
Yet if our One completes his task,
The Dark One lurking, turns to ash.
But if our One turns inward spite,
All hope will fade, without a fight."

The last phrase cut to Clal's heart deeply, *all hope will fade...without a fight*. It did not dawn on Clal until now that this prophecy was about him, about his quest and his journey, about the peril and finally, a warning to the death. Clal shifted in his seat. He had never felt this way before. It was difficult to hide the way he was feeling, overwhelmed, unbelieving, in shock, embarassed, and a host of other emotions. He wanted his family back home. He wanted to find that blacksmith and just live a simple life, without the attention of others. But did her really. He'd dreamed through his youth that's he'd be a part of something great and fantastic. Clal desired to tromp around the world enjoying adventures and the meetings of people along the way. He wanted a noble quest to hold on to, to call his own. This was typical of many boys at some point in their lives. But it was so different. He felt alone. *Where was*

Ansa? Where was his friend Ryth?

While Clal was deep in thought, Morgreth sat down.

King Nelbierd was look down at Clal with no expression on his face. He tapped one finger on the table then turned to Clal.

“I think it's time for a few words from you, Clal Winden.” What are your thoughts about this prophecy since...it is about you?”

Clal stood up, with more vigor and confidence than he had expected. “Well, Sire, I do not know what it means. This is the first I've heard such a thing.” Clal looked around. “Forgive me, but I don't understand all that is going on here. I don't exactly know who I'm supposed to be or what I'll do. I believe that the process of finding the one is...is...true and accurate, and so forth.” Clal began to sweat; each word he continued to speak seemed to be worse and more clumsy than the previous one. “I'm a bit afraid and confused, and I think it might be time for me to have some fresh air and think.” Then Clal added. “The food was very good sire and the chairs are very comfortable.”

Clal nodded then sat down. As soon as he did, the black bierded man across from him arose. “King, may I be permitted to speak?”

“Of course, King Emish.” said King Nelbierd.

“Thank you.” He turned to Clal. “Greetings from the northern realms. I am called King Emish.” He smiled a wide and pudgy grin. “Where are you from?”

“I come from the West in the valleys of Lyrune within the shadows of Crescent-Keep Mountain.”

“I see.” King Emish said.

“And, what kind of keys do you know of or,” King Emish's hand held an imaginary key and was turning it in the air, “or what things do you have experience with that unlocks?”

“Well,” Clal was getting nervious. These questions were odd to him. “I don't know, keys like...just keys; metal, with teeth on them. Uh...”

“Fine.” King Emish raised his hand and motioned for Clal to stop. “And how about danger or vicious crime. Have you heard of such things...lately?”

“Well, no...” Clal's voice trailed off.

“King Nelbierd, here is a boy, from the West, mind you, not from the East. He has no knowledge of keys that will unlock the sun or any other type of key that are made from anything other than metal. And he's not seen nor heard of such dire and dangerous times. And besides this, he doesn't look like a hero or our great deliverer in the least bit.” The room was silent. Then King Emish shattered the silence with his booming laughter. “Either we've got the wrong fellow here or he's got a few years yet to sprout. Why don't you send him to my kingdom for a while? I'll train him like he's my own, and by the time he returns this way, he'll have grown into the skins and the calling he was born into.” King Emish burst out in laughter once again, but no one else was laughing. This was often the case with King

Emish.

King Nelbierd smiled a polite smile then returned to his look of annoyance then he stood once more.

“For all of the allegiance that has been promised and that will yet surface, I thank you. I've placed the care of Clal in the hands of Morgreth.” The king took his seat.

“Clal and I have much to discuss and would like to pursue the opportunity to do so as soon as possible.”

“Until tomorrow at noon.” King Nelbierd said and the others stood up and began to leave. King Thyryn came up to Clal and bowed. “I'd like you to meet my daughter, Princess Leara.”

“She is very beautiful, sire,” Clal said without thinking. Leara's cheeks went red and she hunched over a bit in her shyness. Clal held his breath.

Her father turned to her and said, “Yes, she is the shining jewel of our kingdom.”

They walked away through the doors. Clal wanted to follow. He wanted to learn more about them, to be in their company for he felt goodness when King Thyryn spoke. Leara's beauty was simply unmatched than any other beauty he'd experienced.

“Clal, it's time to move on to the next stage of your long journey.” Morgreth turned and began to walk briskly. “Come this way.”

Clal pushed in his chair. They walked around the table then back through the arches to the room of examination. They approached the small room where Clal was examined. Morgreth pushed the wall and revealed a stone door, the one Clal remembered the King walking through after Clal was confirmed as the One. It was a dark tunnel that was lit only by a few torches and the remaining day light falling through windows high above them. They turned through many doors and in many directions. In only a short time of travel, they had arrived at a top edge ledge where the city could be seen almost in its entirety. Clal looked around at the city. It was so different now. Things had changed, not the city, but his visit to it. Then he remembered again, the other visitors who had come to Eldan Vyum for the examination.

“Was that Emish, the one you spoke of?” Clal said, “The one...”

“Yes Clal, the very one who may be among your enemies.” Morgreth was slowing down his pace as they walked down the open ledge. He stopped and said. “Here. We're here.”

Just then Clal heard running far down the way. His heart began to race. Clal shuddered at the thought of such an early attack upon him. He looked at Morgreth who was squinting in confusion.

Chapter 10

Ryth's breathing was getting harder and harder as he lay on the ground in the mud. Tied up and ready to be shipped out as a slave or something. Ansa had now reached the castle and was trying to find a way in. Ryth saw Ansa out of the corner of his eye. He began to hum the tune that he once sung on the

garbin flute.

She uses Gwenaea's dagger to cut him loose. "Where'd you get a hold of that trinket?"

"I'll explain later."

"I was beginning to lose hope," he said. "Why did you not wait for us at the inn? We were supposed to meet tonight," he said.

"Clal's in danger, that's why I came. But why would he be in danger? What do you know Ryth?"

"I don't know, the last time I saw him he had gone to be examined. That's the last thing I heard from him. I was taken by two boys, tied up and thrown out here. I don't know why. It's puzzling." He rubbed his rope burned wrists. "I can't think of any enemies I've made as I've come to Eldan Vyum so many times." His bags and things were gone.

By this time Ryth had stood up. He looked around for a moment, then ran to a small doorway. "Ansa," he said. "I think I can get us back to the examination room."

From above they both noticed the fluttering of a bird. It was small and of a rich brown color. Ansa had noticed it earlier but had paid no attention. It had been sitting on a barrel while they talked?"

It circled around Ryth's head and then darted into the passage way. While Ryth was still confused, Ansa quickly ran after the bird. Weaving in and out of hallways and pathways, up stairs, ever upward. It was their only real hope at this point. Ansa somehow knew that with each turn around a stoney corner and with each step up the many stairs she was getting closer to Clal. This thought fueled her running legs and beating heart as the spinning bird raced ever onward.

Ryth had lagged behind but was equally as committed to the chase. Ansa was lighter on her feet. Ryth had lost some level of strength being tied up. Suddenly Ryth tripped on a step and forward. He turned his body sideways in time to take the impact on his shoulder. A sharp pain shot through his upper chest and neck.

"Ah," he said. Ansa turned after hearing Ryth's voice.

"Oh Ryth," she said scampering down the stairs to where he was laying. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm alright," he said. "Thank you."

He tried to get up but the injured arm was weak. As Ansa helped him up she simply said, "You're not alright."

Though they had stopped for a moment, the curious little sparrow was still with them. It had found a place to stand, a torch on the wall that was currently unlit. But once it saw the two begin to ascend the stairs, it hopped into the and continued its journey. Its speed was slower and gentler this time. Soon they reached the top of the highest possible point of the castle that Ryth could tell. The bird buzzed around a corner. Ryth and Ansa ran to follow it.

Chapter 11: Old Things Made New

After a few feet Ansa stopped. Ryth stopped short of knocking her over. There, down a ways down the hall, was Clal, looking in their direction.

“Clal!” Ansa yelled. She smiled and her tired legs carried her to his side. She embraced him.

“Ansa,” he shouted and smiled, “what are you doing here?”

Clal turned to Ryth and said, “What happened? Where did you go?”

Before the mix of questions and answers began, Morgreth turned to Clal and said, “we better continue. Place your hand here.” Then pointed to the wall to a place on the gray brick wall.

Clal obeyed. As soon as his fingers and the palm of his hand touched the place where Morgreth had indicated, dusty gray color turned a light blue then it faded away. The three stepped back. The bird cocked its head to one side.

“Clal?” Ansa said. She grabbed his arm.

“How is this possible,” was Clal's response.

Ryth said nothing.

The other bricks began to fade away in the like fashion one by one, faster and faster, until there was an archway revealed.

“Follow me,” Morgreth said as he swiftly entered the small hallway. Clal entered next, followed by Ryth. As Ansa was about to enter, she heard shirping and all sorts of chattering. She turned to see the sparrow looking directly at her. She frowned at it playfully.

“I guess you can come too.”

It darted in.

The wall slowly closed as it had opened and they were sealed within the chamber. There was no need for light because there was already light, but the source of which could not be discovered.

“Clal?” her feeling of danger was confirmed but not entirely. “What just happened?” She looked up at Morgreth.

Then Ryth came closer to Clal and looked him over. Something was different about him, he had changed and Ryth could see it. “I understand.” He said simply. “Clal, you are the One.”

Morgreth stepped behind Clal and towered over him. He placed both hands on his shoulders then said, “Ansa, Ryth,” He paused while he slowly nodded, “Your brother...your friend...Clal is...the One.” Ansa gasped and she swiftly put her hand to her mouth. Tears welled up and began to roll down her face.

Morgreth continued. “It is in this year, in your time, in Clal that the hope of all people lies. He has been chosen and all goodness shall be behind him and before him.” At this moment the wizard retrieved from his garment the blue orb, the examination stone. Out of the corner of his eye, Clal knew what would happen next, but he was not afraid and did not doubt that he was the One. When the wizard placed this stone, first upon his neck then his forehead, nothing happened.

“What's that for?” Ansa said.

“Just watch.” Ryth replied. He remembered Morgreth and his stone, but Ansa knew nothing about it. He knew Clal truly was the One, and he was interested in how the stone might have proven this.

It wasn't but a moment when the symbol of the One sprang from Clal like shafts of light from an unknown world. The design on his forehead was intricate, like a crown, with many shapes of moons, stars, and one sun. It lit up the room in a blue glow. Both Ryth and Ansa were smiling, captured and enthralled. They were looking from ceiling to floor and from side to side. All of this came from a simple boy that was not so simple anymore.

When the light had faded to a glow Morgreth held out the stone, “This is the examination stone, as you may remember Ryth. Ansa this is how I've examined the youth each year for many years.” He turned to Clal and said, “Perhaps Clal might share with you some of its other uses.”

Up until that point none of them had realized that the room was filled with a few things. There was a small wooden table with chairs with a book upon it. A corner of the room was dedicated to maps and there was a bookshelf near that corner.

“Clal has been named, and called and has accepted his task.” Morgreth nodded to Clal. “Am I right?”

“Yes,” he said.

“But entwined within his destiny is your own. Ansa as his sister, his twin, there is a bond between you that can never be broken. You will find, along the way, many reasons why you are together, and so forth.”

Morgreth turned to Ryth who was listening intently with hands on hips. Now however, he slowly slid his arms and hands down to his side. “Ryth, do you think it was by chance that both of your parents requested the services of the same wagon driver?” Morgreth put his hands behind his back and leaned a bit to the three of them, “I sense, that you would all travel to the deepest caverns and to the highest clouds for the good of one another. It is upon such promising soil that the seed of a great task will flourish. You all have been rightly chosen. Even Clal cannot do this alone.”

Morgreth was silent. The others said nothing. Ryth quietly walked over to the table and sat down. He now remembered about his arm and the throbbing. Ansa too went and sat down at the table against the wall where Ryth was. She had walked a long way that day. Clal, however, just stood there near Morgreth, in the middle of the room. This is where they remained deep in thought, thoughts that had never entered their minds; mostly questions starving for answers. The silence, however, was eventually broken. So much needed to be explained and Clal felt like this would be a good time to inform each one's journey's, and so Clal began with a question. He turned to Ryth and said, “Ryth, where did you go? I thought you were supposed to meet me down where we slept the night before.”

“Well,” Ryth sighed. His anger was still as sharp as the point of a sword. “Do you remember those two older lads that came up to us to give us trouble right before we were going to be examined?”

“Of course I do.” Clal's jaw tightened. “I didn't see much purpose in their visit.”

“Right. Now, after I had circled around from the examining place into the great waiting room again, I saw them and they saw me.” Ryth stood up from his seat which surprised both Ansa and Clal. Morgreth, however, was more intrigued by the details about the boys and why they were bothering Clal and Ryth.

“Then they moved through the crowd, they weren't that far away from where I was. I didn't notice the terrible scowls on their faces until they were very close. When I realized this time, that their game was nothing like the encounter in casual conversation while you, Clal, were around, I turned around and ran.” Ryth took a few steps closer to Clal as his energy rose. “They both pursued, like a four legged monster, down hallways that I did not know, in a direction that had not planned to go in. And eventually, through the maze, I came to a dead end. They approached, both on each side.”

“Caught!” the tall, dark haired one said. “Cornered!”

“Without warning the other of the two landed a blow unto my ribs and I doubled over.” Ryth raised his eyebrows and rubbed his left side. Ansa whined.

“To spare you other details, they tied me up and took me out into some place just beyond the castle walls. They said they'd send someone to pick me up to be shipped somewhere far off for labor work. I thought that somewhat odd.” Ryth trailed off in thought.

“All I can say is, 'Why?’” Clal said. “Why? What are these two up to? I don't understand it?”

“I do...” Morgreth's voice boomed through the small room. He came closer to the three of them, and now they all were standing, or sitting very close.

“I've read the signs in the heavens for many moons.” He looked up to the ceiling. “In search of the signs of the year of the coming of the One. It was in this year that the signs were unmistakable, truly remarkable in it's design, that he would be named during this next examination. And so I began my search early, for this reason, Ryth, that you speak of.” Morgreth nodded to Ryth. “I did not know, but do now, that others could or had the ancient knowledge to read the heaven's. But now I know, though I do not know who...yet.”

“I'll remember their faces, and the way they spoke,” Ryth said. “They didn't say much, probably to their advantage, but they just threw me there into the mud. I layed there for a long time.”

“I'm sorry Ryth,” Clal said. “I wish I could have been there like we had planned.

“That's when I found Ryth,” Ansa said. She was sitting up straight in her chair.

“Only by the winds of Illia could you have found him.” Clal said.

“Maybe,” Ansa said, “But Gwenaea and I had a plan.” Ansa wasn't about to give her success and long hard work up to the graces of chance and good fortune. “This morning I awoke with a feeling of alarm. Clal I knew you were in some sort of danger. I thought it silly but, you know, I've had those feelings before.” She gestured with her hands, “remember the cliff incident when we were ten,” she thought for a moment, “and when I thought we should be home early from tromping around in the far Crescent hills and how we heard later that the Rinnon River had risen too high to cross.” She bit her lip, “and when our Pleenia died and you left and couldn't be found and how I...”

“Yes,” Clal said quietly, his head now bowed, “I remember all those things.”

“Clal,” she said, “there's something not right, and if...since you've been named, than that explains

everything...too a point.”

Ansa continued, “Clal, Gwenaea is an angel. I told her about this feeling, this inkling in side me, her and I having become such good friends so quickly...” Ansa's face brightening and her smile brightened all of their faces. “...she believed me. So, she filled me up with as much food as I could carry, and a map,” She reached around and swung something from her side, “And this dagger she gave to me. It was from her mother. This is what I used to cut Ryth's ropes that held him.” Ansa took it out and showed the others.

“Where did you meet Gwenaea?” Morgreth asked.

“I stayed at her inn last night, 'Haven's Inn' on the far side of Eldan.” Ansa put her dagger back and slid it out of site. “I came with Clal on the trip so that I could meet up with a seamstress to work for a time. Yet, Madam Prinkle did not seem to be there when I arrived.” Ansa itched her forehead. “Though, I'm glad she wasn't.”

“And how did you two get up here?” Morgreth said.

There was a series of tweets nearby. It came from the castle sparrow. It had been silent but active, hopping around, bobbing it's head, examining every inch of the room and its contents.

“It was that bird,” Ryth said. Although he was thankful for the little thing, Ryth still wondered if he could have managed the same result. At the thought, however, he exhaustedly surrendered any such notion.

Morgreth turned to the sparrow, held out his hand with one fiinger extended, then whistled. It didn't move.

“Come along little chap.” Morgreth continued in a voice that Clal never would have expected to come from a great wizard; it was a tiny glimpse into his boy hood.

“Here birdie, birdie,” Ansa tried.

Ryth just whistled that best sparrow whistle he could remember, but there were no castle sparrows in Meldin country.

Though Morgreth, Ansa, and Ryth had tried, none of their efforts could persuade the bird to budge. Clal watched the bird watch the others. It tapped it's feet and bobbed its head as it stood on the pole that stuck out of the wall which held the torch. Clal could almost understand what he was thinking, like the bird was mocking the enticements to move. Clal thought he might try.

“Let's see,” he said. “I think I'll give him a name.” He'd never named an animal before. His thoughts turned to the birds size, his red and brown color, it's uncanny knowledge and how it led his sister and firend to him, and many other things, all in a matter of a few moments, “I know what I'll name you.” Clal turned to the bird and stood straight up, errect, and formal. “I, Clal, endow you with the name of Hittle, because of your honorable service to Ansa and Ryth and because...” he was barely able to hold back a laugh, “...and because...you are so very little.”

Clal thought, as sure as the moon is round, that the bird gave a little bird-like bow. It hopped off the bar

and flew right to Clal. Hittle landed on Clal's shoulder, and there it's home would be, all the rest of its days.

"Hittle," Ryth said. "I like it." He turned to the bird, "Hittle, I want to thank you for leading us here."

"I don't know how you knew, Hittle, but you are wonderful." Ansa kissed the bird.

It chirped a melodious tune then was silent again.

Ryth turned to Clal with a smile, "Tell me what happened to you."

Morgreth stepped forward, "Friends, as I've stated, there seems to be some evil at work that is concerning. I'm going to leave you here..." He said watching their faces, "I will return after a while."

Clal looked at Morgreth with an open mouth. The others just stared. Morgreth walked back toward the wall, "I won't be long..." he said, "not very long." The wizard touched the wall which disappeared again as it had before. Morgreth himself disappeared around the edge of it and the wall slowly began to redraw itself. Before the opening to the outside world was complete, Clal could see that there was not much daylight left. Through all of their catching up, none of them had thought about where they would sleep or what they would eat, the details that adventures seem to skip.

Ansa sensed their need for food, so she unpacked a few things from her sack. "Here," she said, "handing Ryth some bread, "have some."

"Oh," Ryth said surprised, "Thank you."

Clal appeared equally as gracious by the smile on his face as he tore off piece after piece savoring every bite. They all had their fill of water also that Ansa, once again produced from her pack.

"Clal, tell me," Ryth began, "tell us about what happened to you after I saw you leave to be examined."

"Yes, tell us" Ansa said.

Clal explained first the boys that tried to stop him from ascending the stairs. Ryth thought this to be of no shock. He told them of being examined and about the light that spread across the dark brick once the orb passed by his forehead.

"It's still strange though and hasn't quite set in yet...me...the One." Clal seemed to talk to himself for a moment.

Clal resumed his account now turning to the feast. He described the kings, including King Nelbierd and how each of them seemed to respond to the recent events differently. There was King Emish to explain and Clal described him as curious and suspicious. He spoke of king Thyrin and his daughter at which Clal looked at Ansa and caught her eye for a moment.

"I've heard of that King Thyrin," Ryth said, "An honorable man and kind but just king to his people."

Then Clal talked of Morgreth and how he spoke in Clal's defence in order to resolve some inner conflicts within the minds of a few present.

“It was as he said he was, a keeper of peace, the king seemed concerned, as well as the other kings, and with his words he somehow helped them understand.” Clal said.

“This is all very interesting.” Ansa said.

“...and strange.” Clal said scratching his head. “If I'm the One, really the one...”

“You are the One...” a voice came from behind them.

The three of them jumped and Ansa gave out a yelp and covered her mouth.

“You are the One, Clal,” Morgreth said approaching them, “and as soon as you accept this, we can all get on with this great task and your life's quest.”

Clal looked down at the floor for a moment. His face was tensing up, eyebrows down and teeth grit. He jumped up and turned to Morgreth.

“How can I be it...him...the One to defeat the dark one lurking, or what ever I'm supposed to do. I'm Clal Winden and I live in a small home in a remote place and I don't think I can do this.” Clal's hands were tight and clenched; then he froze like stone. His breathing once rapid began to slow as he continued to speak again. “I don't know where to go or where to start. I don't know much about Illian geography or places. And if there are enemies I wouldn't know how to...fight them.”

“I see that you are not afraid to speak your mind and your heart is stout for doing so.” Morgreth stepped toward Clal. His face was kind and understanding with the slight turn of the corners of his lips and the glow in his eyes. “Let us come to an understanding here, now. You're the One. Trust in this. Perhaps your personal history has not pointed to such a fact, though in time you might see reflections of your destiny upon your past. Yet, you've seen proof in word and magic. Why doubt it? Becoming the One who will defeat the dark one and unlock the sun and many other things will all happen in time. But time cannot be handled by mere mortals and must be left to its own. The way has been prepared and it begins with that book.” Morgreth pointed to the table where, indeed, a thick, golden crested volume lay upon its top.

“You have much to do to prepare Clal, everything is here...those things that will aid you in beginning your quest.” Morgreth pointed once more, this time to the other side of the room. There were three rectangular chests in a row. Each had a differing symbol on them. The middle was the largest and the one on the left the smallest. They were surely made or covered with gold. The first one was green, the second, deep red and the last one was of a pale blue.

“These have been prepared for you.” Morgreth stepped motioned, “go ahead Clal, have a look.”

Clal thought this a curious set up. Three containers, chests of sorts. He opened the first and looked inside. The chest contained only one item, a very thin papered ancient scroll with almost translucent paper and written in a curious hand. Immediately Clal recognized the object. He slammed the chest shut and then was still.

“What is it Clal?” Ansa said. She stretched out her hands some distance and took a step forward.

“Nothing.” Clal lied. “Just a bit of fear for the journey creeping in again,” was all that Clal could think to say. The truth however, was much different. He opened the chest again and studied the scroll to make sure, indeed it was the one that he had seen a thousand times, but only in dream. It was the one that he'd seen in the reoccurring dream of the two cloaked men.

Clal closed the lid, this time much more gracefully. He walked over to the largest chest and opened it. There was a staff there with a jewel at it's tip, it was a black jewel, and after further investigation, Clal realized it was not a jewel at all, but a stone with a few veins running through it, the very stone that was used to examine Clal. There were some maps, mainly of Illia, but one was of a different place. It was incomplete on one portion so that the land mass had no completed form. There were also places where the land attributes and cities were not filled in. However, the kingdom origin was penned in. There was no naming of what this place was. Clal assumed it was an island near Illia that had been traveled to. This was all that was therein.

The final chest was a beautiful blue, and would have been wonderful to know what was inside. But Morgreth thought otherwise.

“Clal, this chest should be saved for another time. I am sorry, but I must ask this as a request. I really cannot explain at this moment.” He nodded.

Clal moved away from the chest and turned to Morgreth.

“Now, night is upon us and I must see you to your room Clal,” he turned to Ryth and Ansa, “er, rooms, I suppose. Oh, star streaks!” Morgreth put his finger to his chin and turned halfway around. Then in a moment, he spoke. “I know of no other rooms but yours Clal. forgive me, I did not intend...”

“I can stay here,” Ansa said. “I can sleep right here, on the floor. I don't mind, really I don't.” Of all of the desires she had had, this was it, to spend as much time in this place as possible. “Clal, it's protected by magic,” She turned to the wizard, “is it not Morgreth?”

“It most certainly is. But that doesn't mean...”

“And so, I see no reason why it would cause any harm if I rest for the night in here.” Ansa concluded.

To Morgreth, this was an odd request. But it would make his efforts easier in finding a place for Ryth to sleep.

“Alright Ansa, you may stay. If you leave this room by touching the wall we entered through, know that there will be no way of getting back in. Also, you may stay on one condition...that you get some rest...” He winked at her, for he could guess, perhaps, of her intentions.

“I will. I will.” She could not hide her smile then.

Morgreth turned to Clal and Ryth. “Clal I will take you down to the west wing where you will find fine feather pillows and a suprisingly adorned room just for you. And Ryth...well, let us be off.”

Clal broke away from the two and approached Ansa. “Enjoy your solitary adventure. We'll see you in the morning.” He bore a smile but it was not his usual cheery one. It was laden with some sadness, yet another moment of parting from his sister. Yet another unexpected inconvenience.

Clal stood up then looked around. "Hittle," he said, "would you stay and offer this sister of mine some company?" Clal smiled. The small bird flew down and was soon standing on the floor near where Ansa was. He chirped a few times. Clal assumed that Hittle had answered in the affirmative then turned and walked away with the others.

The three soon left leaving Ansa and Hittle alone.

"Thank you Hittle," Ansa said patting his small head. The moment they left the chamber the book that had been sitting on the wooden table was promptly in her hands.

She opened the volume; dust spread through the air. Ansa sneezed. She began to read, "A book of legends compiled by the hand of Gulnerye..." She paused. "Gulnerye?" Then continued. "...giving an account of the histories and legends of the people of Illia..."

Ansa stood up right where she was at. "I wonder," she said. She flipped through some pages and read a several entries of some of the legends. "Kelvkoroth's Legend, Sands of Illusions...that one sounds interesting...The Legend of Turtle Rock, Lady Wind." She walked over to another part of the room, sat down and leaned her back up against the wall.

"Now here's one." She said. "Guardians of the Stones." Ansa was wearing one of her packs still and she grabbed a loaf of bread from it. She tore off a hefty chunk, replaced it, then took a bite. She began to read with eyes as bright as the moon without the chamber. She concluded her evening in this manner until her hands were too weak to hold the book as she succumbed to the a deep sleep that awaited her.

Chapter 12:

Need more companions, travel with Thyrin for a while...get to know Leara and him...he brings important aspect and leads them in a certain correct direction...

What does the party need to succeed? Must make sure they are prepared.
Clal's horse and him become good friends.

Scene: The Seeking of Thyrin's Aid

Clal talks to Ansa about this King Emish and what they overheard...

On their travel back to the High chamber they overhear voices, King Emish, a boy, and maybe King Nelbierd. They are talking negatively and one can assume their speech means ensuing action.

They get to the high room, tell Ansa, and she suggests a letter, a message

They write it, to meet at a certain place...(away from the castle, Gwenaya's, etc...)

It's the last time they see him in the gift giving ceremony.

But king Emish is their, all the time and it seems hard to give the scroll.

Clal gives up something he's wearing or shroud the note with something, a gift maybe.

They hope he gets the message.

They worry, he's late...they meet somewhere and smuggle the three safely from the castle.

There are horses that are bought by Thyrin. Etc. etc. etc.

Guardians of the Foundation/Root/Element/Five Stones

Guardians of the Winter Stone

Guardians of the Water Stone

Guardians of the Shadow Stone

Guardians of the Mirror Stone

Guardian of the High/Heart/First Stone

Guardian of the Winter Woods: there is a statue that stands at the gates of the winter woods...woods that climb up a steep hill/mountain...legend that the statue was a real person at one point...

Climax to
End

Previous Scene: content

“Clal” the king said. “We know you are the one, though you yourself might not understand it. Take what you can as we freely give aid. But whatever you take, beyond all, take the hope that resides within the ancient element. Take our hope with you.”

Clal took a chance of courage and peered into the face of the elvin king, into his blue flecked, gray eyes. It was a test to search for the truth within the King's words. When their eyes met a stream of knowledge and light filled Clal. More was said within the king's gaze than in any other spoken council or encouragement the king had said during his entire stay there at Edaphlas. It healed his heart. It stirred his soul. He stood a little taller and felt a little wiser for it.

“Larkin and Skyla are going with you,” the king said.

“Thank you, Sire,” said Clal. He bowed his head low. Ryth and Ansa also bowed to the great king. Larkin and Skyla descended the stairs from their father's throne and Clal, Ryth, and Ansa received them gratefully. The king raised his arm slightly and the chamber doors were thrust open by two guards. With heavy hearts at the realization of their ensuing departure, Clal, Ryth, and Ansa turned and walked toward the doors of the chamber. As he walked beside Ryth, Clal felt his hand reach for the element. The wonder and excitement of finding and obtaining the stone filled his senses. They approached the towering doorway. Clal envisioned himself passing through the doors of the dawning of time chamber. He'd place the stone upon its resting place and there his journey would have been safely concluded.

But, now, the guards heaved the doors shut and remained outside at their post.

Clal was not in the dawning of time place, but his feet were beside his companions' and his eyes beheld the same stone walls and iced over surroundings that he walked through when they first entered the palace. The lane was wide and the walls were made from a blue stone that appeared to be glass-like. They walked a short way before Clal turned around. One of the guards was now pointing in one direction with his hand on the shoulder of the other guard who nodded. The first guard placed his own hand on his own chest and pointed in the opposite direction. The other guard nodded once more and then departed. Then the remaining guard turned in his direction. Still as a statue he peer in their direction, at Clal himself. Though the company was now far away, the guard's gaze was a piercing threat which he did not understand. Cold, like the cut of the wind upon the skin, but much deeper, the stranger stared.

Clal looked down for only a moment to study the stone he was walking upon. He lifted his head up and turned to look at the guard again. But he had vanished.

Chapter 22: As the Crow Flies

Clal soon forgot about the guard as he marveled at the beauty that surrounded them. Ice statues that revealed distorted images of ancient trees within. Pathways that led in every direction splintering off from the main stone walkway. Clal noticed anew, the fantastic statues of blue and silver ice. There were gray trees with yellow leaves, glowing like stars or drops of sun. The stone beneath their feet was like broken pieces of numerous mirrors put together in the shape of a square; each one emitting a faint light and warmth. The entire scene was glowing, though the source of such brilliance could not be discovered by eyes alone. Soon, they passed through the great ice archway which marked the beginning of the road to the palace. They were leaving the realm of Edaplas. Clal looked back, one final time, remembering all the magic and wonder that had been there. He yearned for the safety and peace he had

felt there. He recalled the peace he once felt in his own homeland where he often would climb the eastern face of Crescent Mountain to its highest point. In the springtime he would look down upon the Crescent hills and upon the great river Lyrune. All the good things in his life came to him when Edaphlas was in his mind.

As they walked in the cold air, Clal found it difficult to hold on to the words of the Elvin king. He worried about the f'element and his soon to be concluding adventure. From within the brown pouch that was hidden on his left side almost to the lowest part of his back, he pulled out the f'element. Clal knew that he was holding something ancient and sacred in his hand. It was indeed part of the old world; all of what once was. Looking upon its glassy surface there was an inner fire, a voice within, and it was not cold like a stone, but warm and alive.

They finally came to a place where Larkin motioned to halt. They would be entering the path that would lead them to the other side of Edaphlas.

"As I understand it, Sedrak is waiting for us?" Ryth said impatiently.

"Yes he is," Skyla said. "we will take you there." She looked at Larkin.

"It is not far." Larkin looked in one direction. "It will be at almost the same place you set foot upon our island...but we will need to take another way to get there."

"How do you know where we were when we got here?" said Ansa, her head cocked to one side.

"All things are alive..." Larkin said as he bowed his head a little.

"...and have a voice, and a song." Skyla smiled a slight smile.

Ansa's eyebrows lowered. She looked at the ground, then up at the wall, then finally at a nearby tree.

"I will lead you. Ansa will be by my side." Skyla gave a quick nod to Ansa who smiled.

"I will be at our rear. Keen eyes will serve us all well if there be a time of danger." Larkin was looking out upon the soon to be trodden path. "Ryth, you'll walk beside Clal."

Larkin turned to them all. "Remember, we must bring the f'element safely across the outer wilds of Edaphlas. There, Sedrak will protect us. Every amount of effort to do so is required. Be aware and stay together."

"Larkin, you speak as if there is some great evil lurking about. What do you know that...we don't know?" Clal was puzzled. What had not happened yet, however, was the realization that, if he did not complete his task, the great and evil one will gain so much more than he already has gained. The time of the ages was turning and could not be undone.

"There is evil out there, and always will be, until the f'element is safe. That is what we are doing now. We are no longer youth of innocence and frivolities." Lark turned to peer at the path once more.

Skyla spoke next. "We will turn here and walk down the main pathway which is wide and bare. There is little shelter for some time. The elements have taken their toll on the land. Our forest froze many

centuries ago. We will turn upon a path which is narrow and find ourselves cutting through the thickest part of the ice forest. It will be there that we end our journey, arriving to the place where Sedrak is expecting us. This is our path.”

Larkin pulled his hood over his head and gathered his powder blue cloak tighter around him. Skyla's clothing was woven with silver thread and shimmered some. The others were similarly clad. They turned a corner exiting the long semiclosed tunnel that led to the kingdom's gate of entrance. There was no wall to shield them from the elements now and the wind was relentless as it scrapped across their faces. Ansa gasped and stopped walking, but Skyla took her arm and they began to lead the travelers along.

Once they traveled further into the ice forest, the snow drifts changed and shifted almost at every step. It was all a maze of ice and snow and frozen statues with trees encased within. All but Skyla and Larkin were shielding their faces with their arms or hands. The elf maiden's silver hair was long and winding in the wind.

Clal kept his head down and continued to wade through the terrain for some time. They traveled down narrow paths, through fallen trees, and over a few hills. Occassionally they would stop and find shelter between a snowdrift or against the frozen trees. They began to feel defeated even before their journey across the outer world was even halfway begun.

They had just entered the main pathway, which was wide and flat, when Clal pulled the felement more firmly against him. It was instinct that moved him so. As he did, a surge of fear entered his mind. His breathing became irregular. He looked at the others. They were walking beside him or in front of them; nothing was out of the ordinary. But, this fear was growing.

“Larkin.” Clal called. The wind stole voice away before he even began speaking. Even Ryth did not hear him, so fierce was the wind and snow.

To his great alarm, the image of the guard flashed into his mind, staring at them as they had walked. This thought filled him with a chilling dread. Clal stopped walking.

Larkin too had halted and was gazing up. The others did not notice as they continued to trudge forward. Clal held his breath as he watched. His fear heightened and Clal's heart began to pound faster. Larkin bent his knees and crouched down in a sudden movement. He was very still.

“Clal!” he shouted. “Something is drawing near.”

“What?” Clal said. “How do you know?”

“The wind is yielding to it.”

Yielding...to what? Clal wondered.

Larkin spoke, as if sensing Clal's inner question. “To him...Krothwing!” Larkin said pointing upward.

Clal followed Lark's gaze and peered up. He did not understand. But sure enough, there was a figure fast approaching. As it did, he recognized it first as a speck, then as a black bird, then as a figure of a man. *But that was not possible.* Clal froze. Though the figure was clad in mostly silver and white, there was a darkness found in the figures face and within the depths of his eyes.

Larkin sprang from his crouched position. Krothwing was met by the elves unforeseen attack. They rolled several feet away into the snow and down a large snowdrift. Both Skyla and Ansa were

awakened out of their monotonous strides. They screamed at the sound of Krothwing's yelp.

Clal's senses were numb but he found his feet carrying him toward where the two battling forms had slid. The scene began to unfold as he looked around and took in his surroundings.

The snow had let up and his sight was less hampered. He spied Ryth run to Ansa and Skyla motioning them both to hide. They disappeared behind a cluster of ice trees. Ryth turned and fled to Clal's side. The snow was deep but they soon reached the top of the snowdrift. It was very steep and had caused their enemy and friend to slide out of their view, even at this high point. There was no sign of them.

"Clal, I know this might sound foolish, but I think we should split up." Ryth said.

"No." Clal answered. "Not yet...at least."

"Let's just go straight then," Ryth said.

Clal nodded.

They slid down the slope on their sides and reached the bottom. A few steps later they began to hear the faint sound of clanking swords. They ran and turned the corner of a high bank of snow and ice, that seemed like the wall of a long forgotten place.

Both Ryth and Clal were surprised by what came into view. Around the corner they saw the Krothwing hovering above Larkin circling around him. Clal and Ryth looked at each other with open mouths. Lunging in upon Larkin with sword drawn, moving with tremendous skill, Larkin was beginning to yield. It was an awful scene. He was on his knees with both hands gripping the hilt of his flashing sword. Clal could see that Larkin was desperately trying to fend off the blows, but his adversary had powers he himself did not possess. It was an unjust match and it pushed Clal to sudden action.

Clal leapt from where he was standing and entered the small alcove. Ryth followed. With swords drawn, by less than skillful hands, their hearts drew courage from their strength in numbers.

Krothwing's back was toward them so their approach was unnoticed. As they came closer neither Larkin nor Krothwing saw them. They could now see Larkin in detail. His eyes were swollen and blood was issuing forth from several places of his head and face. His clothes were torn in some places.

Suddenly, Krothwing broke his attack and landed on the ground. Larkin struggled to rise but so swift was Krothwing's final onslaught upon him that Larkin fell to the ground in a cry of pain.

"Stop!" Clal yelled. Clal jumped up and swiped the air with his sword. Krothwing spun around. He skillfully dodged and kicked the sword. Clal fell backwards. Ryth jabbed at the foe, but Krothwing simply darted above them.

Ryth used Krothwing's height above them as a turning point. "Clal," Ryth waved his arm, "to Larkin."

They both darted across the alcove to the other side where Larkin lay. Krothwing continued to hover above them. Larkin was in a poor state, blood stained, bruised, and wounded in spirit. Clal was afraid for him. Larkin had been sent to lead them, and to protect them, but in this condition, he could no longer do so. It seemed that hope was waning.

They stayed there against the wall, Clal, Ryth, and Larkin, like caged rats. Clal leaned against the wall near Larkin's head. Ryth was beside Clal crouching with his sword in his hand. Larkin was laying sideways with his hand resting on his fist. They sat there for only a moment, clouds rising from their rapid breathing, lungs burning from the cold, before Larkin spoke.

“Clal, you must not let Krothwing get that f’element.” Larkin whispered. “In his hands it would become a terrible weapon. In your hands it will become the key to unlocking the gate to all deliverance.”

The three of them monitored Krothwing’s movements. He was descending. The tip of his toes soon touched the ground delicately followed by his heels which pressed upon the smooth ice. Krothwing stood still, though Clal's fears did not lessen.

Clal had not noticed before, but Krothwing wore a golden symbol on his right shoulder. It was curious to Clal. It was in the shape of some sort of five-sided square. Within, there were five small symbols unfamiliar to Clal.

“What shall we do?” whispered Ryth. His shaking hand was still holding his blade.

“Nothing, until we think of a plan” Clal answered.

Then, they said nothing; the air was still...and the whole world held it’s breath.

“Clal,” Larkin whispered at last, “give me the f’element.”

“Give you,” Clal lowered his voice, “give you the f’element?” Clal was about to glance at Larkin but Krothwing shifted his stance and he knew he was about to speak.

“Clal Winden.” Krothwing began. “It's unfortunate that we meet on such ill terms...” His towering figure resembled the frozen trees that dotted the landscape above. Krothwing’s face was in shadow.

Larkin leaned closer to Clal. “I have a plan...” his voice was low. He knew Krothwing was listening more intently, “let each play his part.”

Krothwing continued, “...I know what you have and I intend to take it from you...” his eyes flashed and a wry smile graced his lips, “...unless you give it willingly.”

Larkin winced then moved closer to Clal. Ryth did the same, but without the wince.

“...that would be the wiser choice.” said Krothwing.

It was evident that time was dwindling like sand through fingers. Krothwing could not be held back much longer, they knew they had to act with hast.

From within his garments, Larkin snatched a large, smooth stone shaped much like the f’element. “Let us exchange the faux for the real thing. When he obtains it, he will fly.” Larkin’s face lit up. “He will not think to examine it, for so great is his lust.” It was the plan that he had invented long before the parting from his father’s throne. Larkin had been the guardian of the f’element ever since he was a youth, and once an author of trickery, always an author of the craft. Clal slowly replaced the f’element

with the stone and slipped it to Larkin unnoticed. Any doubt or fear in doing so fled. There was no other way.

“It will be safe, Clal.” Larkin’s eyebrows raised. The felement was now a secret that only Larkin knew the truth of.

He whispered a few more instructions to Clal and Ryth.

“I will remain here on the ground. I am useless and Krothwing won’t think to deal with me any longer.” Larkin’s voice trailed off.

Krothwing's voice heightened. “If you refuse, Clal, pain and anguish will accompany my acquisition as it has already,” Krothwing paused, “...for it is mine.”

“No, and it never has been.” Larkin spat. A fierceness grew as fire lit within his blue eyes.

Clal arose and Ryth stood from his crouched position. With swords in hand they began to move toward Krothwing. It was a scene they had rehearsed together since young boys, but this time the enemy was more than a bail of hay or the bark of a tree.

“There is no skill you possess that can meet my power.” Krothwing laughed. He drew his sword. “A mere boy and his heroic companion. What can you claim?” He laughed again and the sound echoed in a thousand directions.

“I claim all the powers of good,” Clal said, “and all the good that is within me.”

Krothwing's smile faded and he lunged toward Clal. The battle had begun.

Clal dodged Krothwing’s attack and both Ryth and Clal went running. Krothwing flew high and disappeared above. Ryth turned the corner first. Clal spun his head around to look at Larkin. Krothwing was gone. The image of the guard once more passed through his mind. At the end of the lane Larkin lay still, but the enemy was moving.

Once around the corner Clal met up with Ryth who was sprinting up the slope. Their plans were to continue running, but once Krothwing began his next assault, there was no knowing what to do next. Clal saw Krothwing just barely approach his companion.

“Ryth!” Clal yelled.

Clal realized how wrong he was to linger and Krothwing took Ryth to the ground. Krothwing pulled out his sword to inflict the wounds of death, yet, at the last moment he spun around to meet Clal. Krothwing's feet were planted firm near Ryth, so as to keep Ryth behind him. Clal advanced and swung his stout weapon at Krothwing's chest. But Krothwing quickly banished any hope of success with the slash of his own sword upon Clal's. The walls around them irrupted with Clal's shrill scream; Clal was unprepared for the vibration of metal that came after the two swords collided; he dropped his sword and grasped his painfilled wrist. As one shoulder dipped and his whole body toppled to the ground, tears overwhelmed Clal's vision. Krothwing stood directly over Clal and was just shy of reaching to search out the place of the felement when Ryth rose up behind him.

He had found some ice stones and began to throw them at Krothwing, a worthy weapon for the moment. Krothwing turned around. Ryth's good fortune landed one large ice rock right in the nose.

"Ah!" he said and he grabbed his nose and flew upward.

Ryth ran to Clal's side. "Get up Clal." He said. "Run. We've got to get him further away from Larkin and the f'element. We need some time to regain our senses." Ryth helped Clal stand and they ran up the slope. Krothwing came from the side. Ryth swung his sword. Krothwing thwarted the attack as he cut Ryth down with a backhanded swipe from the hand that held the blade. Ryth toppled backwards with blood streaming from his lip. His head hit the frozen earth and he saw no more.

"No!" Clal exclaimed.

Krothwing looked up from Ryth's lifeless form whose legs were twisted unnaturally. He began to levitate and their eyes met.

"Clal!" Krothwing yelled. "There is no one left to shield you from my devices. You will fall and I will ascend. The f'element was meant to be within my grasp," he clutched his one fist while the other clutched his sword, "ever since Larkin took it from me."

"He did not take it from you." Clal heard his own voice. "It was never yours and it never will be." Clal leaned forward. "Never!" he yelled and stuck his sword into the air. His emotions were raging. All he could think about was his pursuer. Clal's hate for Krothwing was complete and overcame him. Larkin was down and Ryth, dead or alive? There was no way to know now. The fear of what lay beyond the horizon of the moment was immense. At this thought, Clal turned and ran up the slope.

At the top he turned and the realization that he had not kept his eyes on his adversary. This struck him like a hammer on an anvil. He had now joined the pathway that they had deviated from in the beginning. The wind was a new threat. Snow began to swirl and twist, whistle and howl. There was no way of knowing where his assailant had gone. His greatest fear set in. He spun around in an effort to calculate Krothwing's next move.

Clal gasped. Krothwing was in the midst of a speedy descent above him. Clal stepped back, then he stepped back once more. His mind broke into a panic and he turned around and sprinted.

"No!" Clal screamed.

The ground exploded in a cloud of snow crystals as Krothwing collided into Clal's right side. The impact sent both of them sliding across the icy ground several feet, Clal's chest hitting the ground with incredible force.

Once on the ground Krothwing turned Clal over so that they were facing each other. Clal couldn't breathe; couldn't see. He was helpless. As soon as he had been turned upon his back, Krothwing began to strike Clal's face with his fists, first to his eyes, then to his nose. The blood began to fill Clal's mouth and ears. He choked and began to moan. Clal tried to turn to one side but Krothwing wrenched him back into position. He had never known such pain.

Clal tried to defend himself by moving his arms in front of Krothwing, but his attacker was quick and fought off any attempt to defend himself. With a few more blows to his stomach, he knew that he was

going to die. This wasn't part of the plan, it never is. It had all gone wrong.

Krothwing grabbed Clal's throat and shoved his fingers into his skin. Blood immediately began to issue forth. Clal kicked his feet, scraping the ground to get away. Krothwing's other hand searched Clal, his pockets, his shirt.

"I know what you have," Krothwing hissed between his teeth. "The dark one lurking awaits it."

"Ryth...Lark," Clal struggled to say over and over, but it only turned into gurgling noises.

Everything was turning black around him and he could no longer hear the wind or feel the bite of the frozen air. He was delirious. He felt Krothwing searching for the f'element still. Clal could do nothing. The sky was spinning and nothing made sense. All was lost and the enemy was going to prevail.

But all at once, Krothwing looked to one side, then above him, and leapt from off of Clal's chest thrusting what little air Clal's lungs had in them out. The sky above wrapped around the Devil's Crow, and in a moment, he altogether vanished.

Chapter 23: An Unwelcomed Farewell

Ryth found Clal first. He could not endure the scene. Clal was lifeless, cold, and pale. His lips were blue, but there was still a faint pulse. Ryth knelt beside him, nudging him gently and speaking to him. In this way, Ryth began to turn back the reckonings of death.

"Clal. Clal." Ryth's voice was shaking.

Clal's eyelids fluttered. He gasped and began to frantically search himself with his hands. To his horror the f'element was gone, stolen, taken in malice. *It couldn't be* he thought. But it was true. Clal turned to one side and in the snow began to sob. He had failed.

Ryth heard running and did not respond to Ryth's last words. His head jerked toward the sound. It was only Skyla. She knelt beside Ryth and Clal and retrieved some cloth from her cloak. Skyla began to sop up the blood from Clal's split eyebrow and lips. Ryth looked past Skyla and saw Ansa standing a ways off in the distance.

"The f'element is gone," he muttered over and over again to himself. It was an unbearable sight for all and with each chant from Clal, the words seemed to burn the ear.

As Ryth and Skyla surrounded Clal, Ansa stayed aloof in the snow a few yards away. She had been the closest to Clal during the attack and was thrown aside by Krothwing's shoulder when he descended from the great heights above. With dozens of snowflakes clinging to her blond hair, she was hardly recognizable. Ansa was shaking violently as she buried her head into her hands. Skyla looked up and turned around. She slowly handed the cloth to Ryth with her gaze still fixed on Clal's sister. In her smooth and silent manner she glided to the side of Ansa who had now slipped down into the snow. Ansa was kneeling into an awkward position; she was crying uncontrollably. She cried, not only for her fears and surprise, but because she heard the words of Clal, of the absence of the element stone. Skyla held her there for some time stroking her hair and wept many tears with/for her. Moments seemed to drift by as oceans of sorrow. At length the girls returned to the sides of Clal and Ryth.

"The f'element is gone," he muttered again as if in a fever.

"It is not gone, Clal," came a voice. It was Larkin's voice.

Skyla and Ansa gasped.

Clal sat up straight away and Ryth buried his head in his hands. He had forgotten amid so much confusion. The exchange had been such a hurried moment.

"The plan" he said as he walked closer, "the fake." Larkin pulled out the f'element from within his cloak. It's vibrancy lit up the scene. Larkin handed it to Clal.

"It was his lust for the stone that defeated him." Larkin continued. "It blinded him so, and he did not think to examine the stone that he found within your garments. Krothwing shielded himself from it's own true nature. His greed for what the true f'element could not give him in the end saved us all."

For the first time, their hearts weren't so heavy. The burden, their ultimate burden, was lifted some.

"Yet," he continued, "our fears should not all be cast off."

"I sense things unseen, their location, the state of danger, a way of passage, and so forth. We must be careful, still. I know Krothwing." He paused and scanned the sky. "He is still here."

"This isn't the end then, is it?" he said. "We're being hunted now. To know this each step of the way is..."

"Clal," Ansa said as she took his hand and clasped it with her hands. The sight of the f'element had brought hope to his sister. "Do you remember what Morgreth said...about the powers of good and the powers of evil?"

Clal ignored her and peered out into the dense snow. After a moment he looked at Ansa. "He said that the powers of evil are no match for the powers of good in the end. But what about in the middle?" Clal frowned.

"The idea is that we do what we can, and that somehow, if providence brought us together, there will be a way for us" she looked up, "even if an impossible foe strikes down upon us."

For now, Clal seemed satisfied.

* * * * *

Though injured and slow in pace, they all knew that they could not linger and nurse their wounds; moving forward straightaway was the wiser of the three options they now had. During the remainder of their travels, to their good fortune, there was no sign of Krothwing. The wind became a breeze and the snow soon passed. Finally, the sight of Sedrak's mammoth shape in the distance came into view.

"Sedrak!" she said and she broke into a sprint. Clal had never seen her run and was surprised at her speed and agility.

Larkin called to Skyla, more out of his reprimand for her disregard to his words of caution, but he too was smiling as he hurried along behind her the best his body would allow.

Ansa had been linked arms with Clal and had walked with him like this the entire way since Krothwing had fled. Between Clal, Ryth and Larkin, Clal had received the greatest harm and was still hand on to Ryth's shoulders and neck. It was his ribs and also his left leg that sent shocks of pain and discomfort at almost every step. Clal was more than grateful for healing he received from those by his side.

As the last three approached the edges of the floating island, there was a waft of salt in the air and the sweet smell of wild flowers. Warmth was in the wind. The end of their journey was drawing to a close.

Soon they were all surrounding Sedrak. He was truly grand to behold. Sedrak was an almost perfect white with a faint grayish blue at the edges of each of his countless scales. Clal could hear a low rumble from some unknown source. But as he watched in wonder at the great beast, he understood that it was caused by the Sedrak's breathing, slow and methodic like. His long neck was slanted down where his head was found, listening to Larkin and Skyla relay an account of their journey.

Sedrak nodded his head once. The elves turned toward the others.

"Friends," Sedrak said. His voice was like the call of a lion, but calm as a summer sea.

"Larkin and Skyla have told me of your travails and tragedies. It is no small thing that Krothwing has so boldly sought to thwart your efforts. Clal, it has been written that these days would come."

Clal noticed that Sedrak wore a smile, not for the moment, but he could tell that his skin and scales had turned and shifted into the permanent position of it. This and everything about the massive serpent radiated the kind of hope and joy that life was meant to be about.

Clal's gaze was fixed as Sedrak moved his head to one side. He looked behind him then lifted his great body off the ground. His great muscles tensed up his wings slightly unfolded.

It was all happening like before, the black speck, the black bird, and then there was Krothwing, perched upon the highest ledge above them. Even Sedrak's neck could not reach the height.

"Fools!" Krothwing spat. "Roguish folly."

"Say nothing." Sedrak told them.

"Foiled." Krothwing screamed. He was in a frenzy; face red, hair disheveled, he clutched the stone once beheld by Clal and thrust it down.

"I swear it upon you Clal, upon you all, 'danger, mischief, vicious crime. Our craft will prevail. This isn't the end, but the beginning."

Clal looked at Sedrak who read the terror on Clal's face. The beast's head darted back in Krothwing's direction.

"That's enough you devil." He raised his neck a few feet. "Be gone!" Sedrak leapt with great speed toward the undersized foe. Krothwing shot up just shy of running head long into the stone wall. The

pursuit continued as they twisted and turned amid the air shrinking all the while. Soon Sedrak was gliding back and landing upon the earth once more with the greatest of ease.

“Sedrak,” Clal said looking up at him, “I don’t understand.”

“You will...” Sedrak replied, “...in time.”

Sedrak then laid flat upon the ground, head and all, and said, “let us leave this place.”

Chapter 23: The Crowned Eagle Descends

“I can only take you as far as the place of the Dawning of Time.” Sedrak said. The others had climbed on Sedrak's back. Clal was standing in front of the dragon's head as they discussed the plans.

“The world does not know me...has not known me. But it soon will.” Sedrak's already permanent grin heightened. “Though that time has not come yet.”

On the great beast's back there were spikes that protruded from his spine. Each wrapped their arm around one as Sedrak instructed. When all were secured, the dragon raised his head, stood in a crouching position like a cat ready to pounce, and sprung into the air. On both sides Clal watched his grand wings extend and flap with grace and agility. Soon Edaphlas was a tiny fleck in the sky, a bittersweet sight. Edaphlas, of paradise and peril.

Sedrak, though massive in size, could sail through the sky with the greatest of ease and gentle strokes of his wings. The wind was mild as his head deflected most of it and the top of his back was strait enough for the party to rest and sit upon.

Clal observed his companions. Ryth watched the patches of clouds move below or fidgeted with his clothing. Skyla and Larkin were standing up with the wind blowing in their hair, Skyla's long and glimmering, Larkin's feathered out. Occasionally, one or the other would turn their head or move their hand or shift their body. He could tell they were engaged in a quiet conversation. Then there was his Ansa, so tender in spirit. A sister that had been his friend, a true inspiration since the beginning, now weak and spent in all that had taken place. Clal's eyes welled up; oh how he desired to take it all away.

Clal could only peer at the shield size scales, dozens of them, that lay beneath him. The middle of each was of a brilliant white, almost emitting it's own source of light. There was a depth within that spoke to Clal of olden days and of times never to return. At the edges, each silver-white scale tapered off into a deep ocean blue followed by a crystal sky blue at the tips, almost indistinguishable. Though each scale seemed to be well polished, there was no sign or feature that worried Clal for their welfare to turn all of them sliding off into the earthen abyss below. He moved a bit to look over the side but jumped back at the sight of it and held tighter to the spike he'd been clutching.

Soon, they began to descend. He despaired at the thought that the dragon and all his glory and wonder would soon depart. An unfamiliar earth was approaching and the reality of the next stage of their quest rushed upon each of them.

Soon, all but Clal were standing on the red stone of a high and flat mountain like land mass; the place where the Dawning of Time had been named. It was a place where an almost hidden side of a cliff had been hollowed out into a cave. An iron door had been installed and was locked from the inside. It

captured their interest instantly.

Clal was about to join the others when Sedrak spoke. "Come Clal. Let us share a few words before I leave you to what you were destined to complete."

Clal turned around, and slowly walked across his back tethering himself to a nearby spike.

As Sedrak and Clal were lifted into the air, the others saw them. Nothing was said. Both the ascending and the land spectators understood. Clal had begun to change and his role as The One was setting the things around him and within him in motion, . As Clal looked down he knew that this scene would not be the last. His path, though traveled with many, would someday carry only one traveler.

Sedrak continued to rise upon the winds. The earth unfolded on all sides, the clouds were well beneath them and Illia was as a large island. It was breathtaking. Though he knew Sedrak would not let him fall, Clal was now hugging the spike that he once had casually gripped.

"Clal," Sedrak spoke. "Do you see that speck of an island, black, over to the east?" The dragon's wings flapped in a loud rhythm but he made out Sedrak's words.

"Yes." Clal squinted and could indeed spy a faint land mass separate from Illia. He was astonished.

"This is Hanone." Sedrak hesitated. "This is where the great enemy now resides."

Clal gasped. Even from such a distance, it looked and felt sinister.

Many things were said and explained, but the dragon told him to keep them in his heart only. How ancient Sedrak was, began to set in. Sedrak spoke at length with Clal, and then said, "Let us now return to the others. You have yet to finish your task."

"Show me more, Sedrak," Clal said eagerly but Sedrak said nothing.

Sedrak sailed downward in a rapid descent. Soon Clal was standing on the ground with the others. He searched the cliff and found the Dawning place. Clal turned and looked at Sedrak. Their eyes met and Ansa sensed a moment of an unspoken understanding. Ryth was watching Clal and the two elves look upon the great dragon. He was sitting like a statue, upright and strikingly noble. Within his heart Clal pronounced a name upon the great dragon: The Crowned Eagle, the world's grand jewel long since in slumber.

"We'll meet again, fair ones." Sedrak's voice resounded upon the ancient stone and cliffs nearby, like a clear trumpet call at daybreak. His glossy, crystal blue eyes scanned the band pausing at each of them.

"Never forget your place upon the wheel of the world, within the workings of the unknown. Each of you will have a purpose, no one purpose greater than another." Sedrak smiled; that expansive grin stretched from the tip of his pointed snout to the furthest distinguishable point of his jaw line.

"There is yet much to accomplish. Stay together. My thoughts will be with you."

Clal stepped forward toward Sedrak, "But when will we..." His voice was swallowed up by the flurry of dust and wind. Sedrak had raked the air with his wings and was pushing higher and higher leaping

from an invisible ledge at every wing flap. They watched as the dragon turned at one point and sailed to their left. Even before he disappeared over the horizon his white appearance could keep him from within the veil of the heavens as he faded away. The great grand father of the world was, once more, a memory.

“He's not much for words, is he?” Ryth said to himself. He shrugged. Clal turned to Ryth and quietly disagreed within himself. He thought for a moment then breathed in through his nose and said, “Follow me.”

One by one the others pulled themselves from their skyward enchantment and followed Clal as he requested. They walked along the narrow cliff that led to Dawning's door. It was steep. Clal hadn't seen the place but the others had.

About four steps into the cave was the iron door. It had many markings. On the left door there were images and scenes that were clear to the eye but dull to their understanding. On the right door, there were words inscribed, characters that were unknown, even to Larkin and Skyla.

Clal turned to his sister. She was studying the scene for any clues. Clal turned back toward the door, but Ansa's sudden burst of energy severed his train of thought.

“Wait!” she shouted. “Clal, grab the f'element and hold it up to the doors.”

He hesitated, but slowly pulled it out of his satchel. As he held the life stone up to the center of the right door it read, “...ger, mischief, vic...”

The alarm caused by the word swept across the group, all accept for Clal; Ansa gasped and covered her mouth with both hands, Skyla stepped back a step, Ryth grabbed Clal's arm, and Larkin's hand found the hilt of his sword.

In just a few moments Clal moved his hand to the upper left hand of the door. A stream of words began to issue forth as Clal moved his hand past each character. Clal read the words aloud:

“Look to the East to find the One
Who only can unlock the Sun.
The powers of this world await
Who holds the key to open fate.
And when is found this One to name,
And take his place beside his fame,
Remember this, that with his time
Comes danger, mischief, vicious crime.
For not too far from this world's birth,
There is one who roams the earth
Awaiting chance to stake his claim
Upon each heart that has a name.
Yet if our One completes his task,
The Dark One lurking, turns to ash.
But if our One turns inward spite,
All hope will fade, without a fight.”

Clal's voice trailed off into a whisper. They were stunned. But even so, Larkin spoke out of the silence.

“May I see the felement Clal?” Larkin said.

Clal handed it to him.

Larkin held it before a few of the symbols. Nothing changed. He gave it back to Clal and returned to his reflective manner.

“Only in your hands, Clal, can the virtues of this gift be realized.” Skyla moved toward him and touched the felement that he was holding in front of his chest. “There is great wisdom here, in the depths of so small a thing. I am honored to serve you, Clal, in anyway I can during your quest for good.” She turned around and returned to where she had been standing. It was a kind gesture, one that would prove to extend beyond many trials that their journey would bring them.

They continued to study the doors before them. “Clal,” Ryth said, “what do the words mean?”

“I don't know. I've never heard such language, though it seems familiar to me.”

“It's a prophecy.” Larkin said raising his hand toward the door. “It's about you.”

It was then that Clal stepped forward and began to pass the felement before the words again. As he did so he read, slower this time, searching and studying, but most of it made no sense to him. He was captivated, and as soon as he finished reading, his hand jumped up to the top again. He repeated the process until he paused on one particular word...*who holds the key*...

“Key,” Clal exclaimed.

All at once Clal touched the word “key” with the felement. The doors began to fade, first beginning at the word “key” then spreading to the edges of the right door then through to the edges of the left door. Clal lept forward and ran down a short hallway. On each side there were sticks attached to the walls emitting blue flames. Clal reached the end of the hall where a large, flat stone resided. It was red with blue veins, a few large ones and numerous thin ones. There were others things in the room, curious things in corners, but Clal didn't notice any of them. He turned around and saw the others trotting toward him. Once they were beside him, he said,

“By the looks of this large stone and the holes in it, I think I'm supposed to put this felement in one of the holes,” Clal thought, “but which one?”

Ansa answered, “Well if you used it to unlock the entrance to this place, then one of its uses must be as a key.” She touched her finger to her chin. “Clal, it was a key from Edaphlas.”

Ryth was looking over his shoulder.

Clal bent over and examined each hole. He discovered that there were small symbols above each hole. He knew one had to resemble Edaphlas or something from it. There was a triangle above one of the holes and an ancient looking flame above another. Above one of the holes Clal found a circle with a dot in the center and yet above another hole there was no symbol at all. But he knew where to put the felement that was in his grasp, for there above the last hole there was indeed a symbol of a tiny dragon

etched into the stone.

“Look,” Clal he pointed and turned to the others. Each of them leaned over at once.

“It's here, this is the place.” His finger was poking the dragon shape.

“Put it in! Put it in!” Ansa grabbed Clal's arm.

Clal hesitated then gently placed the felement in the shallow hole. They waited for something unexpected to happen, like their entrance into the chamber, but it didn't. For Clal, it didn't have to.

They looked around the place. There was a mirror in one corner and a pool of water in another. A large and dark cave that appeared to have a slight decline filled up one wall. Then, the most curious of all, a spiral staircase leading straight down had been hidden from their view. It was directly behind the stone that was in the center of the room. The staircase went on infinitely to Clal's view, but he thought he saw a faint light, a twinkle amid the darkness.

“It's done then,” Larkin said.

“Yes. Our journey is through at last.” Clal signed.

“Not quite.” Ryth pointed to one wall that Clal had overlooked. There was a door there, which was slightly ajar. It was a simple wooden door found in simple wooden houses. All that Clal could think about as he drew near and opened the door, and the only word that was echoing within his heart was, “home.” This is where his journey should end, for that is where it began, long ago, somewhere in his memory.

And when he arrived back home again, he truly was not the same boy he once was.

“Not quite.” Ryth pointed to one wall that Clal had overlooked. There was a door there. It was a simple wooden door found in simple wooden houses. There was a small beam of light issuing from a crack. And as it shone it carried upon it many memories the light of joys once known. They walked toward it, led by Clal. All that Clal could think about was the word “home”. It echoed within his heart of hearts. “Home.” This is where his journey should end. That is where it began, long ago, somewhere in his memory.

Clal reached for the door knob, opened the door and walked through it. The others were at his heels.

And when he arrived back home again, he truly was not the same boy he once had been.