

The Dragon Summoner

Book 1 of 8 - Legends of Clal Series

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Book 1: The Dragon Summoner

Book 2: The Twisted Peak

Book 3: Skyland's Rising

Book 4: Sands of Illusion

Book 5: Kingdom of the Tides

Book 6: Wielders of the Dawn

Book 7: The Stone Seed

Book 8: Book of Legends

Prologue

"He's one of them." The thin man spoke as he walked toward the others.

"How do you know?" The large man cut in.

"I watched him do it." The thin man spoke again.

The large man stroked his chin. "Under our very noses this whole time," he said pounding his fist against his palm.

A third man leaned toward the large man. "But, is it enough? Will he do our bidding?"

The thin man chuckled, "He'll have to or," the man pulled out his dagger and tossed it up in to the air then catching it by the hilt, "it might...get...complicated."

"For him," the large man spoke, "not for us." He shifted his weight, "because, this is easy and he is weak."

A fourth man, with a raspy voice, spoke next, "Or is he weak? And is it wise to assume his limitations are..."

The large man raised a fist, "Not now."

The fourth man tensed his jaw and folded his arms slowly, eyes aflame.

"Then, this is it. This was all we needed." The large man spoke. He spun around.

"It's time." The large man boomed.

"And...him? When do we tell...him?" The thin man spoke.

The large man squinted, then turned to the thin man "Go to the place of the 7 stones and inform him of the finding. Then meet us in Reubus no later than a day and a half from tonight."

The thin man nodded, ran toward the darkness, then disappeared.

"I couldn't have planned this better if I had had all the magic in Illia." The large man said with a slight smile.

"True." The fourth man spoke, "And, if our plan succeeds, that's exactly what you'll have."

Chapter 1: An Old Friend

Clal burst through the cottage doorway carrying two large satchels over his broad shoulders. He threw them into the cart loaded with barrels, paused, then closed his eyes. He listened to the breeze move through the nearby forest. It sounded like the ocean waves he knew so well. He smiled. "Yes," he whispered to himself and nodded. He waited another moment then spun around. Tipoeing past the open doorway he broke into a sprint in the direction of a patch of trees against the mountain side.

He weaved his way through, what seemed like, a wayward band of aspen trees that has strayed from the rest of the forest. Alas, arriving at bank of a small stream at the base of a mountain.

"Hello there Ole' Crescent Keep. Sorry to keep you waiting." He gave the a boulder jutting out of the mountain dirt a hearty pat. "It's just that I won't be back for quite some time and there has been a lot to manage lately."

Clal looked up shielded his eyes from the morning sun. He smiled, then found his footing on a well worn path that paralleled the waterfall riddled stream which danced it's way down the mountain side. This is the path that would lead him up and over, then down the other side where the sand is white and the ocean waves know his name.

He bounded up the mountain side and stopped once he reached the top. He looked down at what was now a miniature version of the cottage and cart squinting his eyes. Seeing no movement there Clal turned to the endless span of blue and ran down the path that led to the sea.

Gravity got the best of him as he ran and soon he was taking great strides to keep from tumbling over. Narrowly missing one of the last forest trees, Clal lept onto the white sandy shore and ran into the reaches of an oncoming wave.

It was a small wave at that which only barely came up to the middle of his calf muscles. He rolled up his pant legs, took out a small leather pouch and started to pluck small pebbles from beneath the surface of the wet sand.

He crouched down and toyed with a sea crab for a moment until he heard a familiar voice.

"Clal? Clal, it's time!" the voice of his sister came trailing over Crescent Keep Mountain and had found him, as it always does.

"Time." He whispered to himself shaking his head. He leaned over, confiscating three small pebbles from the white sand. He poked them into his bulging pouch.

He looked at the sun and squinted, "Time? A thief in the night..." He threw his pouch up in front of his face then caught it. "...but this time, I've got the upper hand."

Clal turned to the sea waves, "Farewell old friends. Not sure when we'll meet next. May it be sooner than late. That'd be my wish."

Clal shoved his pouch into his pocket then ran up the mountain path straight to the very top.

Just as he was about to descend the other side, he heard a loud crack and a rustle of leaves to his left. Clal froze and looked out of the corner of his eyes.

“Young lad. Stop right there.” A high pitched voice called out. “Why are you in my woods?”

“Er...uh...” Clal turned toward the voice. “Well, because I live in the valley down their. I...”

“You dare to cross these borders and run among my trees with no thought of who is the keeper of this forest?” The voice continued.

“Well, I never really thought of it...”

“I hereby banish you to the apple cart,” the voice commanded, “which is leaving, even as we speak. I sentence you to an indefinite span of months, or years as apprentice to the blacksmith of a distant city. And this, because of outrageous impertinence and disrespectful trespassing in my forest disturbing it’s most joyous tranquilities and delights.”

The voice stopped.

Clal shook his head as a smile graced his countenance.

“And you shall be under the custody of your sister, Ansa, after which you will serve her endlessly until arriving to your apprenticeship destination.”

Clal leaned over toward the voice then whispered, “I bet I can beat you there, oh fair and noble mistress of the forest abode.”

He turned and darted down the side of Crescent Keep.

“Now, really, Clal, without any warning?” Ansa called after him as she burst through a cluster of bushes and ran after him.

Despite her more practical nature, there was a bond of shared mischief between them that no amount of seriousness could ever dim.

Clal reached the front of the cottage first—a sturdy, stone-built home with a thatched roof and ivy creeping up the walls. Ansa collided into him moments later which caused a fit of laughter.

A burly man with a grizzled beard and thin woman carrying two small wooden boxes exited the cottage and walked over to Clal and Ansa.

“This year, Willa and I will be staying behind seeing as Turl, Gree, and Mina can manage without us.” Goran announced looking at Willa beside him. “The yearly Advantis celebrations will be like any other year, a marvel I’m certain, except for the two of you and the starting of your apprenticeships.”

“Thank you, Uncle Goran, for working that out for us. We are so very grateful.” Ansa said putting her hand on his shoulder.

“These are for you,” Willa stepped forward, her voice shaking, “Things from your parents we’ve kept safe all these long years.”

Both boxes were adorned with carvings of mythical creatures and intertwined ivy.

“You should wait to open these until you’re further along in your journey.” Willa added looking at Goran. “We don’t know what’s inside, but we know that there is something important there for the both of you.” Her voice almost whispered the last of it.

“They’ll guide you in ways we cannot.” Goran smiled. “Stay true to yourselves. Though, I haven’t any doubts. They say you can’t separate twins no matter how far apart they may wander”

Ansa and Clal exchanged glances, a mix of curiosity and reverence passing between them as they held the wooden boxes, Ansa hugging her box to her chest.

Clal looked up into the eyes of the only parents they’ve ever known.

“We’ll miss you both.” Ansa said wiping her nose and sniffing.

“We’ll be sure to come back and share many stories.” Clal smiled.

Then, the twins embraced their aunt and uncle, feeling the weight and wonder of what would surely lie ahead. They turned to the cart, a sturdy wooden vehicle hitched to two strong horses, waved, both still holding their wooden boxes.

“Are we set?” Turl, the oldest of Goran and Willa’s three children said.

Clal nodded.

“Gree. Mina. Hold tight. We’re on our way.” Turl announced. He cracked the reigns and urged the horses forward.

Gree, was sitting on the outside while Mina sat between him and Turl. They were seated at the bench and Clal and Ansa were in the back of the cart. The two youngest, Gree and Mina, could barely contain their excitement.

As the cart rolled away, the twins glanced back at the cottage. The familiar sight of their home grew smaller. The time to leave and move on for them had come, as it were, in a single day. And now, Clal felt as if he was being swept away from a life he had once grown to love so much. The new path ahead was unknown, but Clal faced it with a sense of adventure, as with all new things.

Clal tucked away the cherished gift from the parents he had neither seen before or knew whether they live now. Then he looked back at the cottage now far down the dirt road that cut through the thick forest.

Ansa looked up at Clal and reached out to put her hand on his. As they turned a corner, their home vanished from view, leaving behind a landscape filled with tall aspen trees and a world of possibilities, the unspoken promise of a journey that now awaited them.

As the cart rattled along the path, the countryside unfurled around them—forests of white aspen bark and tall pine, fields of golden wheat swaying in the breeze, clusters of wildflowers dotting

the roadside. Clal kept his eyes on the road passing under their dangling feet, but he couldn't help but wonder what was in his wooden box.

Ansa leaned toward Clal and whispered. "I've been thinking, Clal," she wrapped her arm around Clal's, "what if Gwynn doesn't like the way I sew? Or, what if I talk too much? And, what if..."

"What if you absolutely amaze her with how fast you learn." Clal said, "What if she adores you before the first week is over." Clal winked, paused, then leaned forward whispering. "What if after a month she says, 'How ever did I get along without my Ansa?'" Clal laughed. Ansa scowled then shrugged Clal with her shoulder. "You make fun, Clal." Clal chuckled, "I do not. Everything I just said will come true and you know it."

Ansa allowed a slight smile to grace her lips. "You really think so?"

Clal nodded then plucked a leaf from a nearby tree passing by and blowing it from his palm in Ansa's direction, then smiled. "I'm sure you'll quickly be a favorite among the blacksmith's customers." Ansa smiled. "Is it true that Talon is the very best blacksmith in all of Illia?" "Yes." Clal's tone become more subdued. The pit in his stomach returned as he thought about his new path. He looked down at his hands and wondered if he was strong enough and how hard it would really be. He looked up into the forest moving by and squinted balling his fist and setting it on the wall of the cart. Ansa put her hand on his shoulder. "I know it's all new and we don't know how things will fair, but I believe in you too Clal." Clal placed his hand on hers without looking and squeezed her fingers. "Thanks sis." Clal had always wanted to be part of adventures in one way or another. Now, he would be forging swords, axes, all kinds of weapons for the castle men and others who wish to pay the high price that Tallon exacted for his wares. It was as if Clal's very childhood dreams were being realized and he almost couldn't wait the day and a half to get there. Clal and Ansa remained silent for a long time, their bodies moving with the sway of the cart as it jostled over uneven ground. The aspen trees waved at them as they traveled through the forest. The autumn breeze carried with it the scent of vegetation in full bloom. The forest was bustling with the sounds of nature; crickets, birds, and the wind in the leaves. Clal was abruptly shaken from his daze thinking about future days ahead. He just realized that this was where they usually turned into the woods from the road when visiting Clal's friend, Ruth. "Ansa, this must be the place where..." Clal and peered into the forest, "Wait." He stood up, almost losing his balance as the cart rolled over the uneven road. He walked to the side of the cart then gasped.

"Hey! Hey!" he yelled, waving. "Ansa, look." Ansa sat up, "Rythe. Yes." She jumped up to her feet, "Turl, stop the cart. We have a new visitor. It's Rythe." In the distance a young lad with dark brown hair and a pack on his side was bobbing up and down waving his arms, his voice barely audible. Then faintly they all heard Rythe calling out, "Clal! Clal!" Turl stopped the cart and they waited for Rythe to arrive. Rythe's figure shot from the forest to the road where Rythe failed to communicate any words as he gasped in great gulps of air. He leaned against the cart for a span then began. "Clal, Ansa, how fortunate I am to have caught you." He gasped another gulp of air with one hand on the cart and the other on his chest. "Turl, thank you for stopping, by the way." Rythe smiled.

Turl smiled back. One of the horses whinnied. "Don't suppose you have room for another passenger, do you?" "I don't see why not." Clal said. "We're stopping at Eldan Vyum." Rythe walked over to Turl. "Mind if I ride along?" "Not at all, Rythe. You're practically one of the family, or at least it seemed in times past." Turl smiled and pointed with his thumb for Rythe to climb on. "Hello Gree, Mina." Rythe said as he ran to the back of the cart and climbed in as Clal helped him up. "Thank you." Rythe said, tossing his pack onto the cart sitting beside Clal. Clal clapped Rythe on the back. "I wasn't sure when I'd ever see you again." Clal smiled, "It's been..." "...too long, friend." Rythe said with a smile. "What's the news with you two?" he said, settling back against his pack, folding his arms and stretching his crossed legs out. "You're heading in to market to sell apples like every other year?" "We are going to Eldan Vyum for six months to learn a new trade," Clal started. "I've been invited as an apprentice to a blacksmith that my father knew." "That's a high honor, Clal." Rythe said with raised eyebrows. Clal nodded, "To think, making swords and armor for the finest men who walk this land." "Nails and locks, furniture and horseshoes too." Rythe added. "It's an important job." Rythe turned to Ansa, "And you, Ansa? What lies in store for you in Eldan Vyum?" She hesitated, "Well, mending and sewing clothes." She smiled only slightly. "That's it, just a clothes shop." "I see," Rythe said hesitating, "...which..." he leaned forward, "...means that you'll be crafting enchanting dresses for royal ladies while Clal is pounding out iron swords for epic battles." He smiled a wide smile. "Who could ask for a more exciting way to end the year?" Clal had never thought of their apprenticeships in quite that way. It was just what Ansa had needed and Rythe's presentation of their future appointed stations even brightened Clal's spirits. "It sounds like you two are off to new adventures." Rythe concluded. "Which blacksmith are you going to work with?" Rythe leaned closer to Clal. "I think there are three in the city." "Yes," Ansa agreed. "Perhaps we are after all." She smiled. "Talon." Clal said. "The one that is contracted with the King." Rythe's demeanor immediately changed. He's heard that name before. Rythe looked down for a moment then recomposed himself with an inhale and a smile.

"Rythe? What brings you to Eldan Vyum?" Clal said, head cocked with squinted eyes.

"The Adventus and the Examinations," Rythe said, "I turned seventeen three and a half months ago." "I remember the year Turl went," Ansa said, "he had some interesting stories to tell when he came home." "It's a tradition that's been around since before the oldest man's great grandfather's time." Rythe said, "Some say no one knows when it all began. But I hear that every year they rehearse the reason why and conduct an examination because of it."

As Rythe was speaking he also continued to think about Turl, the blacksmith. Something was formulating in his mind. "What kind of examination?" Ansa said.

"To see if one of the sons of Illia is the chosen one," Rythe said. "The chosen one?" Clal said. "For what?"

"Well, some believe that the evil in Illia will reach a tipping point, that a hero will need to lead the people to overthrow an ensuing threat."

"And what do they do to examine you? Turl never talked much about it." Ansa said. "How could someone possibly find out who the chosen one is?" Clal said, puzzled. "How would that work?"

"That too I don't know much about. I'll surely find that out soon enough," Rythe smiled. "Well, tomorrow, to be exact."

Rythe's demeanor changed again. Rythe began to feel overshadowed. A memory kept haunting him as he thought about the blacksmith once again. They were silent for a time, Clal was still trying to solve the riddle of how the chosen one was to be discovered. His thoughts turned to Rythe and how they used to meet up and spend so much time together. Then Clal turned to Rythe and said, "It's been almost two years since we've spoken. Tell us," Clal smiled, "where have you been? We used to gallivant all over the countryside together." "Right." Rythe said quietly. Smile now gone. "We did." Ansa was also watching Rythe. She wondered if he was hurt by the look on his face. "Rythe? What's wrong? Are you feeling okay?" She placed her hand on his arm. Rythe looked up at her. "No. I, mean, sure. I'm fine." He said. Rythe looked down at his hands as he picked at his fingernails for a moment. Then, he breathed in and sighed, "I've been...around," he said, "just staying closer to home." "Clal, I meant to stop by a while back." Rythe said continuing to look at his hands then brushing one hand through his curly brown locks. "I've taken trips to the sea and have visited the Eastern shores too." He looked up at the sky and squinted, "And...there was a visit from my aunt, hunting season, we cleared another section of our land for farming. That was a chore." Rythe was struggling to come up with something interesting. "Rythe," Clal said, "you don't sound like yourself. I don't know what it is but you've changed. What's going on?" Rythe's face turned pale for a moment. He started to shake his head slowly. He looked up at Clal then to Ansa. His gaze turned to the open valley they were passing through, sun rays poking through clouds that were scattered across the blue sky. Then his head froze as he looked in the direction of the north. Clal knew that his friend was troubled. "Rythe?" Ansa said finally breaking the silence. Rythe jumped then looked at Clal and Ansa again. "Okay. Okay. I will tell you." He adjusted himself in the cart, shifting his weight and leaning forward. They all followed his lead and huddled together. "I will only tell you because you ask," Rythe began to say slowly, "and only because I know you will keep what I'm about to tell you..." Rythe leaned even closer, "...with utmost secrecy."

Clal and Ansa both looked at each other then back at Rythe and whispered in unison, "We'll keep it secret." "Good. Okay." Rythe breathed a long breath in and a long breath out. Then turned to Clal. "Yes, Clal, you are right," Rythe continued, "I have stayed away these past several months. I've been hiding. I've become a recluse of sorts." "Hiding? Why have you..." Clal's voice faded away as Ansa gently touched his arm. "And for that, I am truly sorry." Rythe said, tightening his lips. "For the missed adventures we could have had."

Rythe paused and shook his head, then leaned in closer, "Earlier this year I took a trip to the North." He was struggling to say the words as if his mouth didn't work right. Rythe pointed north. "It was just me, through the woods, though I took the plain road most of the way. Mother and I had agreed that we needed a new ox to pull the plow. Migg was getting too old and wouldn't be useful to us for next year's farm work." The distant look in Rythe's eyes returned as he looked out into the woods gathering his thoughts. Rythe jumped slightly then squinting his eyes, looking like he was in a sudden fit of pain, but that disappeared as quickly as he had started.

"It was on the second day, just a half a day's walk, that I was walking along the road in plain sight. I had just passed an apple tree and had plucked from its branches one of the biggest apples I had ever seen. I thought of you right then, Clal, I want you to know." Rythe chuckled. "No apple could taste as good as yours, you know." His smile faded away. "I was eating that apple, walking down the wide road when I heard thundering behind me. Normally, I would watch whomever was on horseback, move out of their way, then continue on my way. But not this time." Rythe shook his head, "No, this time I felt a fear that I had never felt before. The moment I heard their horse's thundering hooves, I knew that some great darkness was upon me and it was approaching fast." Ansa slid closer to Clal and clutched his arm. "And, so I immediately hid as fast as I could," Rythe's voice got quieter, "behind some nearby bushes. In the process I dropped my apple. I had only taken a few bites." "They appeared in the distance almost as soon as I left the road. I watched them approach and thought that I could endure their passing and be on my way. But to my great alarm," Rythe paused, "the large rider in front silently lifted his fist in the air and the riders slowed and stopped right in front of where I had found cover." "There were three riders in dark clothing. Two of them dismounted. I froze, barely breathing." Rythe paused. "It was hard to take it all in really." Rythe continued. "Just moments ago I had been enjoying my apple, walking along the road, thinking about some of the best things in life. Truly wondering what this new ox would even look like. I'm kind of fond of animals, well, most animals." Rythe's voice spoke the following words even softer. "But now, I feared for my safety, my future, my very life, but not understanding why."

By this time Ansa seemed to have melted into Clal. She realized, however, that she was acting less like a sixteen year old woman and more like a juvenile girl. And so, she straightened up her back and smiled slightly even though her muscles were tense and she would be content not to hear how Ryth's story would end. "They were all searching the surroundings" Rythe continued, "looking here and there, like the skill of a hunter, I recognized it. The rider who seemed to be the leader, the largest one, was standing closest to me. He searched the ground, spotted my apple, then picked it up."

"'What is it? Must we delay?' one of the riders still on their horses said." "'Quiet,' said the leader. 'There's someone here...and they think to hide from us.'" Rythe stopped speaking as his head slowly shook back and forth. He looked deep into Clal's eyes then into Ansa's. "No...these men were no ordinary men." He continued to shake his head. "I wanted to crawl into a hole, disappear. The feeling that I felt while in their presence forced the most terrible thoughts into my mind and heart."

"Then the large one spoke again. 'See here,' he said, pointing to the ground. 'These tracks are fresh. And this apple here, not five minutes ago it was plucked from that tree over there. A few bites and abandoned on account of our arrival.'" "A pity," another rider said. "It looks like a good one." "Then the leader took the apple in his massive hand and crushed it in his grasp. He looked in my direction and started to inch his way toward me with the other one close behind. The third one on horse back dismounted." Rythe's face became pale. Drops of sweat were beginning to form on his forehead. Ansa noticed this and felt a rush of sadness pass over her. "I wondered why three men would pay attention to and even torment one who was alone almost in the dark of night in the middle of the forest." Rythe clenched his fist, head shaking faster now as

he hit his palm with his fist. "I soon found out the answer to the riddle." Rythe was talking faster now. "They had come behind and were headed north also and had seen my tracks for miles, I was sure of that. And when the tracks left the road, I'm guessing it was only because I heard them and could not be far, they probably guessed." "We know you are here," the large one said, 'and we would have you show yourself.'" "The other dismounted rider walked over to a rider on horseback and whispered something to him. The other two now striding next to the leader and I found no comfort in staying hidden any longer." Rythe looked up at them with a stone look on his face. "There was no use." He said with an empty and distant voice. "And so I did what I thought would be the only reasonable option if I wanted to save my skin," Rythe leaned back and threw his hands up in the air, "I leapt out of my hiding place and ran." "I jumped over bushes and darted past trees. Clal, you know how fast I am?!" Rythe added. "But it wasn't fast enough. I figured they wanted money or information, but I didn't know exactly." Rythe's said, "I didn't have either and, you know me, I wasn't about to give them anything, those sniveling thieves." "I must have only taken ten strides when I was hit from behind and tackled to the ground by one of them. It was like he had jumped from a tree the way he collided into me." Rythe looked up remembering the details, "He wasn't behind me, it was as if he had been in front of me, but that's not possible." Clal looked at Ansa then back at Rythe. "It was one of them on pinning me to the ground while the other two ran to where I was being held." "Why are you telling us this, Rythe?" Ansa said, shaking, "This isn't one of your tall tales?" "No. Sadly, it is not, though I wish it were." Rythe had that distant look in his eyes again. He looked at Clal and Ansa then said, "I tell you this because this is a riddle half solved, and of all of the people I know, you two are fit to help me solve it." Rythe sighed, "I never intended to tell a soul. But you asked why I have not been around, and I feel you ought to hear the truth, especially since you mentioned Talon." "Talon?" Clal said. "Was he there?" "No." Rythe said, "I'll get to that part." Rythe leaned back close to the twins, "With three of the men pressing in I couldn't think of anything to do so I said, 'Hello friends. It's a beautiful night. Care to join me in a stroll?'" "I should have kept quiet because I was shoved to the ground with an incredible force. But, I continued, 'Now really, this is no way to treat a complete stranger, or anyone for that matter. The name's Riggins. How can I be of service?' That didn't work either. It just made things worse when I found a new pain in my ribs." "All we want to do is ask you a few questions..." the large one said "and that shiny dagger dangling from your side, I'd like that too," another one said "then we'll leave you to your journey," the large one said. "No," I said.

"You told them no?" Ansa said.

"Yes." Rythe folded his arms and nodded. "I wasn't about to let them take anything from me without a fight."

"But they could have killed you." Clal said.

Rythe paused and looked into Clal's eyes, "I felt something strange, right at that moment, something that gave me the strength to know that what I wanted to do would work out some how."

"No," I said, 'you can't have anything. I'll be answering no questions...and this dagger was left to me by my father. It means a great deal to me.' Then I pulled away from the rider who was

holding me and yelled, 'Why would you chase me and hurt me when I did nothing to you?! Cowards prey on the innocent. There are three of you and one of me...' I said "I was shoved again but that time I shoved back. Then, they closed in on me inching forward like before." "This young lad here, he thinks he's brave.' The leader said, then continued, 'First I thought to find some sport, but here we've found the budding hero of Illia.' He laughed a cruel and wicked laugh. 'It's clear to me what we should do with one who thinks to grow so brave.'" "Do you not know with whom you are in the presence of?' the one holding me hissed." "Yes,' I said, 'I do'. I felt as if these were men whose hearts were truly black, and so I said these words to them." Clal and Ansa leaned in. "You were men who were once noble and great, but who embraced the evils of this world and now are servants to it,' then I added, 'slaves, you are.'"

Rythe chuckled, "Then I spat in the face of their leader."

"Rythe, that doesn't sound like you?" Clal said. "Clal, I felt something there, like I was bigger than myself somehow." Rythe smiled then shivered slightly, "It was exciting and frightening all at once." "Immediately one of them said, 'Strike him down.' The rider holding me released his grip, stood and drew his sword all in one movement then thrust it towards me." Rythe leaned in again and the twins did too. "And here's what happened next." "I hadn't noticed but we were on the banks of a river, just a few feet away from the water. At that moment the river began to glow, a light deep beneath the surface started growing brighter and brighter, though the river was shallow. The light eventually illuminating the entire forest, like it was day." Rythe's smile had returned. "The three riders paused, stunned by the phenomenon." "Renthar,' my attacker, yelled out, 'what is this?'" "I...uh..." Renthar said, then looked at the third rider, "Imforo!" He said, 'Lower your sword.'" "I ran towards the water. I was surprised that the men didn't follow. I felt free from their evil intentions for a moment." "It seems as if we've met with the wrong lad tonight.' Renthar said" "Then, they slowly walked toward their steeds, all three of them keeping their eyes fixed in the direction of the light. They mounted, cracked their reins and disappeared into the forest shadows." Rythe said. "When they had gone, I waited and watched the light within the river begin to fade." Rythe's voice was quiet. "I knelt down on that river bank and spoke to the kind water that had saved me in that moment. My tears were flowing freely as I had at one moment staring into death's face, and at the next moment, had been wrapped in the most exquisite feelings of safety and peace."

"Thank you,' I said, kneeling down close to the water's surface. 'I will repay you somehow, someday. Thank you.'" "I ran all night. And though I knew somehow the keeper of the light in the river was still with me, I wrestled with the fear of the encounter." Rythe shook his head. "I didn't continue north but I retraced my steps, this time through the forest. I cut much time off my journey and soon, mid-day the next day I collapsed on the front steps of my home. Luckily my mother was still sleeping or else she would have been worried. When she awoke, I simply told her that I was unable to get an ox and returned home as fast as I could." Rythe held up two fingers, "For the next three weeks of half-sleepless nights, I had only two questions in my mind, who were those men, and why did that river shine its light when I needed it the most?" "I found out a half answer to the first question only a few weeks later when I went to Eldan to finally buy an ox." Rythe said. "They are known to some as" then he leaned in and whispered, "...the RISHK." Turl turned and looked behind him. "What are you three up to back there?" He said.

The three of them jumped in surprise. Turl laughed and wore a wide smile, "Telling tall tales, eh?" "Rythe is always good for a story." Clal said. Clal was still captivated by the story Rythe just told them. It was mysterious. Clal knew every bit of it was true.

"I believe it will be time to rest our horses for the night." Turl said. "There's a stream just up ahead, about a mile or two. We'll stop there for the night, set up camp after we water the horses, if that's all right with you lot." "Is anyone hungry?" Gree asked, turning around. "I know I am." "I have some bread and cheese..." Mina announced. "Me," Ansa stood up then walked over to the front of the cart leaning over a barrel. Ansa's head was hanging and she was breathing hard.

Mina handed her some cheese and bread. Ansa stroked Mina's blond hair, turned, then sat back down Clal passing out the food to the others. Rythe held out his hand. "Thank you Ansa," He said smiling. Ansa's cheeks showed a hint of red as she smiled back. "Wouldn't it be great to be able to stop men like the ones you described, stop them from causing trouble?" Clal said.

"I fear their work runs deep." Rythe said.

"My thoughts exactly" Rythe turned to Ansa who looked back at Clal.

"So the RISHK you say?" Clal said, confirming what he remembered about their name. "Yes," Rythe replied, "that is their name. They're some kind of clan." "And if they've given themselves a name they must have a purpose," Clal concluded. "Right," Rythe said. "They must, and that's what I thought." Rythe smiled, "So I had to find out." Ansa shook her head. "You mean there's more?" Her face looked as if she had just swallowed some moldy cheese. "I mentioned that I traveled to Eldan Vyum a few weeks later," Rythe continued, leaning in again and speaking quietly. "It took me that long to find my courage to venture out on my own." Rythe stared out again into the forest, which was now growing dark, the sun having melted into the horizon.

"I must have replayed the scene a thousand times since that day." Rythe returned his gaze to the twins. "I did muster up my courage to make a journey to the eldest city, Eldan Vyum. I found where they sold oxen, which was what I was in need of like before. I purchased the animal and told the merchant that I would return in the morning to take the animal home with me." "I asked him where the closest inn was to which he directed me and I was soon at the inn paying for a room and a hot meal. I sat down at a table in the corner and was enjoying some long needed food and drink. Then a group of men at a neighboring table who were boisterous and beginning to make much noise started livening up the atmosphere. One of them stood on his feet, wobbling and spoke." "'He was large and rode a tall stead.' He burst out, holding his hand out high to the height of an imaginary horse, kind of wobbling back and forth." "'Sit down you old fool.' One of the other men laughed, 'No storytelling for you today.' They all burst out in a thunderous storm of laughter." "But the man continued, 'I'd never seen him or any of his kind before.' The man continued slowly sitting down in his chair. 'He told me he had just come from the North and that he and his comrades needed me to forge him some weapons as quickly as they could be pounded and proved.'" Clal gasped, "Talon, the Blacksmith."

"Yes, it must have been," Rythe agreed.

“Then the old man told those around him that he kindly told the man that he would not be available for three months as he was behind schedule with requests for tools and horseshoes and some swords for the king, to name a few, and that he had no time for his request. Clal wondered if this was why Talon needed an apprentice to help with the overload of work. “Then Talon said that the horseman pulled something from his saddle pack,” Rythe continued, “and threw it toward Talon. He said it was a sack full of gold coins and jewels as big as his own head and that the man called this quarter payment for the job that he wanted Talon to do.” “Then the man told his friends at the table that he did not agree to do any work for him and that he told him to, as he put it, ‘Please be moving along.’” “Then, Talon told them that the man tossed down a second sack of riches as half payment and told Talon that he would return in two weeks to provide the rest of the payment and to obtain his three weapons.” “‘Then,’ Talon said to the, now, riveted crowd, ‘Can you believe that he turned and left without saying another word?!’” Rythe continued, “It sounded like the leader...Renthar was it...from the description.” “And one of them asked for your dagger,” Clal said. “Wasn’t that one of the weapons this man that Talon was describing asked for him to make?” “Yes,” said Rythe, “and I had to know more. So, the next morning I left the inn and went to the blacksmith’s shop in the city which was nearby. I could use a few new tools anyway and thought to trade some information for the purchase of a tool.” “I found the blacksmith at his shop furiously working away. I could tell he was well into the crafting of a broad sword. I asked him for a few tools and he sold me one, but said that he did not have the other tool I asked for and would not be able to make one for me for some time.” Rythe turned to Clal, “The old man looked spent and it was only early morning time.” Rythe shook his head, “I think I know what would have happened if he had said anything but ‘yes’ to...er...Renthar.” Clal’s brow curled as he imagined the stress now tripling for the blacksmith. “‘You’re making the broadsword for that man, aren’t you?’ I asked Talon that day. Talon stopped working and set the tool down.” “He looked surprised and asked me what I knew about it. I told him I was at the inn last night and that I had overheard his story. I asked him who I thought the man was. Talon hesitated. Then he told me that he thought that the rider matched the description of what one of the RISHK might look like. Then he asked me what I’ve heard about the RISHK.” “I told him that I thought that the man that he had encountered might have been one of the men whom I crossed paths with in the northern regions of Illia just two weeks ago. I told him that they cornered me, then attacked me and tried to take my dagger.” “Then, he told me,” Rythe said, “to stay away from any of them at all costs.” He asked me to move along, and so I gathered my ox shortly after and returned home. That was almost three months ago. And, since you’re going there, Clal, I thought, perhaps, I’d, sort of, check in. See how Talon is fairing. Clal and Ansa remained silent for a time as the cart continued to creak and sway. Soon, Turl was calling out to the horses to slow down, then the cart rested well off the road, just before the bridge. Gree unhitched their white mare and Mina unhitched the golden brown stud then led them both one after the other to the river’s edge, as they did every time they passed this way. Swallows were swerving over head and jutting in and out from under their clay nests under the bridge. Clal jumped out of the cart and helped Ansa down. Rythe climbed down slowly from the cart then motioned for Clal and Ansa to follow him up stream. Once closer to the river’s edge, Rythe knelt down and looked into the water. “It was a river like this one,” he said, “where the light shined through.” “It must have been so beautiful,” Ansa said trying to sound brave as she had also knelt down. Ansa leaned forward, cupped one of her hands and dipped it in the water.

She pulled it out and let the water stream down her fingers and back into the slow moving ripples. Clal was standing by a nearby tree. He leaned up against it and peered into the water. The trees in the distance reflected upon the water's surface. Rythe stood up and turned to Clal and Ansa. "It's a strange thing what happened that night in the woods. I haven't been away from home since returning from Eldan Vyum. How ever alarming it was, I'm going to find out more about the RISHK." Clal put his hand on Rythe's shoulder and said, "If I can help you, I will." Rythe picked up a rock and tossed it into the water watching the rings spread then disappear. He walked through some trees and disappeared. "Clal," Ansa touched his arm, "I don't want to hear anymore about the...RISHK. Can we try to find something else to talk about?" Clal put his arm around Ansa as they walked back to the cart. "Sure, little sister." Clal smiled. "The dark things of this world don't deserve so much attention, anyway," he said. "No," she smiled back, "I just don't like to see you so scared when Rythe talks about them." She winked at him then ran to catch up with Rythe. Clal watched as Ansa jogged toward Rythe who had already disappeared behind the tall bushes and low trees of the Lyrune Forest.

Chapter 2: Fireside

A fire was growing inside of Clal, he could feel it. He stoked the coals of the fire everyone had helped to build. It was the story. Rythe's story. Rythe and Ansa hadn't talked to Clal much since returning from the river. They had all unpacked, laid out their sleeping gear and were now watching Turl as he stood up in front of the fire.

"Well, apple mavens and maidens," Turl held out his hands, "I believe it's time for some stories. Yes?" "Horay!" Mina cheered.

Clal and Turl broke a few apples in half with their bare hands and passed them out. Stick were provided for roasting.

"Come on, Turl. Tell us some good ones." Gree said hitting his stick he found against a half unearthed rock by where he was sitting. "Okay. Okay." Turl chuckled. "Assuming you calm down..." "Now...Rythe here, he's new to our little tradition." Turl steps over to where Rythe is sitting, a top a large boulder with one foot on and his elbow resting on his knee. "Rythe, welcome. And so, every year on the night before we begin our apple selling season in the merchant's market of Eldan Vyum, we do a little..." Turl looks at Mina who smiles and giggles, "you know, kind of a," Turl turns and looks behind again, this time at Gree who is now frowning and waving his brother on, "er...oh yes, we tell stories, sing a song and roast apples, then we go to bed."

Rythe looks at Clal, then to Ansa and smiles, "Sounds fun." And, Rythe meant it. This was one kind of activity that he'd never before been a part of, being an only child. In fact, as he thought about it, he really had had to grow up rather fast. Turl spun around on his heels and clapped his hands twice. His broad torso flexing as he pulled his hands to his chin and stuck out his pointer finger.

"Alright, shall we go top to bottom or the other way around?"

"Start at the top," they all yelled, all except for Mina who wanted to start at the bottom.

"Okay. Alright," Turl said, "We'll start at the bottom." He leaned close to Mina and pulled her off the ground onto his shoulders.

"Here we have the youngest of our crew, Mina the Marvousandous." Mina put her hands to her mouth to stifle a giggle. "Rythe, one thing I didn't mention is that these stories are about each one of us between when we went to market last year up until now. So..."

Turl closed one eye then turned and looked up at Mina with his other eye as his mouth bunched up to one side of his face under his high cheek bone. He hopped forward one step and said, with his hand in the air, "I think I've got it."

"Mina, about seven months ago, when the snow was thick and wet, pulled on her warm clothes and marched out to build something in the snow. Gree was still asleep, or else he too would have been with her. I remember looking out of the window watching as she started. I wasn't asleep but was not ready to brave the cold wind. But, Mina was. That's didn't stop her."

Turl patted her leg. Another giggle escaped her before she could catch it.

"She was out there for a while, came in, and pulled me into the clutches of winter outside. 'What is this?' I asked as we approached the tiny snow dragon. Mina replied, 'It's my snow dragon.' 'Oh,' I said. 'Well, where are it's wings?' Mina cocked her head, then put her finger to her forehead. She then jumped up to grab two twigs, stuck them into the dragon and said, 'There. Two wings.' 'And, does she have a name,' I asked Mina." Turl raised his hand, "and this is the reason for telling the story. Mina, do you remember what you told me?"

Mina nodded her head. "Yes. I said that she was named Dreamfinder because some day I want to fly on a white dragon like that," Mina smiled, "only much bigger." The others laughed as Turl pulled Mina off his shoulders. "Yes, much, much bigger," he said. Mina returned to sit beside Ansa. Gree stood up and walked to stand by Turl.

"Gree has grown this year." Turl pinched Gree's biceps, "grown strong too." Turl balled up his fists and started to dance around and put in a few soft blows to Gree's stomach who jabbed Turl's left ribs after which Turl whines and walked to stand by Gree again.

"Last month, you see...Gree went climbing," Turl paused and raised his eyebrows, "...a tree. And he said to me from a top that tree." 'Hey Turl,' said he, 'Watch me.'" "Which I did." Turl said while Gree put one hand to his brow, shook his head and looked at the ground. Turl looked up out to Rytte and Clal, Ansa and Mina as they all watched and waited. "Gree inched toward the middle of a branch as far as it would allow him without bending or breaking," Turl clapped his hands and Mina shouted while the others listened just jumped, except for Rytte. "Then Gree ran from the tree limb, around the trunk and onto another tree limb then leaped toward a branch of another tree sailing through the sky." Turl took one hand and waived it over through the air. Now, the rest of the story goes like this, "Gree didn't have any wings, like Mina's snow dragon, Dreamfinder, so, naturally," Turl swooped his hand downward, "Gree had to come down." Turl paused, "Which...he did, reaching for whatever tree limb he could hang on to." Turl put two hands on his hips then announced, "And as he came down, Gree's voice got louder until both Gree and his yelling stopped." Turl paused with wide eyes. "...just two feet above the ground." Turl turned to Gree, "another daring act survived by our young master Gree." Turl started a clap and the others joined in. Gree was now blushing as he walked to his spot and sat down in the grass. Turl walked back and forth for a moment then pointed to Ansa. "Okay Ansa, you are next. This will not be easy. Too many to choose from." Ansa gasped and jumped up from where she was sitting then stood close to the fire rubbing her hands together. "Ansa is full of wisdom and surprises. I dare say she's the wittiest of us all," Turl turned and said in a hushed voice, "though, I'd like to believe I've can play wit now and again too." He turned to the audience, "This year, Ansa could be found chasing a number of animals...like...birds...frogs...and butterflies." Ansa turned from the fire to listen. "Ansa do you remember when spring was ending and we had climbed up to the only lake ole' Crescent Keep mountain allows to nestle in its climbs?"

"Nimle Top?" Ansa said. "Yes." Turl said. "And, do you remember what happened there?" Ansa cocked her head, "No, I don't." "There were dragon flies out that early morning. Clal was gone and Gree wasn't with us either. Just me and the girls." Turl looked off into the distance. "And, you said one landed on your hand as you were looking out into the water." Turl's gaze froze on

his own hand as he continued the story. "While we were climbing down later, you were behind me. You described the dragon fly to me." Turl smiled slightly. "You described the magic of the colors in its eyes, the head and body and the way the feet poked out, every detail. And...I remember that by the time you were done I had forgotten who I was, where I was going, and your voice almost sounded like you were singing the song of the dragon fly to me." Ansa giggled. "That's Ansa, all things animal and creatures." Turl said. Ansa walked back to her spot in the grass. "It's a gift, Ansa. A gift." At this, Rythe looked over at Ansa who was looking at him. He smiled and she shrugged her shoulders. Rythe clasped his thumbs together and fanned out his fingers flapped them as he moved his now, concocted dragon fly in a figure eight motion. Ansa smiled and nodded slowly. "Clal, come up here, my brother." Turl waved his hand. "Now, Clal is leaving us, along with Ansa, this year." Turl shook his head. "Too soon in my opinion. But..." Turl came close to Clal and wrapped his arm around him. "He's going to become a blacksmith. And, I think, that fits Clal. Swords and shields and poking things." Turl nudged Clal with a finger in his ribs. "I remember one evening when we were pruning the apple trees and mother called us in for meal time. Clal," Turl turned to him, "you stayed out there, sort of, dawdled so as to be the last one there." Clal looked up at Turl and nodded. "You took one of those cut branches, one that looked straight and long and it had two branches sticking out so as to look like the hilt of a sword." Clal started to smile. "You looked around to see if anyone was watching." Turl smiled. "That's when I hid myself more secretly." Turl turned to everyone and said, "Then I heard Clal say, 'I have the upper hand now. Don't think I can't finish this off the way I meant to. The way it's always supposed to have gone.' Then, Clal thrust forward and I don't think I've ever seen such sword's play in all my days. Clal..." Turl turned to Clal who was looking down at the ground. "I would feel safe with you in my midst among any threat of creature or minis that exists in all this land." Turl clapped which caused the rest to clap. Clal smiled then hit Turl on the arm which caused both to start laughing. Clal returned to his seat where Turl came and sat beside him. Ansa stood up, slowly walked toward the fire then turned quickly around on her heels.

"Turl. Turl. Turl." Ansa shook her head as she spoke. "What to say about our eldest brother Turl. Hmm...oh...I think I have something." Ansa froze then hopped forward an inch. "The rotten apple." She turned to Turl. "Do you remember." "Ansa...no." He smiled looking down at his left hand. "No, please. Not that one." "Turl, there are no rules to this here tradition." Ansa smiled wide. "When we were picking apples just a week or two ago, Turl was high on a ladder filling another basket full. Er...two baskets I believe it was." Turl nodded, then shook his head holding up two fingers. "And somehow, the ladder couldn't handle all of that weight. It started tipping with Turl on it." Ansa let out a sharp chirp after which she put her hand on her mouth to prevent any further interruption. "That's when Turl started to yell and swerve and he tipped mouth open wide." Ansa stopped and chuckled then composed herself. "I..." she paused and turned straight face out of force, unsure if she could finish the story. But, having committed to tell it all the way through, she continued, unabated. "Now, I believe in miracles, but never of this kind or s...ss...sort." Ansa stood still for a moment then continued. "On the way down," she was now talking very fast. "Turl caught a branch." She shook her head, "No, not with his hands or feet, but with his mouth, his teeth sinking right into that soft bark and lo," she stood up straight with her hands out, "he stopped himself from falling, with a bark and a bite." Ansa couldn't hold it in any longer she started wailing uncontrollably as the others couldn't help but join her. If it was

Ansa laughing or the story itself, or both, no one knew. However, the laughing went on for a good few minutes and began to die down after Turl replaced Ansa at the fire.

"If mother and father were here we'd tell a few more stories." Turl's eyes looked back along the road toward the direction of their homestead. "This year, they decided to stay home for a few important reasons."

Turl turned looking at Rythe, "this is where we end our story telling with a song that mother used to sing."

Clal, Ansa, Gree, and Mina stood up and stood beside Turl. It was usually Goran and Willa who sat as the children sang for them. But, now, with an audience of one, Rythe couldn't help but smile and feel the love they shared for each other.

They began to sing as the soft light of the fire cast a warm glow upon the scene and the crackling added to the tune.

"The lands of Illia sleep, my love Or so the mountains say And rolling meadows speak of thee
My love, asleep, till day

Though shimmer bright and beam of light Will dance upon your face And all the winds upon the
land Rush in, you'll stay your place."

Each one paused and held in the heart the feelings that they felt just then as they sang their song. Silence reigned for just a moment as the mixture of peace for their heritage kept them loyal to each other.

And sadness, however, was growing in Clal's mind and heart for the road ahead. Ansa too, looking at the two youngest, wished for more time with them.

The group slowly broke apart and Clal walked over to Rythe who was looking far into the forest, now dark, though the moon was full and the light revealed its secrets nonetheless.

Just before Clal was going to speak, Ansa grabbed Clal's arm and spun him around. "Op, whoa..." Clal muttered. She pulled him away from Rythe over past the fire to the other side of the camp. Mina and Gree were at Ansa's heels.

"What, what is this?" He grimaced, "To be treated in such a manner." Ansa pushed him to the ground where he sat, eyebrows raised."

Gree ran to Clal from behind Ansa, "I have a gift for you," he said.

"So do I," Mina ran to join them. "And Ansa too," her blond hair whipping across her face as she turned and looked at Ansa with a smile that stretched from ear to ear.

Ansa came and sat by Clal.

Mina held hers out first both to Clal and Ansa. "They are people. They are us. Momma and pappa, and the five of us." Mina handed each group of people to Clal and Ansa. They were wrapped in aspen wood bark. "I wanted you to remember all of us together and your home and

the valley of Lyrune.” She smiled proud of herself. “Apples, they are made from the stems and seeds of apples.”

Ansa put her hand to her mouth and looked at Clal then leaned forward and grabbed Mina. She tickled her for a moment then released her.”

Mina giggled but was distracted, still looking at the people.

Clal’s finger gently caressed one of the people. It was white, different from all the rest. “And Mina, what does this white one mean?”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you.” She pointed at his, “that’s the one that means you, whoever you are. It’s you, Clal, and you Ansa for your set of people.” She looked at Ansa and Clal’s faces as she cocked her head and lifted her shoulders. “You know, to help you feel kind of...special?!” Her eyebrows went up.

Clal laughed, “I love it. I do feel special.” He smiled and pulled her into her lap. She sat there for a moment as he picked up the white stick person and another and danced them around on both of his knees as he sat cross-legged.

Gree spoke up. “Okay, my turn, “he said taking Mina’s hand and helping her up.

He pulled out two leather pouches and gave them to both Clal and Ansa. “Ansa, you first.” Gree said.

She looked at Clal and then pulled the string to open the pouch while turning it over in her hand. Out dropped a single stone that looked rough and gray. Ansa squinted, however, and turned the stone over in her hand. That’s when Gree started to explain the meaning of the shapes on the stone.

“I carved four animals in one of the stones I found in behind one of the waterfalls halfway up Crescent Keep mountain.”

Ansa pulled the stone closer to her face to reveal creatures from left to right, each increasing in size.

“The dragonfly story Turl told, I was there and so I thought it was a perfect place to start. And then, the animals just came to me and I carved them without much thought, or at least decided on which ones to carve.” He put his hand on his hip. Then it took forever to finish carving them all.” He turned and looked in Turl’s direction, papa and Turl helped me a little.

Ansa touched each of the creatures one by one. A dragonfly. A sparrow. An eagle. A dragon.

“I knew you liked animals and I was just so excited about the idea.” Gree watched as Ansa stood up.

“Thank you, Gree.” She hugged him close. “I will cherish this for as long as I live.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed tight. A gentle tear escaped her eye and rolled halfway down her cheek.

She returned to sit beside Clal as Gree turned to Clal who was now pouring his pouch out onto his hand.

The stone bore five phases of the moon, a similar stone in size and material.

"The first phase is the crescent moon shaped in a thin shape and stands for the first letter of your name, C. Then the waxing, half full, three quarters full, and completely full moon." Gree thought for a moment. "I'm not sure exactly what it means but I thought it would be fun to carve.

Clal jumped up and grabbed Gree swinging him in a circle. "Gree, you are tremendous. This is tremendous. How did you..."

"I don't know, it was...oh, it was one night when I was looking up to the sky and saw the crescent moon, just like that. It reminded me of you and it just, sort of, happened." Gree smiled as Clal put him back down.

"Oh, something like this doesn't just happen." Clal smiled and put both hands on Gree's shoulders. "Thank you, Gree." Then Clal roughled his shaggy hair and smiled.

"Oh, and it also represents the Crescent Hills that surround the east side of Crescent Keep Mountain." Gree said almost under his breath.

"Thank you both. Now, I believe we have a most glorious day planned for tomorrow. You too come with me. Clal is sleeping near Rythe's side of the camp."

Ansa put one hand on each of their shoulders and escorted Gree and Mina to where they three would sleep for the night.

Clal looked again at the stone and smiled. He slipped it back into its pouch then tucked it away into his side pocket. He started to walk over to Rythe and Turl, but they were still deep in conversation so he rerouted and sat on a stump beside the fire.

He looked into the flames in wonder at the spectral of such a phenomenon. *Fire*, he thought. As he continued to stare into the flames the surroundings of the scene melted away and all that was left was Clal and the flames.

As the flames danced and flickered he imagined two flames remaining, frozen in their place, like two people standing across from one another. One of the fire people held a ball which levitated in their hand, up and down, almost unnoticably. Then, it threw the ball to the other fire person. The ball grew and grew until it filled the entirety of the fire which consumed both fire figures.

Just then Rythe put his hand on Clal's shoulder. Clal jumped and turned around grabbing his arm.

"Oh," Clal yelled. "Rythe, I'm sorry." He whispered, "I was just..."

"...focused." Rythe chuckled. "In some kind of trans it seemed."

"Yes. You could say that." Clal said looking back at the fire in wonder about what had just transpired.

“Well, I’ve really enjoyed my time today with you and your family.” He looked at the others who were layed down. “If I would have known it was this fun to be around you all I would have been a regular in your neck of the forest.” He smiled a large smile, then took a bite of his cooked apple he still hadn’t finished.

“Good night, Clal.”

“Good night.”

Rythe walked over to his blanket, took off his boots then slipped inside and turned over.

Clal, scanned the scene and decided to have one last look around camp.

The crickets where singing and chirping their night music as he whisped through the grass and leaves.

“Goodnight, Copper. Goodnight, Echo.” Clal said as he pat the noses of the horses who were tied to a tree for the night.

The road looked vacant and the camp looked safe and still in the moonlight. Clal began to walk toward where Rythe was laying when he had a thought. He stopped then walked toward the river. He thought that it would be perfect to end the night with one last visit to water where he could dip his hand in.

He walked up to the water’s edge, knelt down and leaned in to cup some water in his hand. As he did so something caught his eye. It was his reflection in the water.

He saw his face, his hair, his ears and his shoulders. But, there was something else. Clal squinted and looked dipped down closer to the water to see if he could understand what he was seeing.

A woman’s face, though very faint, appeared over his right shoulder. Clal gasped and spun around to look to see if Ansa had followed him. But, there was no one.

Clal spun back around to see the same woman’s face just where it had been a moment ago. Then, she turned with her hair whipping around and was gone before he could say or do anything else.

Clal immediately stood up. He put his hand on his shoulder then turned and walked toward camp.

The feelings he began to feel overcame him as he’d never felt quite like this before. And as he slipped into his own blanket thoughts of peace and joy filled him, though he didn’t understand why.

The last thing he could remember was the smoke from the fire that trailed up into the sky as it danced around the the moon, the worthy guardian over their sleep during the night.

Chapter 3: Advantis Begins

“Clal...” Rythe nudged him. “It’s morning.”

Clal blinked. He sat up rubbing his head then stood up and wobbled.

No sign of Ansa or Gree or Mina.

Turl was readying the wagon and hitching the horses.

“Come on, Clal,” Ansa came trotting by. “I’ve got some cheese and bread for us to eat till we get to Eldan Vyum in a few hours.”

Clal and Rythe rolled up their sleeping blankets and odds and ends then tossed them into the back of the wagon and climbed in.

Turl flicked the reigns and they were off.

When the cart started moving again Clal returned to his thoughts about what had transpired in the past twenty-four hours. They have left Lyrune for who knows how long, mysterious gifts from parents they’ve never met, Rythe and his story about the RISHK and Talon. Then, the gifts from Gree and Mina, the strange fire, and the woman in the reflection. What’s next?

The clip-clopping of the horse’s hooves on the wooden planks of the bridge they were now crossing added a new sound to their adventures. Clal smiled at the sound of it.

Soon they reached a clearing as the forest gave way to flat lands. They rose over one last hill then reached the top to reveal a wide view of the landscape they were approaching. “Eldan Vyum,” Turl announced. “There it is.” Rythe said in his deep voice. “The Elder City.”

To their right set on a hills was the great castle of Eldan Vyum. Almost from it’s entry there were buildings that fanned out from right to left.

Though Clal and the others had been there before to sell apples at the market, the vastness of the city was always a topic that came up months after they arrived back to Lyrune.

Turl increased the speed of the horses, as he too was excited to set up their wares. They always met the most interesting individuals and heard the most extraordinary stories.

Ansa was less talkative today, Clal noticed as they continued to drive on through the country side. She was looking at the smooth road as it passed under them like the water of a mountain river.

They were all three huddled together again when Rythe looked up at Clal then at Ansa who was staring at the road.

“Ansa, you alright?” Rythe asked her.

She smiled but it slowly faded away. “I think so.”

"Hmph." Rythe nodded. "Right."

There was silence for another few minutes then Rythe spoke again.

"Really?" He said.

"No." Ansa replied.

Ansa leaned forward toward Clal and Rythe.

"I had a dream." She said quietly.

"A dream?" Clal smirked. "You never remember your dreams. And you remember this one?"

"Yes. I can't seem to stop thinking about it. Actually, it seems as if it won't leave me alone."

Clal squinted then said, "Is it about animals?"

Ansa gasped, "Clal? How did you know that?"

"I don't know. It was just that your story...your stone, they were both about animals and that was the first thing that came to mind."

She smiled slightly, "Yes, it was about animals. But not any I really have thought much about."

"Like what," Rythe said, head tilting to one side.

Ansa hesitated. Then looked as if she was going to say something. Then blinked rapidly as she looked at Rythe then Clal.

"A snake." She said cringing at the thought. "Not the most likable creature."

"A snake? What kind of snake?" Clal pressed her.

"It was a red snake but it wasn't a real snake, only a, sort of...on fire." Immediately Clal thought of how his imagination had created the scene with the two figures in the fire last night.

"Fire?" He said in disbelief.

"Ansa, what else did you see?" Rythe's tone became more serious as he was intrested in understanding what this all meant, a very unexpected turn of events to their journey which, he thought, was unfolding in ways he had never imagined.

"The others," Ansa gulped in some air and was feeling different, her heart was beginning to race, "they were made of stone instead and didn't move." She sat up straightening her posture and brought her hands in front of her. "The snake was alive and I followed it as it just moved straight on ward for what seemed," She squinted one eye, "days."

"The other animals..." Clal said.

"They were, they were a eagle. And, there was a very large turtle."

"Then," She smiled, "The strangest thing," She paused and lifted her hands, almost like she was in her dream again. She cupped her hands and created an arch out of her arms. "There were dolphins. I don't know how many but so very many. And they, sort of climbed onto each other and made this arch." She broke out of her trans and looked at Rythe and Clal. "But they were stone."

Rythe was rubbing his chin vigorously at this point. Pausing ever so often, then starting his thinking ritual as before.

Clal was dumbfounded. He shook his head, "This is amazing, Ansa." He smiled, just the kind of thing he liked to think about because, it meant to him, adventure that awaits those who seek to unlock the unknown. "It proves you...wait."

Clal too began rubbing his chin.

"I know what you're thinking," Ansa replied. "I too don't believe these kinds of dreams come by chance."

She shifted her weight and tilted her chin up straightening her posture even straighter.

"I don't know why it's come to me, but I honor the gifts of this world with an oath to fulfill whatever it is I'm supposed to do with this." Ansa said, "Even if I have to weave it in between my daily work as a seemstress's apprentice."

Ansa giggled as she considered the witty way she was able to craft her creative statement.

Clal chuckled too.

Rythe was now rubbing his curly brown hair looking at the ground beneath his feet. He waited for several minutes then spoke.

"What happened at the very end of your dream?" Rythe asked softly, then looked at Ansa, eyes squinting.

"There were," she hesitated, "chains."

Rythe raised his head with eyebrows raised, "Did you say, chains?"

"Yes. Many chaines. On a floor made of many stones." She continued. "It was dark and they some of the chain links were broken." Ansa was looking off into the distance with a straight face.

"I don't understand any of it." She whispered. "And the feelings it made me feel, I've never felt them before as long as I have lived."

Her eyes began to fill up with tears. "I don't know whether to be excited or afraid."

Clal reached over and rubbed her back. "You know what I think?" He said. "I think special dreams come to special people." He pulled her to his side and put his head on hers.

"Clal, if ever I had a brother, I'd want one just like you." Rythe broke free from his contemplative serous look and laughed roughing up Clal's hair in the process.

They all three smiled then Rythe continued. "I think this is something, Ansa, that you'll understand over time." He smiled. "Just don't give up on it."

"Okay. I won't." She said, smiling still held by Clal.

The remainder of their journey from countryside to city entrance remained uneventful. Soon they were rolling in through the gates, pulling up to and stopping at the location in the market where they would set up their booths. Then they all jumped down from the cart and began moving apple barrels and setting up tables and canopies.

Once everything was unloaded Turl turned to Clal, "Clal, we've got the rest of this. You and Ansa have enough to worry about." He leaned over and rolled a barrel to Gree and Mina who pushed together to move it to their spot.

"Why don't the three of you head out."

"Well, I suppose..." Clal started to say.

"Thank you, Turl." Ansa hugged and kissed him on the forehead. "We would like that very much." Winking at Clal she ran to to where Gree and Mina were working and hugged them long enough to let them know she would miss them both.

Clal too walked over and gave them his best wishes. He embraced Turl.

"You're what made me who I am, Turl." Clal pulled away looking at the only oldest brother he's ever known.

"You are who you are, Clal, because of your birthright. Nothing can change that." Turl smiled, then Clal turned and walked to catch up to Ansa and Rythe who was already walking toward one of the main streets.

After walking for only a few minutes Rythe spoke. "Do either of you know where the seamstress shop is?"

Clal smiled. It didn't occur to him that he would need to know where it was since Turl was driving the cart earlier. "No." He said.

They walked a few steps further down the busy road, some shops open and some still dark. Rythe walked over to one of the shop owners and asked, "Hello there. I'm looking for the royal seamstress and thought you might be able to tell us which road we should take?"

The man was old and wore a long robe. He smiled and simply pointed in the direction they were already going. Then he spoke in a quite, scratchy voice, "Gwynn, everyone knows her. Nice lady. She lives down along the second street to your left. Just take that road, second street then turn on the first street...turn right." He finally said.

Rythe whispered to himself. "Second street on the left then first street on the right. Easy enough."

He turned to the man and said, "Thank you, sir." Then paused looking at the tables he was beginning to set up. "Before we go is there anything we can do for you here?"

A wide smile replaced his puckered lips which revealed a mouth full of teeth except for two. "Oh, how nice. No. No, I'm fine today. Just have a lot to do to prepare for the people who come every year for Advantis. Exciting, isn't it."

"Yes. It is." Rytthe replied. "You sure we can't help you with anything? Do you have anything heavy we can lift for you? You've given us some valuable information that we truly needed."

The man put his pinky to his lips as Rytthe finished speaking. Then turned around and waved them into his humble one bedroom shop. He walked to a corner of the room.

"I have crates to carry outside. This is the only help I think I need today." The man pointed with his hand to the crates. Rytthe hefted one, Clal grabbed another, then Ansa found one and lifted it up, here eyes doubling in size as she pulled it to her chest to steady.

The old man also picked up a crate.

Outside in front of the small house there was a table which the crates were set upon.

"What are these?" Ansa asked the man when he set down his crate.

"I carve historical scenes out of river wood." He picked one up and set it down on the ground. "Like this one...the battle of the old country."

"Old country?" Clal said to himself but loud enough for the man to hear.

"When the winds changed their song, and the waves turned." He smiled though distance was in his eyes. "The flame bent and the earth lay still."

He smiled, "It's just lore. But, you can never tell these days what truth is in it."

"How much for this one?" Rytthe dug into the crate he had brought and picked out a small flat piece of carved wood.

"Keep it young fellow." The man pat Rytthe on the shoulder. "I can tell you are a good one."

Rytthe looked at Clal and smiled slightly.

"We must be off," Clal announced. "I am Clal of Lyrune. This is my sister, Ansa. And our friend Rytthe."

"I am Alden. Pleased to meet you all." He smiled.

"We may visit you again if you're not opposed." Clal said.

"Friends today. Friends alas." The man said.

"We wish you well in your sales this Advantis season." Rytthe smiled and held up his wooden carving.

"Thank you." the man said and watched as the three stepped into the street then turned the corner the man had suggested.

They followed Alden's directions passing houses and signs, shopps and eateries. As they continued to Gwynn's shop, the homes increased in beauty and size.

"I liked Alden." Ansa said. "Do you ever get that feeling that some people are just...I don't know...good people?!"

"I do." Clal said. "And, now we have a friend in the city. I like that thought."

"Here we are," Ryt he said stretching out his arm. "Gwynn's Sewing Establishment."

Clal looked at the home and noticed some light in the window. Through the window two candles were burning on a large wooden table in the middle of the room. An old woman was needling away at some fabric. She looked up, noticed she had visitors, then stood from her chair and approached the door. She opened the door, then said addressing Ansa.

"Hello." She waddled toward them a few steps. "Are you Ansa Winden?"

"Yes, that's me."

"I have been anxiously awaiting your arrival." Gwynn smiled widely. Ansa hesitated. She looked at Clal. She was doubting herself at this moment unsure of what or how to feel.

"Gwynn," Clal smiled. "Thank you for taking Ansa in as your apprentice. She's a gem." Clal winked.

"I'm sure she is," Gwynn walked over and put her arm through Ansa's. "Come," she said, "We can shall get a acquainted before the nights through. Then start early in the morning."

Clal broke free of Gwynn's grasp and ran over to Clal. She embraced him as her tears started to freely flow.

"Why now, Clal?" She said through brief gasps.

"Time. Remember." Clal pulled her away from her gently and held her in front of him. "It's that time. Time to go. Time to grow...up." Clal pulled out his carved stone.

"But..." he threw it up and tossed it. "Don't worry. I'll be back at week's end to help Turl, Gree and Mina load up. And we can talk about that carved stone and the animals, all about your sewing and what was in that fancy wooden box our parents left for us."

Ansa gasped and put her hand to her mouth. "I almost forgot about that, Clal. Have you opened yours?"

Clal shook his head. "Open it before we meet next." Then, we'll have too much to talk about, I'm sure.

She felt her pack, ran her finger along something hard and smiled. "Okay," she said with a nod.

Ansa turned to Rythe, "Don't forget to come see me before you leave Eldan Vyum, Rythe." She said smiling.

"See you?" Rythe smiled, "I would promptly call my self a fool if I didn't pay you a visit before I left for home again." He winked and gave her a wave.

Ansa turned, paused, then ran to Gwynn's side.

Gwynn wrapped her arm around her and said, "I have no doubt you and I will become fast friends." Ansa smiled, "Oh Gwynn, I like you already." Ansa turned and waved again to Clal then she disappeared behind the shop door.

"She's going to do well, I would imagine." Rythe said as they began walking along the street again.

"Ansa's always been special." Clal squinted remembering how many times she had saved him from his own shortsightedness or had quieted him just before he was sure to regret the words that were about to come out of his mouth.

"We've never been apart until this very moment." Clal's voice trailed off into a whisper.

Rythe nodded. Rythe led them to the end of a row of houses then they turned another corner. "So, you know where the blacksmith shop is from here then, Rythe?"

Rythe nodded. "You are good to her, Clal. A true friend." He smiled.

Clal looked over his shoulder as they walked down another city street. Many other boys were running rampant with laughter and great excitement.

"It's just up here on the left," Rythe pointed.

They soon arrived and stood in front of the Talon's shop. Rythe turned to Clal. "Something tells me though, Clal, that she's made of iron, your sister. And that there's more to her than what one might see from the outside looking in." Rythe clapped Clal back with a smile then stepped up to the front door of the establishment.

"My, Ansa," Clal whispered. He shook his head and chuckled as he stepped and joined Rythe then knocked on the door.

After a few moments Clal knocked again, this time louder.

By this time Rythe had invited himself to the window. Looking in for a moment he turned. "Clal, I don't know if anyone is here."

Rythe walked around to the other side of the shop as Clal followed. He peeked into another grimy window while Clal looked over his shoulder.

"No," Rythe said, "it looked so different from when I was here last." Rythe reached out to touch the door handle. "And it feels different too," he spoke to himself.

They investigated the premises further, all windows and all doors leading in and found them all to be closed and locked.

“That was the day that was agreed upon.” Clal said scratching the back of his head.

“Perhaps he just...I don’t know...maybe, out for a moment.” Clal said, though, when the words came out of his mouth he knew that Talon wasn’t late.

“Rythe, your story. The RISHK. The request from Renthar...”

“...I know, it kind of lines up,” Rythe said looking concerned, “Talon is in danger.”

Clal turned again to the door and ran his finger along the door frame. Then, he looked at Rythe. “This door was forced open.”

Rythe walked closer then looked at where Clal was pointing. He shook his head, “You can stay with me at the inn until we sort this out.”

“The inn?” Clal said. “Yeah, don’t worry. We’ll make it work” Rythe waved Clal on to follow him and they started walking through the streets of Eldan Vyum. It was dark, though the city was still bustling with crowds and lights. They soon reached the inn. Rythe turned the doorknob of the front door and they both entered.

They spoke with the innkeeper and purchased a room with two beds for the night. There were boys everywhere, in the hallways, on the stairs and in the dining area.

“We must have taken the last available room.” Rythe said.

Clal and Rythe reached the end of a hall and stood by a door. Rythe unlocked the door with the key the innkeeper had given him. He opened the door and they both entered the room. It wasn’t long till there was a knock at their door.

“Who is there,” Rythe said.

“Morry, the innkeeper.”

Rythe opened the door to the room revealing a short middle aged man with a round face.

“Pardon the interruption sirs, but one of you dropped your pack when you came in a moment ago?”

Sure enough, Rythe’s pack was missing. He was the one who talked with the innkeeper. He must have set it down.

“Thank you, Morry.” Rythe said.

“My pleasure,” Morry said. “I’ll be off now. Good evening.”

The door had almost shut when Rythe shouted, “Wait, Morry!” Morry’s head popped back in the room.

“Talon the blacksmith, have you seen him? Has he come to your inn lately?” Rythe said.

“Old Talon?” Morry said. “Oh, no. I haven’t heard a tall tale from him since...” Morry scratched his beard, “...since three months back. And he used to be my best customer, too.”

“Thank you,” Rythe said and Morry closed the door behind him.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Clal said. “It just doesn’t make any sense. How can I be an apprentice to a missing blacksmith?”

All Rythe could do was shake his head. He laid down, rolled onto his side and was breathing heavily in a moment.

Clal, on the other hand, refused to sleep. He remained sitting up on his bed looking out at the night sky. The crescent moon that hung from the star speckled sky reminded him of Lyrune, and he slipped away into dreams of Crescent Keep Mountain where the days were innocent and free.

Chapter 4: To the Examination

Clal awoke to Rythe shaking him vehemently. “Clal. Clal. I’m late for the examination.” Rythe said. “We slept too long and too late.”

Clal jumped from his bed, pulled on his clothes, then grabbed his pack. They were both barely awake when they exited the inn and ran down the city road. They zipped through the city as fast as they could. Before long they were standing in front of the gate of the grand castle of Eldan Vyum.

There were three guards. Rythe approached them.

“We are here for the examination, sire. Are we too late?” Rythe said. “May we enter?”

“It’s about to start,” the guard said. “If you hurry, you may be able to make it there before the opening ceremonies begin.”

Then a second guard said, “I will accompany you to the great hall.” The guard stepped forward and began to walk toward the castle.

Clal leaned over to Rythe, “Wait, Rythe. I’m not supposed to be here. What do I do now?”

“Suppose you stay with me,” Rythe whispered. “There will be so many boys that you’ll be sure to get lost among them. They won’t notice that you don’t go up to get examined, and by the time they might, we’ll be gone. I’m one of the first because of my birth date.”

Clal shook his head. “I’m supposed to be at the blacksmith’s right now, not here.” He whispered back to Rythe. “I’m also supposed to be asleep at the moment, not walking into the great hall of the castle to be examined two years too early.”

“Don’t worry, Clal,” Rythe said with a wry sort of smile, “what’s the worst that could happen.”

“I don’t think I want to find out.” Clal said.

They followed the guard the rest of the way in silence after Clal and Rythe caught back up. Clal wondered why he hadn’t thought to stay at the inn and wait for Rythe. They were simply in too much of a hurry to think responsibly. This was his only explanation.

The guard turned around a corner with Rythe and Clal close behind. They could see the giant doors to the great hall ornately decorated and as high as three grown men. Large frosted windows lined the long wall of the great hall. However, it was the group of statues that held Clal’s attention as they approached the place where they were positioned.

“Rythe,” Clal asked pointing, “do you know what those statues are?” He spoke loud enough for even the guard to hear.

“It’s our Seldinolum and his brave companions,” the guard said. “The great sculpture Bollono of the fifth age fashioned the final scene depicted from a prophecy, now lost to us, of the last days. It’s the great last battle when the dark one lurking will turn to ash, and when life will prevail over death forever more, or so the prophecy goes,” the guard concluded.

They passed by the statues, six distinct figures, all appearing to be in the middle of a great attack upon their foe. They were etched in pure white stone and strikingly alive in appearance. Each stood on a pedestal-like structure, square in shape with a string of characters etched on each of the pedestals’ four sides.

“Which one is Seldinolum, sir?” Clal asked the guard.

“It’s that one,” he pointed.

The statue was leading the others, Clal now noticed, and he held a two edged sword of magnificent size. He held it pointing down, his body twisted as if he had just motioned

downward in a mighty blow. He wore a dagger by his side and strapped across his chest was a horn. Clal looked closer as he passed by. Etched into the horn's side was a dragon that curved and wrapped around it.

"A dragon?" He whispered to himself.

Though Clal wanted to stay and study each sculpture in detail, he knew they must keep moving. It wasn't long before they reached the grand doors of the great hall and the guard ushered Rytte and Clal in. The lurching sound of the doors on their hinges filled the hallway and they shut with a loud boom.

They walked under an archway then through a small throng of boys before finding an open area to sit on the stone floor of the hall. They had come late and so they sat in the very back of the hall. Clal looked behind him and saw that there was a doorway with one guard at his post. He found other doorways throughout the hall where there wasn't a doorway without a guard. Rytte and Clal didn't have time to discuss anything else because as soon as they were seated, the royal trumpet call began.

At the front of the hall on a stone platform rested a table with two chairs on each side. In the chair on the right sat, what must have been, the king, King Neldeer, who wore a crown and a grand robe. He held a golden scepter in his left hand. His face was smooth and his beard the color of sand but graying. He wore a smile and sat tall.

On the left sitting in the other less adorned chair sat a very old man, who Clal ventured to assume was the royal examiner. He'd never seen an examiner and didn't have the faintest idea of what one would even look like or even really was or did.

The man wore a long robe, spectacles, and a strange necklace made of gold. As Clal looked closer he noticed the stone that was suspended in the center of a golden hoop that hung by a chain from the examiner's neck. The stone, even from Clal's limited view, was a deep blue that seemed almost alive to his keen eye.

The old man's beard fell down his chest and onto his lap. He wore no covering over his gray locks. The man was surveying the crowd of young boys, his head moving back and forth slowly. His eyes were green and surprisingly aware given his age though Clal sensed within their depths that they had seen even the ancient of all days.

"Rytte," Clal whispered and pointed, "is that the examiner on the left?"

Rytte didn't speak but only mouthed the words, "I think so."

The table was adorned with a scroll, a candle and a few other things which Clal was not able to decipher. When the silence began to give way to whispers, another royal official appeared from the side and stood in front of the table. The trumpets sounded again, then the man who just appeared spoke.

"I present our King, King Neldeer, son of Neldish, King of Eldan Vyum, High King and ruler of all Illia." The trumpet sounded once more while the man turned and exited the hall.

King Neldeer arose and approached the wooden table.

"Welcome my young Illian youth, our future and our destiny, the great sons of yesterday's youth and the youth of our time." The king smiled and scanned the hall. "You have come from the four corners of our lands and have traveled long to answer the call and duty for your examination in this coming of age time in your lives."

"Most of you know the history behind this most noble and honorable occurrence, however, there may be some who do not. I have asked our royal examiner, Morgrith, to instruct you in this matter." King Neldeer turned around and took his seat.

Morgrith arose and approached the wooden table. "Greetings, to our noble sons of Illia." His voice was deep and rang throughout the hall.

"I am Morgrith, son of Felsawn." He paused. "Long ago this land was born and all evil had been remitted. The land grew older, and the people grew greater in number. Though the darkness had given way to light, the great orchestrator of this world knew that this would not always be the case. And so, a bloodline was marked, a path was charted, and the destiny of a great deliverer was sealed."

Morgrith paused and looked over the vast group of boys. All eyes were upon him. The words he spoke held every boy spellbound. Many of this young generation had never heard this version of Illian history before, especially presented in this manner.

"And though our fathers of old were confident," Morgrith continued, "that the great deliverer would emerge in his appointed time and place, they did not want to leave the future of our world up to mere chance. Neither the day nor the hour is known by any man and never has been known since this would come to be when this deliverer, the chosen one, Seldinolum, would take his place and lead our people home."

"And so, our fathers thought to seek out this one, to name him and to train him, early, before the dark one lurking and the evils of this world gain the upper hand."

He stood even taller then said, "I am the examiner. I have been tasked to find this one, our deliverer. And with this yearly officiation and sacred searching hour, we believe the one will be found while the final seeds, the greatest evil that will be sewn by the dark one, are yet in their infancy."

Morgrith paused.

I will now read 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 was one who roamed 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 with fade without a fight"

Morgrith concluded and returned to his chair.

Then a woman walked onto the platform followed by a man carrying a lyre. This caused the boys to start to whisper, but they were immediately silenced by the beauty of the woman's voice.

"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 the two musicians finished their presentation, they exited the hall and disappeared.

King Neldeer arose. "We are pleased to have had our royal musicians present such beauty before us."

"Now," the King continued, "Each of you will be called to be examined according to your individual birth month and day. The following young men," he said as he picked up a scroll from the table and unrolled it, "will approach this platform as your name is called."

"Olios, son of Olio. Neethum, son of Neethum. Sam, son of Arg. Rythe, son of Deamus. Tuloth, son of Tul..." King Neldeer continued to call the young men as one by one stood and walked toward the front of the hall.

"See," Rythe said, "Your fortune is turning already Clal." Rythe smiled. "The sooner I'm examined the sooner we can figure out a way out of here...quietly." Rythe stood, then said, "Clal, I will be back soon."

Rythe walked away just as the others were, through the mass of boys sitting on the stone floor and up the long aisle to the stone platform. He watched Rythe smile at another boy and begin conversing with him and the boy next to him.

When King Neldeer finished calling several of the boys' names he then added. "No Illian boy is to leave until all have been examined, until the feast afterwards has concluded, and until you all have slept and are well rested for your journey home in the morning."

Rythe looked at Clal who was looking in Rythe's direction. Rythe raised his eyebrows. But as Clal was reminded by Rythe's words he said earlier, who would notice them gone when there were so many boys to keep track of?

The boy in front of Rythe began to walk further down the aisle and Rythe followed, disappearing from Clal's site. Clal returned his attention to his immediate surroundings. He fumbled through his pack to find something useful to do, to keep his attention off of the complicated plight he had put himself in. His hand slid across something long and slender. "My Mother's scroll" he thought.

Clal quickly pulled it out and unraveled it until it was full length in his lap.

"Clal, I've always loved my twins, my Clal and my Ansa. And though I am far away, you are always with me. Take great care of Ansa. She needs you and you also need her. And above all remember the Winden Family Creed.

"Let all that's said and done by you,

Be always done and said in truth."

With all my love,

Your Mother"

Clal smiled, then slowly ran his finger over the Winden Family Creed and across his mother's name. His smile faded, however, as he realized how very far he was from her side. She was good to him, to all of them. He's never felt to want for a better mother.

Clal looked up from the scroll paper and heard King Neldeer, once again, begin to announce the names of the next set of boys. A few of the boys had started to walk back from their examinations and Clal expected Rythe to be returning soon and that their plans for their escape would also commence. Clal looked down again at the scroll from his mother and skimmed the rest of the contents. It was the directions to their new abode in Reubis.

Clal was sitting on the hard stone floor of the hall like the rest of the boys, looking around and fidgeting. Since he was in the very back, Clal decided that standing up to stretch for a moment would be of no consequence to anyone around him. So, he rose and stood.

At that exact moment King Neldeer had announced another boy's name and to those who were not privy to the details, it would have appeared that Clal belonged to that particular name that had just been announced. And so, when Clal hesitated to move and proceed up the aisle of the great hall, the guard who stood in the doorway just behind him coaxed him to join the others promptly.

Clal froze. "I, I..." was all Clal could utter.

The guard stepped closer to Clal then reached over and grasped the hilt of his sword. "No one has ever refused a king's command to arise and approach the royal platform." He growled. "Is this what you proposing?"

Clal stared at the guard realizing that he had once again brought another ill turn to his already destitute predicament. "No, sir," he quickly said. "No."

"Then take your pack and be on your way." The guard said.

So, Clal turned around, picked up his pack, and like a scolded dog, slowly made his way up the great hall's aisle and arrived in front of the platform, a place he had never intended to find himself.

Chapter 5: The Examination

When Clal reached the front of the hall, a few other boys had begun to gather. Clal avoided any eye contact and looked ahead for a chance to be one of the first boys to proceed. A man appeared after a few moments than said.

"You may move forward," he said. Clal followed the one other boy toward a door and out of the hall. They turned a few corners then down a circular staircase. They entered a larger corridor with a vaulted ceiling. The line of boys marched along the length of it arriving before an ornately decorated wall made of blue, yellow and red stones.

A grand and tall door resided in the center of the wall and the knob was of the most exquisite polished gold.

A guard, decorated and adorned with a blue sash and blue jewels on the hilt of his sword stood before the door. The man that led them to this point turned to the boys and spoke.

"We've arrived before the examination chamber. Each one of you will stand before the examiner, the grand enchanter, Morgrith, who will employ an ancient magic to reveal the chosen one, Seldinolum, our deliverer. Once found, all other examinations cease and all boys will return to the great hall for the long awaited coronation ceremony that will immediately commence."

The man knocked on the door, "tap, tap...tap, tap." It opened. He turned to the boy in front of Clal. "Young man, you may proceed." He was ushered into the room and the chamber door closed behind him.

Clal stood there looking at the door. He noticed a single tree at the top and a group of people on the bottom of the door connected by a long line. There were symbols that Clal could not read. The scene was curious to Clal.

Before Clal had a chance to think much about anything else, the door opened and the man turned to Clal. "You may enter" he said as he ushered him into the chamber. Clal stepped in and the chamber door once again slid shut. Clal walked several paces down a narrow hall then into the main chamber area. The room was lit by four torches in its corners and the ceiling was vaulted high above him up into a point.

The floor was fashioned of two large circles, the center as wide as a wagon wheel, made of a white, translucent stone. It was set inside a larger circle that was covered in strange markings and filled almost the entire width of the room.

The walls bore the same markings. However, each of the four walls depicted a scene that Clal did not recognize. Each scene was a representation of a prophecy fulfilled and of a time that had not taken place yet. There was a great battle with many people, a scene of just a forest. A dragon, white and masterfully depicted. And then there was a sword gripped by an unknown hand that was set inside the very sun itself.

Clal also noticed a table that was set almost against the wall opposite himself. There was a candle and a scroll and Morgrith sat in a chair behind it eyeing Clal's every move. Clal was startled at first to see him so inconspicuously watching.

"Come forward," Morgrith's voice boomed. "What is your name?"

Clal hesitated. "Clal Winden,"

"Where are you from, Clal Winden?"

"I am from the West near the sea." Clal said. "Do you know the valley of Lyrune?"

"Yes," Morgrith slowly nodded. "I do know that region of Illia. It is beautiful."

"Yes, it is." Clal replied.

"And," Morgrith continued, "your age?"

Again Clal hesitated, but this time the words of the Winden Family Creed came into his mind, that he must always be true.

"Thirteen."

"Thirteen?" Morgrith his bushy eyebrows and he sat up a little taller and leaned into the table.

"Then how did you come to be here?"

"By mistake, sir." Clal said, swallowing hard.

"I see," Morgrith arose. "Remember Clal, there are rarely if ever any moments in our Illian time when, where we find ourselves can ever truly be called a mistake."

Morgrith walked from behind the table toward Clal who was still standing in the middle of the room. When he was just a foot away from Clal, the stone in the center of the hoop that was hanging from Morgrith's neck began to glow faintly. Clal's eyes were wide as he watched the faint glow continue to increase in brightness. Then Clal began to inch backwards away from Morgrith.

"Clal?" Morgrith said.

"I'm sorry. I..." Clal continued to stare at the stone. "I am afraid."

"Fear is the enemy, Clal, an enemy to all light, and is a thief. It devours everything in its path if we allow it to." Then Morgrith gently said, "Do not be afraid, Clal." He smiled then said, "Are you ready to continue the examination?"

"Yes," Clal said.

When Morgrith again approached Clal, the stone began to glow just as before. This time Morgrith lifted the gold chain of the necklace off of himself then slipped the necklace over Clal's hair until it rested on his neck. The stone continued to glow steadily while Morgrith returned to his seat. He sat down without a sound and continued to watch Clal. He waited.

After a long pause with no immediate change, Morgrith placed his palms on the table and leaned forward to raise himself up from his chair. It was then that the blue stone burst forth a brilliant beam of light that collided with one of the walls. The wall itself began to illuminate, then the next wall, then the next until all of the walls were glowing. The circle upon which Clal was standing also began to glow.

Clal raised his hands in front of his chest. He rotated his hand back and forth as the light from the stone bathed his fingers and palms with blue light. Clal's attention was drawn back to the walls as he began to hear faint noises and noticed that the scenes on the walls were moving. The greatest of all was the scene where Seldinolum was swinging his grand sword against his mighty foe, the brightest of all, the sword was in flames.

As Clal continued to look at each wall a song began to emit from the stone that hung from his neck. Clal heard the song begin to echo in the chamber and did not recognize the tune. He wanted so much to know what it was. "What is this song Morgrith?" he said.

"It is the song of the prophecy, Clal, that I recited just a few hours ago in the great hall."

Clal listened to the song. In that moment Clal felt peace, he felt strength, he was filled with hope and joy. He could not remember what it ever felt like to feel fear, to feel doubt.

When the song completed, to Clal's surprise and almost by instinct he pulled the chain from his neck and returned the necklace to Morgrith.

"Clal," Morgrith immediately said. "It is vital that you listen carefully to what I am about to divulge to you."

Clal nodded.

"I am a keeper of the ancient light and from those ancient days I have come to shepherd the wielders of light." Morgrith arose once again and stood in front of Clal.

"Clal, I am certain," he now said in a quiet voice, "that you are indeed the chosen one. But..." Morgrith then leaned even closer to Clal and said, "...Clal, you and I will be the only ones who knows this when you leave the confines of this chamber. We will safeguard this truth for the entire examination tradition was concocted by our forefathers as a grand diversion. I alone am the only one that knows this." Morgrith paused, "The chosen one, now you, Clal, was never intended to be exposed in the manner that has been invented by the kingdom's magistrates. For the darkness, the enemies of Illia are not all known and the purpose of your calling, Clal, is only to be known at the utmost necessary moment."

Morgrith reached into his robe and retrieved a scroll and passed it to Clal who took it from him.

"But, enough of that for now. Take this scroll. You must be on your way so as not to cause suspicion that you are the chosen one. Read it in private then meet me after the fifth ring of the great castle bell."

"Where?" Clal said.

"It is all in the scroll." He then motioned for him to walk down the hall and exit the chamber. "Through that door down there. We shall see each other again shortly, Clal Winden." Then Morgrith added, "And please bring Rythe along."

Clal walked down the hall, opened the door and before he closed it he heard Morgrith say, "Please send another youth in."

When Clal closed the door a man was awaiting Clal. "Follow me," he said. Clal followed the man down a very long hallway. They then passed under a large arch and into the great hall once again. Remembering where Rythe and him had been sitting before, Clal walked toward the back of the great hall. He saw Rythe sitting there. Rythe caught sight of Clal and sat up quickly keeping his gaze fixed on him.

"Clal, hello," Rythe said.

"Hello Rythe." Clal replied, and for the first time in his life he could not think of anything to say.

Clal and Rythe sat there quietly for a long time as names were called and boys went to be examined. They both knew the examination process now, it was no longer a mystery. The great mystery that remained was how Clal could truly be the chosen one, and how what was said in the prophecies, the lore, and in the songs of old were all referring to him, Clal Winden of Lyrune. This was unfathomable.

He remembered the greatness depicted in the statues and in the walls that were so vividly moving in the examination chamber. How could that be about him? It was too much to think about. He turned his attention to the last things Morgrith told him, which was to read the scroll and meet him after the fifth chime of the castle bell.

"Clal? Where were you? Were you...examined?" Rythe finally asked.

Clal turned to him and nodded. "I stood up to stretch my legs and the guard coaxed me thinking I arose at the call of my name." Clal smiled. "But, I survived. See, I'm here."

"The examiner," Rythe said, "did he take off that strange necklace and put it on you too?"

"Yes," Clal said.

"Then what happened?" Rythe said.

"Nothing," Clal said, sitting rigidly. His palms were beginning to sweat.

"Me too. I imagined an entirely different process." Rythe said, smiling from one side of his mouth.

"I didn't know what to expect exactly. I was just afraid they would somehow find out I wasn't supposed to be there."

"Well, we're supposed to be concocting a plan to get out of here without being noticed." Rythe said. "Have you thought of anything?"

"Yes, Clal smiled." I have just the thing. "But first, I have to read something." Clal pulled out the small scroll Morgrith gave him. "Rythe, can you sit behind me and cover me as I read this. Sometimes castle guards can be quite nosey, I've heard."

They repositioned themselves and Clal began to read the contents of the scroll.

"To the chosen one,

At the time that you read these words you will have already been directed to meet me, Morgrith. Here are your instructions. When you leave the great hall there will be a long hallway on your right that will lead you to a flight of stairs. Once you've reached that flight of stairs, your path will be marked by a symbol on the walls that will be very small. The token or symbols to look for will be a crescent moon and a cluster of stars enveloped by a great sun. You will find your way through the castle and to the appointed location only by following the symbols inconspicuously placed on the ceilings or walls.

Do not delay once the fifth chime has rung.

Until we meet, may safety be at your side, always.

Morgrith."

Clal quickly put the scroll in his pack and turned to Rythe. "I'm finished reading. Do you know about the feast?"

"Yes," Rythe said.

"We will leave after the castle bell is finished ringing. It rings five times." Clal said quietly.

"Right." Rythe said. Then he leaned over and said, "Clal, are you all right?"

"Yes," Clal sighed. "It's just been a very different few days than I would have ever imagined. I'm still in the castle and never should have been here. I'm worried. It's all right Rythe. We'll soon be on our way, I'm sure."

There were boys still coming and going but time seemed to be passing quickly. Soon, Clal knew it would be time to try the plan that Morgrith set out for him. He trusted Morgrith, and that made all the difference.

King Neldeer arose once more after Rythe and Clal had been talking for a while. "I'd like to announce that this is the final group of Illian youth to be called for the examination." He then began to call out several more names and several boys arose and took their place at the front of the hall.

Rythe leaned over to Clal, "We are close, Clal."

"Follow my lead, Rythe." Clal said smiling.

They both sat in the back of the hall waiting, barely even breathing. Clal had never attempted anything so daring and dangerous before. His heart began to race as he imagined sneaking off into the hallway and running through the halls as all the guards in the castle chased them down.

It was a thrilling thought, one that he would have rather kept as a scene from one of his imaginary adventures. But here he was, awaiting the castle bells, on the verge of attempting an escape almost against his will.

“Dong!”

“Rythe, the castle bells.” Clal said. “The feast will begin soon. This marks the end of the examinations.”

“Dong!”

“The examinations have now concluded for the year,” the King announced. “The feast will begin shortly. Please wait to be escorted to the royal dining hall.”

“Dong!”

Boys all through the hall began to stand in groups and the hall almost erupted immediately in conversation. Rythe and Clal also stood and stayed close together eyeing every doorway.

“Tell me, Clal,” Rythe said, “which way?”

“We’ll be using the right hall so stay to the right when we finally begin to move.” Clal said.

“Dong!”

“When did you think up this plan, Clal?” Rythe said with a smile but squinted eyes.

“I will explain later, Rythe.” Clal met his gaze and smiled. “Remember what you said about fortune turning in my favor...” Clal winked.

“Dong!”

“That’s it,” Clal whispered to himself. “That’s it.”

King Neldeer once again addressed the great hall. “Guards, please escort the sons of Illia into the royal dining hall.”

Boys began to file through all doors that led from the great hall. Clal and Rythe, as planned, stayed to the right and entered into the hallway. Clal looked ahead and indeed as described by Morgrith in the scroll, the staircase was there up ahead of them.

When they arrived at the staircase Clal slowed his pace then leaned to Rythe. “Do you see this symbol Rythe,” Clal had taken his scroll out of his pocket and was pointing to the Crescent Moon, Stars and Sun symbol.”

“I do,” Rythe said. “Where did you get this?”

“Follow me and look for that symbol and the walls and ceiling along the way,” Clal said.

Just then, a guard noticed that Clal and Rythe had stopped walking toward the royal dining hall. “Move along he said.”

“I think it’s time, Rythe.”

“I said move along.” The guard said, now moving toward Clal and Rythe.

“Now!” Clal said and they bounded up the stairs and down the hall.

“Halt!” the guard said. Several boys and other guards heard the commotion then a group of guards ran after the escapees.

“Clal,” Rythe said out of breath, “I hope you have a plan after all because those guards...” Rythe gasped, “...they don’t look like they are happy with us right now.”

Clal desperately searched for the symbol on the walls or ceiling as they ran down the hallway. They turned and then Rythe said, “Clal I see the symbol.”

Clal turned, spotted the symbol and turned down the hallway that was marked.

“Halt! Boys, that’s not the way to the feast,” they heard the guards behind them.

Once again Clal spotted a marked path through the halls as the symbol was visible on a stone wall. This happened several more times, on archways and behind torches, always placed in shadows where only the careful eye could see them.

They turned a corner and up some stairs then in the corner of Clal's eye he saw a symbol right in the middle of a passageway in the center of an arch.

"Rythe," Clal said, "it's a dead end, but here's the marking." He pointed.

"Halt! Boys stop!" the guards said. Then from down another direction Clal heard screaming and squawking. "What's that sound?" Clal said.

Rythe had been studying the wall when he said, "Clal, maybe it's a secret passageway. Maybe we are supposed to push on one of the stones or something."

Clal turned from the noise and surveyed the wall.

"Clal, push the wall." Rythe said.

Then Clal placed his hand on the wall and was about to push, but the wall began to disappear before them. Clal fell inside a small chamber having no way of holding himself up as the wall had all but vanished. Rythe jumped in under the archway and partially dragged Clal further in. They both stood up and inched backwards as they looked at the arch and wall that had been there. On the floor there was the same mark that they had followed to this point, it being much larger than they had seen before.

Suddenly, Clal and Rythe heard commotion beyond the chamber, guards yelling, and footsteps fast approaching. They both were ready to pounce as they prepared to stand their ground against the next onslaught of attackers when, like a flash, something whizzed passed them. Immediately after, a small figure appeared in the archway and turned the corner falling to the floor. The person looked back at the archway as the wall reappeared and sealed them in.

Then the person turned their head and looked straight at them and said, "Clal!"

It was Ansa.

Chapter 6: Ansa At the Shop

Ansa was awake before the sun had any chance to send its shafts of golden light over the blue mountains in the East. The morning sky glowed and she stood up from her bed to enjoy the scene from her window in her room. She knew where she was and her recollection of the happenings the night before were clear in her mind, however, her only uncertainty was the feeling she felt that Clal was somehow in trouble.

But, she was here, and Clal, he was at the blacksmith's, and it would be three days until they would meet again. "I'm sure he's fine," she muttered under her breath. "What trouble could he possibly get into not even less than a day since they parted last?"

Having just made the bed, Ansa sat down, retrieved her pack from off of the wooden plank floor and pulled out the scroll from her mother. She opened the scroll and read it allowed.

"To my dearest Ansa,"

"How you've grown ever so beautiful and bright. And though we are apart, I will be with you, always. Your dear twin brother, Clal, needs you, and you need him. Take care of each other. If you are ever confused, afraid, or you do not know what to do next, trust the feelings you feel inside, and do your best to follow them. Last of all, Ansa, never forget the Winden Family Creed."

Then Ansa looked up and out the window, no longer needing to read.

"Let all that's done and said by you,

Be always said and done in truth."

Her watery eyes returned to the paper.

"Let your path always lead you to the light, my Ansa.

With all my love,

Your Mother."

Tears were streaming down her face now as she gently rolled up the scroll and tucked it back into her leather pack. Then Ansa spoke without even thinking.

"I'm confused, Mother." Ansa whispered, holding herself with her arms. She then shook her head and said, "Oh, Clal."

She slowly arose and stood, frozen, the feelings in her heart were so poignant. She walked to the door, opened it, then carefully closed it until the click of the latch could be heard.

As Ansa walked down the hallway and into the dinning area where Gwynn told her to meet her the night before, the feeling of alarm did not leave her. She sat at the table and waited for Gwynn, and determined that she would tell her about her concern for Clal.

After just a few moments, she had her chance. Gwynn entered the room with a smile.

"Ansa, good morning," She said carrying breakfast for the both of them.

"How was your sleep?" Gwynn said as she set the plates before them and sat in a chair across from Ansa.

"Oh, fine, thank you," Ansa replied.

"And do you like eggs and corn meal?" Gwynn said pointing with a fork to the food on the plates.

"Yes," Ansa said. "We had chickens and plenty of eggs growing up."

"Wonderful," Gwynn said. They both began to eat their breakfast. After a few minutes of enjoying a very well cooked meal, Gwynn turned to Ansa and said, "Tell me about yourself, Ansa."

"Well," Ansa said, "my full name is Ansallia, twin to Clalion, who we call Clal. He was born forty-one minutes before me. We were born the only day of the year when the crescent moon shines blue."

"The Azure Moon," Gwynn said.

"Yes," Ansa continued. "And so, Clal and I, we've always been together, never apart, until last night." She paused. "Our family, we're apple farmers and have been for many generations. We grow the reddest apples and they taste like they are from the heavens themselves. I have an older brother, Turl who is so kind and who has just taken over our orchards after mother and father recently moved to Reubis. They just told us that our family will be relocating right before our journey to Eldan Vyum."

"I see," Gwynn said, "and how about you, Ansa." Gwynn sat back in her chair. "I would like to learn more about who you are." Gwynn was amused by her new apprentice's youthful nature. Ansa brought a happy spirit into her life that was sorely needed.

"Me?" Ansa said, raising her eyebrows. "Well, I'm...a girl of thirteen, and my mother," Ansa paused, "she calls me beautiful."

"And you are." Gwynn added.

"I love the sea, as I was raised swimming in its waves and running along its shorelines. I never did mind the sand between my toes after getting home." Ansa continued. "I like sewing, but never did much."

"Well," Gwynn interjected, "that just won't do. I'm here to help you mend your ways." There was silence for a moment as they both looked at each other. Then Gwynn started to chuckle and Ansa burst out giggling and before long, they both couldn't stop laughing.

They soon finished their food and Gwynn took the dishes into the kitchen. The front room was designated by Gwynn as her main work area. This was not customary as the workshop format of that day would have required all work spaces to be further into the house as some projects were private. The distractions of people walking by could also be a hindrance to the work she was about. But, this was the way Gwynn liked it, the ability to see the townspeople and they surely could see her through the large shop window in the front.

Ansa entered the front room and sat down on one of the few soft chairs. She surveyed her surroundings; piles of fabric, half sewn clothing, and a hundred spools of thread of every color imaginable filled one wall of the large room. There was a large table in the middle of the room almost overrun with various piles and half finished clothes. In the middle of the table was a large pin cushion the size of a bushel of apples. The walls were yellow, the light was dim, and by the looks of it, Ansa had arrived at an opportune time to help judging by the room being overrun with supplies.

However, Ansa's heart wasn't overjoyed like it was when they arrived yesterday. Part of her

However, Ansa's heart wasn't completely there and the excitement she felt last night had given way to the incessant feeling that Clal was lost, in danger, or worse, hurt. "I have to tell Gwynn," Ansa muttered.

"Tell me what?" Gwynn said, walking into the room.

Ansa jumped and immediately stood up from her chair.

"Sit," Gwynn ordered, eying Ansa. "Let me tell you something." She said with a smile.

"I knew Nareete before she ever met Dalbus. The moment I saw you, Ansa, last night, it was like I was seeing Nareete again. The two of us were good friends and knew each other for a handful of years growing up." Gwynn sat closer to Ansa. "She was special and I grew to love your mother and I believe that we were so very close because we were so very much alike. And when I got her letter that she wanted to you become an apprentice and that she chose me, I was so flattered."

"Now, I knew when I saw you last night that you were just like your mother. I knew that you too were special and so I felt like you and I were already old friends. I felt like I knew you and I don't think you'll disappoint me no matter what you say or do. But there's something else Ansa," Gwynn said, now with eyes still bright but her smile had gone.

"I knew that when I was with your mother, things wouldn't always go as planned, something I'll explain to you when we have more time." Gwynn said. "But, when I saw you last night, for that very first time, I knew my plan for you to work with me for several months, well, I knew it wouldn't end up being like I expected it to. I didn't understand why then, but now I think I'm starting to. So," she sat straight up, "it's all right. What is this that you feel you have to tell me?"

"I don't want to tell you, Gwynn," Ansa said looking down at her lap, "but I will."

"My brother, Clal, we're twins. And though some do not believe it, we're..." Ansa hesitated, "...connected, though I've never fully understood how." Ansa's posture became less rigid and she felt better already.

"There have been times, many times through the years, when I've felt things, known things, well, about Clal and whether he needs me, you know, needs help at certain times. And when I've followed those feelings, I've always been glad that I did. And when I didn't," Ansa winced, "it's always led to disaster."

Gwynn was watching Ansa and listening closely. But, Ansa stopped and took the opportunity to ask Ansa a question.

"So, is this what you wanted to tell me, about what it's like to be a twin? Or..."

"Not exactly," Ansa said.

"I believe you, Ansa." Gwynn said.

"This morning, when I awoke, I had one of those feelings, a feeling that Clal..." Ansa said, "...that something's wrong."

Gwynn nodded, then leaned over and clasped hands with Ansa. "I'm glad you told me. This isn't just you worrying or you being nervous in a new place. I believe this is real," Gwynn smiled. "Trust your feelings. I will help you."

"I know Clal went to the blacksmith's, to Tallon's. And Rythe went to the castle for the examination. He should be there now. But I can't imagine what could have happened since last night. It hasn't been very long at all."

"It sounds to me like you are reasoning your way out of this." Gwynn said.

"What do you mean?" asked Ansa.

"Sometimes, the things that make the lease sense are those things that are the most clearly understood later on." Gwynn winked.

"So..." Ansa said feeling a sudden surge of courage, "Clal really does need me and I really am meant to find out why. Gwynn," Ansa stood up again, "I'm going to the blacksmith's shop to talk to Clal. And I'm going there right this instant."

"Wonderful, Ansa," Gwynn arose from her chair. "And I will come with you."

Ansa immediately embraced Gwynn, "I'm so glad I'm not alone in this."

"No," Gwynn said, "you're not alone. Even if you were, no one is ever really truly alone. Ansa smiled."

"Let's get going then, Ansa, right away." Gwynn said. "I must gather a few things. You be sure to go and get your pack. Meet me here shortly."

Gwynn left the room while Ansa returned to the room she had spent the night in. She grabbed her pack, felt the slender shape of the scroll then whispered as she turned around to leave the room, "I'm trusting those feelings, mother, and I'll do the very best I can."

Ansa entered the front room once again, but Gwynn had yet to return. When she did, she too was carrying a pack and simply said, "I'm a fish out of water when I'm not prepared."

They were soon walking down the streets of Eldan Vyum, a sleepy town beginning to wake up. Groups of boys were running through the streets, some marching quickly along the road. Ansa knew Clal wouldn't be among any of them so she did not pay any attention to them.

They turned a corner and there before them was a building with a large sign above the door that said, "Tallon the Blacksmith."

Ansa knocked on the door. There was no answer. She walked over to the window, rubbed the film of dirt from the glass. There was no light in the window. They quickly walked around the perimeter and discovered that there was no light in any window of Tallon's blacksmith's shop.

"It looks deserted, Gwynn. Clal isn't here, is he?" Strangely, Ansa smiled. Though it was an alarming realization, and she was almost overwhelmed with the shock of it, she knew that following her feelings once again had not led her astray.

"Where do you suppose Clal is?" Gwynn said.

Ansa didn't answer right away. Gwynn's question reminded her of something that Rytte had said during their journey to Eldan Vyum.

"The inn," Ansa said. "How many inns are there here?"

"Two, and there's one just a mile north of here."

"Can you take me there?" asked Ansa.

"I will," Gwynn said and once again they were off trudging through the city. They soon reached the inn and entered. Ansa and Gwynn approached the counter. The innkeeper was standing behind with his back to them.

Gwynn spoke first, "Pardon me Mr. innkeeper," she said.

The innkeeper spun around, took one look at Gwynn then said, "Well, Gwynn, what a surprise to see you up this way." He smiled. "I thought you had a room or two in that shop of yours. You haven't come to stay have you?"

"Of course not, Morry," she smiled. "We have a bit of an urgent matter and we need your help?"

Morry looked down at Ansa, then back at Gwynn. Then he whispered, "Follow me."

When there were visitors, and there often were, who insisted on speaking privately with Morry, there was always a room he took them to where their conversations could not be overheard. Gwynn herself had been there before.

They sat down in the chairs that lined the room then Gwynn said, "Thank you Morry." Gwynn turned to Ansa. "This is my friend, Ansa." Gwynn said. "Go ahead, Ansa. Tell Morry why we came."

"It's my brother," she began, "I think he and his friend might have stayed here last night."

"Oh," Morry chuckled, "there were many boys last night and who've already left this morning. Are you going to ask me to try to remember your brother by your description because..."

"No," Ansa said, "but he was supposed to stay with Tallon, the blacksmith. We visited the blacksmith and..."

"Was he there?" Morry said excitedly.

"Tallon wasn't there and it looked like the place hadn't been visited or lived in for weeks or even months." Ansa said.

"Tallon the blacksmith," Morry said, scratching his beard. "Ansa, I remember two young men asking me about Tallon and if I had seen him lately, of which I replied that I hadn't seen him for a very long time. Which has been strange because of his frequent visits to my inn. He was very fond of our particular ale that we serve here."

"What did these two young men look like?" Gwynn asked.

"One had blond hair and striking blue eyes. The other," Morry thought, "well he had curly brown hair with a cleft chin."

"Yes," Ansa said, clasping her hands together. "Can you tell Clal that I am here to see him?"

"I can't," Morry said, "they left this morning like all of the other boys for the examination. I assume that's where they were going when they left only an hour or so ago."

"The examination?" Ansa said with a furrowed brow. "But why would Clal go to the castle for the examination? Rythe is of age. Clal is not."

"Perhaps the only way to find out is to ask him yourself." Gwynn said. "But, do we know that he's there with him now?"

"I don't know. But, if I were Clal, I would have decided to stick together," Ansa said. Then she shook her head, "This doesn't make any sense."

Gwynn put her hand on Ansa's shoulder. "I'm sure Tallon's absence would have been very confusing being late and having never met Tallon or even been in the city."

"But why didn't they come back to your shop, Gwynn, when they discovered that Tallon wasn't there?" Ansa asked.

"I don't know, Ansa." Gwynn replied, "They might have had a good reason at that moment."

"They left in quite the hurry," Morry said.

They must have gone to the examination, Ansa thought. But why? She didn't exactly understand. All she knew was that Clal and Rythe must still be together, that they were at the castle or in route, and that some danger had or would soon befall Clal or the both of them. What now?

"Morry," Gwynn turned to him, "thank you for your help."

"My pleasure," he said.

"I think we understand enough for the time being. I believe we'll be on our way." Gwynn concluded.

"Thank you, Morry." Ansa smiled at Morry.

"I hope you find Clal and Rythe soon," he said.

Ansa and Gwynn said goodbye to Morry then left the inn and stood in front for a moment to gather their thoughts. Gwynn looked around then motioned for Ansa to follow. They arrived at a quiet alleyway between buildings.

"I should go home with you, Gwynn." Ansa said. "I should wait. Clal will be back."

"What about the castle?" Gwynn said. "And your feelings? They haven't steered you wrong yet, now have they." Gwynn smiled. She really was a good friend.

"I can't just walk into the castle and ask where Clal is." Ansa said. "And if I find a way into the castle, which I can't believe I'm even saying," Ansa sighed, "where would I look for him without being noticed?"

Gwynn thought for a moment then said, "Ansa, what if walking right into the castle is the answer?"

Gwynn put her finger on her chin and her other hand on her hip. "We'll go to the castle together," She announced. "I'll tell them we are there to deliver some mended clothing from Gwynn's shop." Gwynn pulled out a large pile of clothes from her pack. "I will tell them that you will deliver the goods and that I must be back to the shop for more mending. You'll enter the castle then steal away and the rest will be up to you."

"Hmm," Ansa said, "that might work." After thinking there could be no way to gracefully enter the castle, Gwynn's plan actually sounded believable.

Ansa smiled then said, "Let's do it."

"Here, take this." She handed Ansa the pile of clothes as well as an apron. "These will help us look the part."

They each tied their aprons around their waist, hands whipping back and forth. When they had finished Ansa asked, "Which way is the castle?"

"This way," Gwynn pointed. They left the alley and disappeared down the city street.

They walked a ways, the castle growing closer. Ansa marveled at the scene, a silent, grey giant towering over an endless sea of colorful buildings and rooftops of the city below.

Ansa bit her lip wondering if their plan would work. She followed Gwynn until they both stood before the royal gate, three guards on the right. One guard walked toward them.

"State your business?" He said.

"I am Gwynn the seamstress," she said. "We've come to deliver an urgent delivery."

"There are no deliveries today," the guard said. "It is examination day. Only a few are allowed in or out of the castle. Good day!"

"I am sorry but I believe you are mistaken," Gwynn said, taking a step toward the guard. "This delivery is of the greatest importance."

"I have not been informed of such a delivery," the guard replied.

Gwynn thought, then dug into her pack and lifted out a small sack. "I have here, guard a pouch that might change the way you remember whether you were informed of our anticipated arrival." She tossed the pouch, which landed at the guard's feet.

The guard retrieved the pouch from the grassy turf, opened it up and poured part of the contents into his other hand. Golden coins glinted in the morning sun. The guard stared at Gwynn.

"Where did you come by such precious metals?" the guard said slowly. "How do I know you're not some kind of thief?"

"A thief?" Gwynn said, cheeks turning red. "All you do is stand still in order to earn your wages. I on the other hand toil with my hands for hours a day. I've saved for months not knowing what I might use these golden coins for. And now, I offer them as payment to be able to make passage into the castle so that I can deliver a royal delivery that on any other day would not have been questioned."

"Sire," Ansa said, "we need to deliver these clothes...today."

The guard looked at these two standing in front of him. He handled the coins for a moment then fed them back into the pouch. He tied the string and walked over to Gwynn.

"I cannot be persuaded by the contents in this pouch," he handed it back to Gwynn.

"However, you appear to be honest women, sincere in your desire to fulfill your duty. That is honorable. I believe there is no evil deed at work here."

"She will go in my stead as I am behind which is why this delivery is late." Gwynn said, which was the truth.

"What is your name?" the guard turned to Ansa.

"Ansa," she replied.

"Ansa, you may enter the castle. If you are questioned, tell them Borrgof the guard allowed your entry today." Borrgof turned, opened the gate, then returned to his post.

Another guard approached Ansa and said, "I will be your escort." He started to walk toward the castle.

Ansa walked over to Gwynn.

"What now?" asked Ansa.

"Ask for Lyoria, the royal maiden. Then, make this delivery." Gwynn embraced Ansa and felt as if she was her own daughter. "Then, dear Ansa, I believe you will know what to do."

They released their embrace and Ansa said, "Thank you, Gwynn. Thank you for everything. I will return soon." Then they said goodbye and both walked in opposite directions. Ansa turned and watched Gwynn disappear among the city folk busily passing through the streets.

The journey to the castle was short and Ansa found herself standing before one of the few castle doors. A guard standing nearby opened the door, then Ansa followed her escort into the darkness. The door closed with a loud "Boom!"

Ansa's eyes only adjusted when they turned the stone corner of a narrow hallway. She followed in silence as she rehearsed in her mind what she would say to Lyoria. She still held her pack at her side, all of her belongings brought to Eldan Vyum, safely tucked away. A bit of home was a comfort to Ansa in such a time of uncertainty.

The guard led Ansa down a few castle halls and around several corners and even up a few small flights of steps. Finally, they turned and followed the length of a short hallway with a small door at its end.

The guard knocked. They waited, then the door opened partially. He leaned over slightly and spoke a few quiet words and pointed in Ansa's direction. He paused, then directed Ansa to approach. He waved her into the room and the woman, whom Ansa assumed was Lyoria, guided her in as the guard closed the door to the room.

They walked to the center of the room and Lyoria turned around and addressed Ansa. "Greetings. I'm Lyoria, the royal maiden." She smiled slightly. "What is this delivery the guard was telling me about on such a day as this?"

Ansa didn't answer but handed her the clothing that Gwynn instructed her to deliver. Lyoria received the pile of clothes. Then, a flash of white fell to the floor. They both had seen it. Lyoria quickly snatched it up. It appeared to be an envelope. Lyoria looked at Ansa then turned and walked toward a table. She set the clothes down on the table, picked up her spectacles then sat down on a chair and opened the envelope.

Ansa walked slowly toward Lyoria and watched as she pulled out a golden token of some sort and a piece of paper. She unfolded the paper and began to read. Her eyes shot back and forth and down the page. Lyoria looked up from the paper as she folded it up and returned the letter back into the envelope. However, the golden item Lyoria had been holding in her hand she set gently on the table.

"Please sit down," Lyoria said, who was now reaching for a silver platter which she placed in the center of the table. "That was a note from Gwynn." Lyoria pulled a candle stick close to her which was currently lit and held the envelope above it. It took on the candles flames then Lyoria set it in the middle of the silver dish.

"Gwynn has told me that you are her new apprentice, but that you have become more than just a handmaiden. That you have bonded and that you are surely one of us." Lyoria said. "And so, she is trusting me to divulge our secret to you...Ansa."

"You're secret? One of you?" Ansa repeated. By this time the letter was all but a pile of black and gray ashes.

"I am on the inside of the castle and Gwynn is without. The kingdom, the land of Illia appears to be at peace, but" Lyoria leaned forward, "But it is not."

"Over many years there formed an underground force of men, women, and children, who bear this emblem as a token of their task," she held up the golden token which bore a crescent moon and a cluster of stars encircled by a sun. "This force has no name but only this token. We exist to inform and to protect, and Gwynn said she knows your heart Ansa. And so, will you join us?"

"I will," Ansa said without hesitation. "I will because Gwynn is right." Ansa hesitated. Somehow she no longer felt like a girl in this moment, for she had put on her bravery earlier that day and her stature continued to grow.

Ansa felt free to speak freely to Lyoria. "I have heard of the RISHK recently, Lyoria, and feel as if there is something wrong with who they are. And though I am scared even to hear or speak their name, I too wish to do something about them."

"The RISHK, Ansa, we have learned much about, a topic of which we cannot discuss here." Lyoria spoke quietly. "But, may you know that they are always on our watch, and that they are not as keen and witty as they think themselves to be."

"Now, I like you, Ansa. You remind me of Gwynn in her younger years." Lyoria smiled. "Let us discuss your brother. I wish to help you find him. Gwynn tells me he may be in danger?"

"Thank you, Lyoria." Ansa said.

"Please, don't thank me yet," she said, "I still have yet to think of a way for you to find your brother secretly. Is this what you wish?"

Lyoria looked at Ansa then arose. She spent a few minutes rummaging through piles of things and walking from one corner of her room to the other opening cabinets and drawers. It wasn't until she picked up a white apron that she exclaimed, "Of course! The feast!"

She hurried over to Ansa holding the white apron up in front of her, "I believe this is our best chance. We'll dress you up like one of the staff for the examination feast. You can casually find your brother, give him a note that you'll write, then meet him in a secluded hallway for a brief conversation."

"Do you really think that could work?" Ansa said.

"Am I not the royal maiden?" Lyoria said. "I too work my own magic here. Let's get you into this apron and the rest of the staff uniform."

Ansa slipped the uniform and apron over her own clothes. She kept her pack with her which was flat and couldn't be detected from the baggy clothing she was now wearing.

"How do I look?" Ansa said.

"Perfect." Lyoria said. "We should leave immediately."

They left the room and Ansa walked beside Lyoria as they hurried through the castle halls.

"Now," Lyoria said, "the feast begins when the great castle bell rings out its five great bellows. The great examination ends at different times each year since the number of boys varies. If the bell rings a total of ten times then this is the indication that the chosen one has been found ushering in a new Illian era."

"I can't even imagine such a day," Ansa said.

"It will be a grand day, though not all things and people in Illia will rejoice." Lyoria said. "The prophecy said that there will be days of danger, mischief, vicious crime." Lyoria spoke as they continued to walk down the long halls and up and down stair ways toward the place of the feast.

"When I was a little girl, Ansa, I wanted to help make those dark days brighter. When I met Gwynn we became friends. Then I learned that she shared the same feelings. We organized a group and as the years passed on our group grew. We are now prepared to aid the chosen one in whatever is necessary to be done. And now you're one of us."

"Though I don't know what to do."

"Let's find your brother first. Then, you can turn your attention to what this all might mean for you." Lyoria smiled. "We are going to stop here before I take you to the kitchen."

They approached two large doors. Lyoria pulled the brass handle and it swung open freely. A blinding shaft of light burst from behind. Lyoria walked through, then Ansa. It was the royal garden which was at the center of the castle surrounded on all sides by stone walls.

There were numerous bushes and flowers of all shapes and colors. Several wooden structures with benches beneath held tangles of ivy on top of them. Winding paths through a lush golden turf. And in the center of the garden was a tall hedge, three quarters rounded, that was as high as two grown men. White roses grew from the perfectly shaped hedge. The garden was half in shadow, as the sun had not yet reached its peak.

"We will select the best white roses from that tall hedge over there," Lyoria pointed, then guided her in that direction. She handed Ansa a basket which she hadn't noticed Lyoria was carrying. Lyoria handed her a set of golden scissors. Ansa found the flowers with the largest blooms and brightest white petals to be of her liking and she cut the stems of these one and set them in her basket. She was only working like this for a few minutes when something caught her eye.

Lyoria was gathering flowers several feet away and on a branch above her there was a castle sparrow. It was looking in Ansa's direction.

Ansa smiled, then laughed to herself. She continued to collect flowers when she heard the castle sparrow chirp and chatter. So she looked in it's direction once again. This time, she began to slowly walk toward it.

She was close to Lyoria now and said to her as she was clipping another flower, "Look, Lyoria." she pointed above her. The castle sparrow was still eying Ansa though she had walked part way across the garden.

"A castle sparrow," Lyoria said. "They come here often."

Ansa continued to walk closer to the castle sparrow until she was almost right below it. It hopped from one twig to another now halfway down the hedge.

"Hello," Ansa said. "Aren't you a sweet thing?" The castle sparrow fluttered its wings and hovered, then chattered and chirped.

"Come boy. Come." Ansa said, raising her hand in the air and extending her finger out.

To Lyoria's great surprise the castle sparrow jumped from branch to branch then landed on Ansa's shoulder. It paused for a moment then hopped down her arm and finally onto her outstretched finger.

Lyoria's jaw gaped open, eyes wide. "How...did you do that?" She continued to watch as this abnormally rare phenomenon continued to unfold.

Ansa was smiling from ear to ear. She too was amazed at the behavior of her new found friend. In all her years in the woods, nothing like this had ever happened to her before. Ansa looked at the castle sparrow as he looked up at her.

"Hello," she said to the castle sparrow. "What brings you to the royal garden today?"

The sparrow flapped its wings and took to flight only to hover in front of Ansa's face then rest back onto her finger. Then, the sparrow began to sing a beautiful tune.

"Lyoria, that sounds like a song," Ansa said smiling.

"It...is," Lyoria said slowly. "I can't believe it. He's singing the song of the prophecy."

The sparrow continued to sing as Ansa and Lyoria were silently listening to his high pitched whistle. When he continued, the castle sparrow rustled his feathers then hopped up Ansa's arm and rested on her shoulder.

"So what does this prophecy say," Ansa asked Lyoria.

"It speaks of the chosen one, and of the time when..."

"Dong!"

Lyoria's voice trailed off as the sound of the great castle bell boomed and echoed throughout the garden.

"Oh," Lyoria jumped. "It can't be. It's the feast...we must be on our way."

"Where do we go?" asked Ansa.

"They're early," Lyoria continued to panic, "which means we're late."

"Dong!"

Then the castle sparrow chirped a few chirps and darted into the sky. When Ansa thought that her little friend had all but vanished, the castle sparrow reappeared, chirping and chattering and fluttering at eye level of Ansa.

"Dong!"

Then the sparrow did the same thing, up into the sky then down to Ansa, chirping and flapping vigorously. She put out her hand and outstretched her finger again, but the sparrow refused to come to her.

"He's..." Ansa whispered to herself, "...trying to...tell me something?"

But Lyoria overheard, "Tell you what do you think?"

"Dong!"

"I...don't," Ansa too had the same question. She looked at the sparrow and nodded. "Yes? What is it, little sparrow?"

"Dong!"

As soon as Ansa said the words the sparrow shot off in a different direction. It was soon hovering in front of the doors that they both had first entered the garden through.

"He wants me to follow him, Lyoria." Ansa said, starting to walk toward the doors. But, Lyoria didn't move. Her hand was cupped to her ear and she was listening for something, unbeknownst to Ansa. "What is it, Lyoria?"

"It's the bell," Lyoria whispered, "will it ring a sixth time I wonder?" But, to her dismay the bell fell silent. There would be no displays of celebration heard from the castle bell to announce the finding of the chosen one this day. "No Seldinolum." She frowned.

"He'll come." Ansa said.

Lyoria turned to Ansa and said, "We must leave and help for the feast. We must hurry."

"But this castle sparrow, I must follow it." Ansa then looked into her eyes. "It's leading me somewhere."

Ansa decided to leave Lyoria and ran to the doors to where the castle sparrow was now flying back and forth.

Once Lyoria caught up with Ansa, Ansa insisted, "We must open the doors."

Lyoria moved to the doors and pulled open one of them enough for a person to enter. The sparrow dove in and disappeared behind it.

"Lyoria, I must follow where this sparrow takes me. I don't know why but I know that I must." Ansa said.

"May our paths cross again." She walked over to Ansa and pulled something out of her pocket. "Gwynn wanted you to have this." Lyoria took her hand and placed the golden token into her palm. "Safe guard this with your very own life, Ansa. Farewell."

Lyoria ran to the baskets of flowers then off toward the other side of the garden. Ansa turned then slipped through the large garden door. She pulled it closed then spun around looking for the castle sparrow.

The castle sparrow was standing now in the middle of the stone floor. Once Ansa had entered the hallway it chirped two times then shot into the air and around the corner of another castle hallway. Ansa looked around, slowly inching forward then she leapt forward and followed. She turned the corner and watched the sparrow zig-zag through the air. It was flying so fast, Ansa wondered if she would be able to keep up with the little sparrow. Through the castle it led her. She did not recognize any of her surroundings. She was almost certain the sparrow was leading her into an entirely different part of the castle.

At one point Ansa heard some commotion ahead of her which caused heart to beat twice as fast. But the sounds of talking and footsteps didn't linger and so she ceased from her worrying.

The sparrow would often pause, hovering in the air or would find a perch to rest on, then would dart into the air and fly at full speed. At last, they came to a complete stop and the sparrow stood in the center of the hallway. Then Ansa heard footsteps to their left. They were guards and they came around the corner before Ansa could hide from their view.

"A girl!" one of the guards shouted. "What is she doing in this part of the castle?"

Ansa gasped. The only option she had now was to run down the long hall in front of her. She darted forward.

"Halt!" said the guards. Then sounds of both squawking and yelling echoed through the hall. "Get rid of this rogue bird!"

Ansa had made her way down the hall and up a short flight of stairs. She thought she heard more voices and was about to turn down another hallway fearing that she was now surrounded.

Just then the sparrow zoomed past Ansa's left ear. It flew for a moment then Ansa saw the sparrow swoop to the right and through a low archway in the center of the hallway. She followed the castle sparrow and ran through the archway. Ansa tripped on something right after turning the corner and slid face down along the stone floor. She looked behind her to where she'd just come.

The archway had now begun to close as one stone on the other began to materialize sealing her in. She heard the guards beyond the sealed wall run by and knew that she was safe there.

Chapter 7: The Escape

Ansa pushed herself off of the floor as she continued to look at Clal in amazement. "It's you!" She said. She looked around the small chamber for the castle sparrow. The sparrow was perched on a chest that had been placed in a corner of the room. The little sparrow was watching Ansa and chirped two times when she looked at him.

"How did you know?" She said to the sparrow.

The castle sparrow chirped again then started cleaning himself with his beak.

"Ansa, how did you come to be here?" Clal said. "Why are you here?"

"It's fate, Clal," she said, coming closer to him. "It's been a very strange day, full of surprises and I was feeling..."

"Yes," Clal said, putting his hand on the side of Ansa's arm. "I've never known such a day...wait," Clal's said with raised eyebrows and wide eyes. "What about Gwynn's shop?"

"What about the Tallon, the blacksmith?" She said, "We went by and he wasn't there so we..."

Rythe took a step forward toward the two of them and said, "We? Who do you mean?"

"Gwynn, oh...there's so much to tell." Ansa said. "I don't think we have time enough to tell each other all that has happened since we saw each other last, Clal." Ansa looked around the small room and said, "I think we've got to figure out why we are here."

Clal looked at Ansa then back to Rythe then said, "I know why we are here...for the most part." Clal turned and looked around the room. The same kind of scenes that adorned the walls of the examination chamber were also present here, though different. There were markings on the floor, a chest in the farthest corner and some books and scrolls in another corner. A torch was burning in one corner. Then, there was a door that was on the right wall not directly across from the now sealed archway. Clal still heard guards running past the door and thought he heard the castle bells ringing.

"Why are we here, Clal?" Rythe said. "What happened, Clal...you're...different." Rythe put his hand on Clal's shoulder and smiled. "Ansa, I am not sure but I believe Clal was examined."

"Clal?" Ansa gasped. "Clal! I thought...I mean you're only..."

"Yes, I was examined." Clal said. He turned from them. At that moment they all heard a noise behind the iron door that was in the center of one of the walls. It was footsteps and they were coming closer. Rythe started to slowly step backwards and he put his hands out to push Clal and Ansa along with him. Clal, Ansa, and Rythe were pressed against the wall that had once been an open archway and as the footsteps grew louder and the door began to creak open, Clal knew who would soon be joining them.

The iron door swung open and in front of them stood a tall dark figure, garbed in a robe, a long gray beard, and a curious necklace hung about his neck with a blue stone in the center.

"I see that you found your way all right." Morgrith said with a bit of a chuckle.

"Yes...well, no!" Clal said, clenching his fists. "There were guards after us and I think I heard the castle bell ringing again, Morgrith. What is happening out there?" Then he walked closer to Morgrith, "Did I do something wrong?"

"No." Morgrith smiled. "Sometimes the only way to do the right thing is to cause a little trouble."

Ansa looked at Clal, then back at Morgrith. "What..."

"My name is Morgrith." He said, turning toward Ansa. "I am the examiner." He bowed over slightly.

"Morgrith," Clal said, smiling and motioning his hand in Ansa's direction, "This is Ansa, my twin sister."

"Very pleased to meet you," Morgrith said. "It is not by chance that you are also here. And, why are you here? This is the very thing..."

The castle sparrow started chirping loudly as he rose into the air.

"I do say..." said Morgrith, putting his hands on his hips.

The sparrow flew in circles around the chamber while the rest of them dodged and ducked to stay out of its way. Then after several revolutions around the room the sparrow flew back to the large gold laden chest in the corner.

"And this sparrow?" Morgrith said.

"I was in the castle garden collecting flowers for the feast and this fellow took interest in what we were doing. Then, he wouldn't part from me from the moment that I noticed him." Ansa smiled at the sparrow. "He led me here."

The castle sparrow continued to chirp and chatter and Clal noticed that Morgrith was looking at the sparrow listening intently. The sparrow soon stopped chattering and stood still right above the keyhole of the chest.

"This castle sparrow has just instructed me on a few details concerning his purpose," Morgrith said, "I will share with you only two and retain the rest."

Morgrith was still towering over them and standing in front of the great iron door. His gaze moved away from the small sparrow and in Ansa's direction.

"Ansa," Morgrith began, "this small castle sparrow was given the name Hittle. He is from the western realm and has been sent to you by an unknown hand to be your loyal companion."

"I don't understand," Ansa said.

Clal watched Morgrith who was beginning to run his hand up and down the chain of the necklace he wore, and in the center Clal indeed saw the same blue glow ever so faintly.

"Morgrith, can you tell us..." Rythe took a step in his direction, "What does all this mean?"

Morgrith then turned to Clal and Clal and Morgrith locked their gaze. Morgrith's old eyes looked into Clal's bright blue eyes. Then Morgrith pulled the necklace from his neck and slipped the necklace over Clal's head.

Rythe on Clal's left, and Ansa on Clal's right, both standing slightly behind him, watched as the dim light from the stone began to glow. They both began to walk around and in front of Clal as the beam of light shot forth. Morgrith moved to the side which allowed the light to glance off the iron door. It glinted off the metal then the door began to illuminate.

There was a tree on the top with golden fruit and a line that ran from the tree to a group of people on the bottom of the door. There were designs along the sides of the line and they curled in and out. An ancient language was written on the borders of the door, all of these ornate details began to illuminate and the room began to change.

Like the examination chamber's walls, here too there were scenes from future events depicted only by the prophecies of old. The walls began to glow and the characters within the scenes slowly moved and swayed in a beautiful depiction of the scene.

There was a great scene with a grand white dragon. In its talons it held a large oblong stone as his flapping wings slowly caused him to bob up and down above the curling waves of the

ocean. Rythe, Ansa, and Clal and even Morgrith looked around the room at each of the walls. Another wall housed a scene of five individuals all in mortal battle with five dark figures before them. Their thrusts and slashes through the air were in complete silence and the small figures continued their onslaught in an infinite loop with an illuminated background behind them.

The third wall was all but empty. Clal looked closer. The illuminated background appeared to have faint clouds slowly drifting by. Near its bottom there were waves slowly rolling. And there in the middle far on the horizon Clal saw it, a solitary cloud with a unique shape. Clal gasped.

"Ansa, look!" Clal said. He pointed to the almost empty wall.

Ansa walked toward the wall then touched with her hand the place where the solitary cloud was positioned just above the horizon. "It's a cloud."

As they both watched, however, the clouds melted away and a lone floating land mass was came clearly into view. The illuminated background of waves and wind was a stark contrast to the gray shape of the floating island. It floated closer until it filled the wall. That is when Clal could see the details of the surface above as a kingdom had been built in the sky.

They looked away as other scenes appeared and glowed upon other walls.

The room continued to glow as the stone around his neck emitted a constant beam of light. The walls were shining and the iron door illuminated and the song of the prophecy began to come from the stone around Clal's neck.

This time, to Clal's surprise, Hittle began to sing the song of the prophecy. It rang throughout the chamber and filled with joy the heart of any listener.

When the song completed Clal reached for the necklace chain then pulled it off of his head and handed it to Morgrith. Morgrith took the necklace, however, replacing it over his own head was not immediate.

"Ansa. Rythe." Morgrith said, looking at each of them. "Clal was examined today, whether he was of age or not, it matters not. He came by means of fate. And as you saw here, the stone glowed, the light beamed and the walls and floor illuminated. This is the sign. This is the mark of the chosen one, a mark upon a bloodline. The path is charted," he pointed to the chest in the corner, "and the destiny of a deliverer, Clal is the great deliverer, is now sealed."

Morgrith paused. He looked at Clal and Rythe and Ansa. "There has neither been nor ever will be another one who will wear that necklace and cause that same magical phenomenon to occur."

Morgrith approached Clal, "Clal, you were not chosen by chance, this has always been your destiny, the great fate of the Winden line." Morgrith smiled and leaned down then put his hand on Clal's right shoulder. "I will train you. Others...you will be raised up in knowledge, truth, and skill to meet the foes and challenges that surely lie ahead. Never fear." Then he winked. "And do not think too far down the path, for the battles of tomorrow will not be fought by the person you are today."

Morgrith walked over to Ansa, "The twin of the chosen one has a grand responsibility, you know." Morgrith knelt beside Ansa. "Only you know the chosen one more intimately than any other person who has ever lived and who ever will live. If you accept the task, you can be his companion, his confidant, and his strength to the very end."

"I will not leave my brother's side." Ansa said as her face was streaming with tears. "Morgrith, I am afraid though this is all so marvelous. The great alarm and what just happened here," She looked around the room. "I feel at home yet alone among all of this."

"You have a warrior's spirit, Ansa. You too will rise and bloom as the beautiful white roses that you collected for Lyoria today in the garden." Morgrith then said, "And you will never be alone."

Morgrith stood up and approached Rytte who was quietly watching the conversation listening to every word. "Rytte," Morgrith's voice boomed throughout the small chamber. "I believe you have been a good friend to Clal in times past. Why do you think you have been led to be here and to have a place in the defeating the great evil of Illia and restoring the land to its destined origins?"

Rytte stood tall as he looked up at Morgrith. Clal saw a sense of power as his friend grew in stature at that moment. "I know why I am here, Morgrith." He looked at Clal and Ansa. "That night when the RISHK nearly took my life earlier this year, I vowed as I ran back home in the darkness that I would dedicate my life to stopping such men." Rytte turned to Morgrith. "I never knew what I would be in life or what path I would take and such. But I knew then." He then slowly started moving his gaze to each one of them. "And now I stand here and understand that I have come at this time for a purpose and I am not afraid of the RISHK or of the path ahead."

Morgrith nodded. "Your greatest strength now is secrecy. This entire examination process and yearly gathering was set forth by our wise forefathers. It was to prove that the chosen one was not found, while all in secret, the great deliverer is smuggled out and the charted path of the chosen one could begin well before the evils detect him."

"This is why we are here. This is why we did not announce the finding. This is why no bell rang and no coronation or celebration or no parade will grace the streets of the city. All that you need to begin is here in this chamber. The only missing piece here is your guide out of this chamber, out of the castle and through a secret passageway that you three..."

Hittle chirped.

"...and Hittle will be able to pass through safely so that you can be on your way...for you have much yet to do."

"You are not going with us?" Clal said.

Morgrith shook his head. "I am not. For if I did, they would notice."

"Who?" Ansa said.

"The RISHK. The King. The people here in the castle and perhaps others." Morgrith smiled. "But, I too have my place in the coming time that was prophesied...we all do."

Morgrith turned, then pulled the iron door open, hinged squeaking quietly. "I will be leaving now. I will send for Jestro, who has been a great force for good in this cause already, he will be visiting you within the hour."

"But what do we do now?" Clal said.

Rytte pointed, "How about we open that great chest there in the corner?"

"I think we should, though I don't see a key anywhere." Ansa said.

Morgrith pulled out from one of the pockets from his robe a large golden key with a sun, moon, and stars on it, much like the symbol that guided there to the chamber. Morgrith walked over and handed it to Clal, then nodded.

"Jestro will return and we may not see each other for a very long time." Morgrith said. "I will always send word when need be."

Hittle flapped his wings. "And send Hittle to me in the most dire of circumstances. I am never too far away."

Morgrith stood there eyeing the budding heroes of Illia. For him, he had worked many lifetimes for this very day's time. And it was here. And he was satisfied.

"Be well." Morgrith said. "And trust only the heart within you."

Morgrith disappeared behind the door and the door slid shut behind him.

The silence was deafening as Clal realized what lay in store. Though he did not know hardly anything of what he was supposed to do from his current vantage point, he knew enough, but he was eager to learn more.

Clal, who held the key to the chest, walked over to where the chest was set upon the stone floor and knelt down beside it. The chest was large, made of reddish wooden planks. It was held together by brass bands and golden nails. In the front where the key hole was there was a dragon etched in brass which protruded above the top of the height of the lid of the chest. The dragon held the same oblong looking stone and in the middle of the stone was the key hold.

By the time Clal had sufficiently studied the details of the chest, both Ansa and Rythe had also come to kneel down before the chest.

"Turn the key Clal," Ansa said.

He looked at her then put the key in and turned the key. There was a click inside the mechanism which echoed against the walls of the chamber.

"Go ahead, open it," Clal nodded to Ansa and Rythe. Each one put their hands on the lid and slowly opened it until the lid rested on the wall behind it. Within the chest there was a worn book, a scroll, a coin with the sun, moon and stars on it and a key.

"What are these things?" Rythe said. "Do we...take them or leave them here?"

"I don't know," said Clal.

"What I think we should do is start by opening that book." Ansa said. "It looks interesting."

The book was bound with light brown leather, the corners were dressed with a brass metal design, the center had the sun, crescent moon and stars symbol etched in brass, and there were two leather straps holding it closed. The volume was thick with many pages, some burned, but the book was relatively small in size.

Ansa picked it up then opened the cover. There was an inscription on the first page. Ansa read it aloud.

"When destiny calls for star, moon, and sun

To guide her people back to their home

Acting as three, with purpose as one

Giving a place where no more shall roam

Out of the darkness into the light

Will hope then embark upon its last flight

What once did arise, will now see its end.

With sun, moon, and star, their people defend."

"Clal," Ansa turned to him. "What do you suppose this means?"

Clal thought for a moment. He wondered what the third line meant, Acting as three with purpose as one. "I don't know Ansa. It could mean so many things."

Rythe leaned over and turned the page. It was a small map of Illia. "May I see?" Rythe asked Ansa.

"Oh, yes," Ansa said, letting Rythe take the book from her hand.

"Rythe brought the book up close to his face. He studied the map for a moment, his eyes moving back and forth, to the top and down to the bottom of the page. "It's old," He concluded. "There are things on here that don't exist now, places, even..." Rythe put the book down. "...mountains."

"Where!" Clal asked. Then, Rythe picked up the book again, opened it to the map and pointed to where the southern realms of Illia are depicted. "I don't remember a mountain there," Clal said.

Rythe returned the volume to Ansa who flipped through the old and worn pages. She stopped, then read for a moment, then turned another page. After a few minutes she closed the book, stood up and turned to Rythe and Clal. "This book," she said holding it up in front of them, "it's filled with myths and lore and legends." Ansa opened it again, "But, do you suppose that there is truth here...not just stories?"

"Do you mean an ancient record?" Rythe said.

"If it's a book of legends that could be filled with truth instead of just myths and lore then it could also have clues or answers to our journey and how we are supposed to be going about saving Illia." Clal finished.

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"Wait!" Ansa said. She closed the book then ran to the wall that bore the imprint of the cloud, the floating island. The wall, however, was dim and gray and the scene was almost indistinguishable from the cracks and grooves in the wall. "Here," Ansa said, "Clal, a floating island."

She sat down on the floor in front of the wall that bore the floating island image. She leaned her back against the wall, then stretched out and crossed her legs in a comfortable position. Clal and Rythe also sat down beside her. They watched as Ansa thumbed through the pages of the Book of Legends furiously trying to find something. Then she stopped and there on the page read:

"Skyland's Rising."

"Clal, do you think this is it?" she turned to Clal. "Could this be about the picture on the wall?"

"I..." Clal started to say.

"It reads," Ansa couldn't wait for an answer. She pointed to the words on the page and leaned close to the book,

"Long ago, far off the shores of the western realm of Illia there was a people, a people of music and song. They were known as the noblest in the land. One day a great storm blew and tore at the island. The waves heaved themselves upon it's shores and the island began to turn. A great earthquake dislodged the island and the wind pushed the island heaven ward high into the sky. They were lost to us, the Illian people and were never heard of again. There is a cloud in the West that resembles the island though there is no record here of the cloud and the missing island being one in the same."

"A floating island, Clal." Ansa said.

"I think so, but what would that have to do with defeating the dark one lurking, as the prophecy says," said Clal.

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"What is this prophecy?" Ansa said. "Perhaps it's in here." She flipped through the Book of Legends once more and there near the beginning of the book was the prophecy. She read it out loud.

"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 was one who roamed 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 with fade without a fight"

"Clal, this is about you." Ansa said, her eyes moving back and forth reading it once more. "Clal, it says that you are supposed to unlock the sun and that there are powers that are waiting for you and that you hold the key?"

Then Rythe added, "There will be danger, and vicious crime. A task to be completed and the dark one," Rythe said half smiling, "he'll turn to ash, unless...you turn inward in spite?"

Only now was the reality that Clal was the chosen one and that these things, this room, this book, the prophecy were indeed about him. He could hardly believe where he was and what they were doing. Though, he knew that the examination had not been fabricated. He wished Morgrith was here. He had questions and hoped that Morgrith had answers.

Clal looked at the book in Ansa's hands. "May I, Ansa," he said, motioning for him to hold it. Ansa handed him the book as they remained seated on the stone floor. Clal carefully turned the pages reading portions of one page and a few lines of another. He was half reading and half thinking about their next handful of tasks in order to accomplish such a great feat as saving all Illia from imminent destruction.

"So the dark one lurking is to be turned to ash," Clal said, "fire turns things to ash. So we somehow...use fire?"

"The sun, Clal," Ansa said. "The prophecy said you are the only one that can unlock the sun. And then it talks about a key that unlocks."

"We need to find a key, or something that acts as a key, to unlock the sun, that may be used like fire to turn the dark one to ash, never to return?" Rythe said.

"Yes,!" Clal said, "That sounds..."

"...like we might have the beginnings of a plan."

"Ansa, what about the dragon holding the stone?" Clal walked to the wall that had shown the dragon above the sea. "What does the Book of Legends say about that?"

Ansa once more poured over the pages of the book. She had opened the book in the middle and searched to the end but stopped at the very beginning.

"The dragon and the stone seed," she said aloud. "Stone seed? Stones done have seeds." She handed the book to Clal, "It is here too."

"And thus our fathers have written that the great dragon was tasked to take the sacred stone seed far into the ocean where no soul had ever traveled. It was there that the dragon deposited the seed into the sea. Many years passed and the stone seed grew and became Illia, the great land of the sea. A people came and remembered where they had come from. But as the generations passed, the land of their origin, their beginnings was forgotten." Clal turned the page then said, "That's it. That's all it says."

"Where did they come from? What is this dragon? A stone seed?" Ansa exclaimed. "There is so much to learn."

"I think it will come in time, Ansa." Clal said. "I think we should keep reading this book. Eventually things will become clearer."

Ansa fanned the pages for a moment, then stopped. She opened up the Book of Legends wide and read a few words. "Here Clal, this reminds me of the lullaby mother used to sing to us," She read further, "or...perhaps it is." Ansa started to sing the words to the familiar tune that they always used to sing growing up.

"The lands of Illia sleep, my love
Or so the mountains say
And rolling meadows speak of thee
My love, asleep, till day
Though shimmer bright and beam of light
Will dance upon your face
And all the winds upon the land
Rush in, you'll stay your place."

"But Clal," Ansa looked up at him. "There's a second verse I've never heard." Ansa's voice once again began to fill the chamber.

"The peoples of dear Illia
No sight, no voice, and now
Have gone away beyond what's known
To be and lost somehow.
No matter where you've gone from us
And where you may yet go
I'll come for you and set you free
Your people I must know."

"See, it is mother's lullaby." Ansa smiled from ear to ear. "This must mean something too. This book..."

"Yes," Clal retrieved the book from Ansa's hand. "It must be part of our journey, what we're supposed to do. But there's so many pieces and ways to go..."

Ansa nodded then stood up. "I think I hear something," she said.

Clal and Rytte rose and they all three turned toward the iron door and froze. Morgrith had said that he would be sending someone who would guide them out of the castle. The steps became louder and the iron door began to swing open.

To their astonishment it was not Morgrith or the man that Morgrith was sending to them, it was one of the castle guards who entered the room and closed the iron door behind him. Rythe stood in front of Clal and Ansa preparing to protect them.

The guard stopped, then slowly reached for his helmet with both hands and pulled it off. His long blond hair fell to his shoulders and he wore a smile. He looked at each one of them and then said, "Which one of you are Clal?"

"Who are you?" Rythe said.

"I am Jestro, sent by Morgrith," he said. Then he looked at his armor that he was wearing and chuckled. "Oh, yes, this might be startling. No, I'm not here to find you out or take you to the dungeons. I am a guard, yes, but under the order of Morgrith, though King Neldeer does not know this, and won't for a long time, if at all." He was taking off his armor as he spoke. "Which one of you are Clal?" Jestro repeated.

Clal stepped forward, "I am Clal Winden, just a boy."

Once Jestro removed all of his armor he came before Clal and kneeled. "It is a high honor to be alive at the time when our great deliverer has come. I will forever be your loyal servant, Clal Winden of..."

"Lyrune...of Lyrune, sir" Clal said.

"Of Lyrune?" Jestro said. He stayed kneeling for longer than Clal would have preferred him to. Clal would have preferred him to not have knelt before him at all, but he supposed that this could be a common occurrence as the days passed by.

"Well, you'll be needing some weapons for your journey, right. I'm here to help you." Jestro motioned for them to follow him through the dark passageway.

"Where will you be taking us Jestro?" Clal moved closer to the chest in the corner.

"To the castle iron works, of course." Jestro stepped back from halfway in the passageway.

Clal grimaced and slouched as his thoughts turned to the danger they faced as they struggled to arrive here to this chamber.

"I know a place where we can acquire satisfactory weapons. I would like you to find us a way out of this castle and let us be on our way. We can manage from there." Clal spoke in a firm tone. Each moment that they were still within the castle walls meant danger, and this was to be avoided.

"Sure," Jestro scratched his head. "Morgrith asked me to take you to the smithy."

"I understand Jestro." Clal said smiling. "I believe we have no other purpose but to flee from the castle and be on our way. Can you help us?"

"Certainly!" Jestro, once again motioned for them to follow him.

Clal turned toward the chest, "Ansa!" he said, grabbing Ansa's arm. "There's a few other things in here." He reached in to retrieve them. He picked up the key and coin. When his hand pulled on the scroll the scroll refused to budge.

"Clal, what..." Ansa's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open.

"How do I..." at once Clal stopped pulling, "this is for another day. It will not budge because it's not meant to go with us."

Rythe had already entered the passageway through the way. Ansa and Clal looked again at the scroll then Ansa turned. Clal slowly closed the chest, turned the key, and locked it.

Ansa also slipped past the door into the darkness behind the wall of stone with Hittle bobbing up and down on her shoulder. Clal followed behind her, stepped into the passageway then

turned. He looked at the walls and the depictions and scenes, the chest, the archway with a wall where they once had entered through. It was a sight, where he learned much and where their journey truly began, Ansa, Rytte, and himself, the hope of all Illia.

Clal turned to the darkness and unknown before him. He closed the door to what he knew beyond the iron door which slid shut. Embracing the darkness before him he made his first step toward the path ahead.

Jestro led them through strange caverns and dark passageways behind the castle walls and under the floors of rooms and hallways.

Now and then a passageway would splinter off in another direction. Finally, they came to an unadorned iron door wide and tall. "Here's where we take our final plunge into the deep." Jestro pulled out a large key, jabbed it into the keyhole then turned the key with his massive hand.

"What's down here," Clal walked to stand next to Jestro who was waiting for them to all arrive.

"This is the way out of the castle, the great circular staircase that, when at the bottom, leads the wanderer out almost three miles to the south of the castle. There, within the cover of the trees of the forest you will emerge into the outer world beyond the castle clutches." Jestro stepped a few feet backwards and motioned with his hand for them to enter. "I, however, will not be escorting you further. My duties, less important duties such as my guard duties cannot permit the time...oh, I just remembered my armor was left in the chamber. I'll leave it there and simply use another."

"And Clal," Jestro handed him a small, leather pouch, "Here is what is left of Morgrith's aid as you begin your journey."

Clal put out his hand and Jestro placed the pouch in his palm. Clal felt the weight and through the leather a faint glow could be seen. "The necklace," Clal said quietly. Clal felt something else in the pouch. It was small and slender. He pulled it out. It was a miniature scroll. He unrolled it and read the words. "Only put on the necklace when light is needed and no other outsider is looking in."

"Clal, we still need weapons." Rytte said.

"Right. I've thought of where we can find some, though being three miles south of the castle is going to make it difficult to return to the city streets." Clal inched further into the doorway.

"Thank you Jestro." Ansa smiled. "You are a true friend and we won't forget what you've done for us today. May the heavens shine down upon you always."

"Thank you, Ansa. And Clal, Rytte, I have no doubt that we will meet again before all of this is said and done." Jestro put his hand on the door. "Now, after you're all in and on your way I will be locking this door behind you. There is no light, just darkness down here."

"Everyone in," Clal pushed past them, and the others followed.

"Farewell, friends." Jestro pushed the door shut then the clank of the door being locked echoed throughout the passageway. The darkness enveloped them instantly and the air was damp and suffocating. Ansa began to breathe quickly as they continued to walk in the darkness.

Then Clal remembered the leather pouch and the necklace. He slipped it on. Light returned to their senses. From the stone at his chest, Clal could see the roughness of the dirt walls and the winding path before them. It lit the way and the others kept extremely close to Clal as they continued.

Clal couldn't help but wonder why Morgrith hadn't come back and why he hadn't decided to come with them. Jestro was helpful, though, he still had many things to discuss with Morgrith,

questions. He wondered if they were even headed in the right direction, having refused to go to the castle smithy with Jestro for weapons.

They walked what seemed like a good long time along the underground tunnel. There were no split offs, no lights, no markings on the walls, nothing but a crudely carved out tunnel that hadn't seen many visitors, and cobwebs.

"Clal, what's your plan for arming ourselves?" Rytke asked.

"Tallon, the blacksmith." Clal raised his hand in the air while he answered. "We'll go and pay him a visit. If he's there we'll ask for some weapons and if he's not..." Clal stopped walking, "we'll simply let ourselves in and find them."

Ansa gasped, "Clal, no we won't. That's stealing."

"I know Ansa." He turned and looked at her. She looked away. "But we may find out what has happened to him while looking for a few weapons. If he knows the cause I don't believe he'll consider it stealing...I hope."

"His disappearance is still a riddle that's yet to have been solved." Rytke used his thumbnail to scratch at the wall beside him, taking the opportunity while Clal's light was shining in his direction. "And anything that may involve the RISHK, now involves us."

Ansa shivered. "The RISHK, ugh!"

Clal paused for a moment then turned and continued to move forward. They marched on and eventually the air began to be less damp and muggy and more sweeter smelling, the smell of the woods.

They turned another corner then the floor of the tunnel began to climb upward and they knew that they would soon be exiting the tunnel. There was a faint light that was now visible, air currents began to move around them and before long they approached the entrance of the tunnel. There were no doors, only wood planks that covered the entrance which was hidden within a cluster of trees. They climbed a few tall steps, pushed up where leaves and branches fell into the tunnel.

Clal, Ansa and Rytke climbed out of the hole, maneuvered past the trees then stood on the forest floor. Hittle shot into the air and circled several times before resting on Ansa's shoulder again.

The trees had undoubtedly been planted to retain the secrecy of the tunnel opening. There were old trees and young trees, certainly maintained through the years. Clal took great care to return the opening to its rightful disguise by placing leaves and sticks upon the flap of burlap and planks that covered it.

The sun dipped below the horizon as they turned toward the faint silhouette of Eldan Vyum Castle. They would soon be under the cover of darkness as they reentered the city soon. Clal mentioned that staying off the main roads would be best, so they trudged through the thick and thin of the forest.

Their packs clapped against their sides as they walked and not much conversation was had as they traveled for fear that they would be found. They passed great pines and trees with white bark as they journeyed through the forest. The castle became closer, and the danger in Clal's heart returned as a formidable companion. His only plan was to visit Tallon's blacksmith shop to get weapons, but then what, and was this their path? Clal shook his head and kicked a rock in front of him.

"Rythe," Clal reached for a tree branch then pulled off a cluster of leaves. "We are close now. Do you know how to get back to the blacksmith's from here?"

"I think so." He squinted and looked left then right ahead of them. "I think we're too close to the castle still. I wonder if we should have taken a different route instead directly back in the direction of the castle."

"If we turn west, cross the main road, then follow the forest cover until we enter town the same way we did yesterday, I think we could avoid any detection." Clal turned to Ansa for her approval.

"I am still not sure going to Tallon's is safe, or necessary." Ansa frowned. "Why do we need weapons right now? Why can't we find some other way, or wait. Why didn't we just get them from Jestro?"

"Because there's already danger out there, and mischief and vicious crime, or so the prophecy says." Clal leaned against a tree. "We don't know and can't trust anyone. I just wanted to get away where we three were alone. But I also know that we should be armed if something does happen. Rythe, why do you carry a dagger?"

Rythe shrugged. "For protection or to skin a rabbit if I am hungry."

Ansa stared at Rythe, "Okay. But the point is...well, what are our options for weapons? We don't even know if Tallon's deserted place has any weapons worth taking."

"There aren't many options. He would have been the only smithy in the city." Rythe said. "And the further we get from the city, the less likely we'll be to get our hands on any weapons...unless, of course," Rythe smiled, "we find pitchforks and rakes to wield."

"Ansa, I know it puts us in danger again," Clal thought for a moment. "What about we visit Gwynn after Tallon's shop?"

Ansa froze, then after looking in the direction of the city, said, "Yes, that would do, Clal."

The sky, now dark, bore no light from the moon or stars to aid in their journey. Clal had long since tucked away the necklace after reaching the end of the castle tunnel. They continued in the darkness. "I think we should cross the road and come in from the West. We're too close to the castle." Clal said.

He motioned for them to follow him as Clal headed toward the main road. The forest was thick but soon they stepped foot on the hardened path. They crossed quickly and darted into some bushes. They continued to trudge further north toward the road they had used when first entering Eldan Vyum.

Clal never would have imagined that they would be tramping around at night in the middle of the woods once again, stepping foot on the same road they left only a day ago. And yet, there they were.

Ansa, by this time, was dragging her feet slightly as she walked. Her slender body hunched over and her pace slackened. Rythe too showed signs of fatigue as he walked and wobbled along slightly. They hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast and the long hours of walking were beginning to take their toll. They soon entered into the streets of the city which brought a small amount of energy as their pace quickened.

"We're close." Rythe said.

"How close?" Ansa grabbed her pack and adjusted it on her shoulder.

"About ten minutes walk, I would imagine."

"And Gwynn's?" Ansa yawned and Hittle chirped twice.

"Gwynn?" Clal jerked his head to look at Ansa.

"Clal, maybe Gwynn could help us," She smiled."

"Maybe she could, but..." Clal.

"Ansa may be right, Clal. Gwynn knows the city, the people, much better than we do." Rythe looked at Ansa and smiled.

Clal was reminded of how wise she had always seemed and this was a time when he knew she was right.

"Ansa, I think Gwynn could help us. Though I fear the consequences if anything goes wrong." Clal came closer to Ansa and wrapped his arm around her waist. "I'm glad we have each other, Ansa."

"Rythe, to Gwynn's shop if you remember the way." Clal announced.

"I rarely forget how to go to a place that I've been before," Rythe raised one eyebrow, "especially one that I've just been to a day ago," he winked at Ansa who winked back.

They passed by city shops and cobble stone walls, horse drawn carts and animals being driven through the streets by their masters. Strangely, however, there were a few guards about which had not been the case the day before.

Clal remembered that the feast had occurred without them and that the boys had yet to return home. Their return would be tomorrow and they were all sleeping in the great hall. The guards had been in pursuit to catch himself and Rythe. This might explain why there might be guards out tonight.

They soon arrived at Gwynn's house. It too was dark, like Tallon's smithy. However, Ansa turned the knob, opened the door, and called out for Gwynn as she poked her head in through the doorway.

Ansa paused then a hand grabbed her sleeve and another hand cupped over her mouth as she let out a muffled scream.

The hand pulled her inside and a voice said, "Come in! Quickly!" Ansa, Clal, and Rythe entered the shop and the door closed behind them.

Chapter 8: Talon the Blacksmith

"Follow me." Gwynn said. "Hurry."

They could hardly see but there was still some light as one dim candle was lit in each room. They reached a place where there were stairs down to a lower level which Gwynn climbed down and told them to follow.

When they arrived at a place where there were stone walls on three walls, no window and a door to shut them in, she lit a lantern and set it on a round table in the middle of the small room.

"I didn't expect to see you here so soon, Ansa." Gwynn said breathing slightly heavy.

"We need your help." Ansa said. "We need weapons and thought you..."

"Weapons?" Gwynn rubbed her chin. "What happened at the castle? Did you meet Lyoria?"

"Yes, our plan worked. Then..."

"What plan?" Clal said.

"Gwynn told the guards that I was making a special delivery and that I needed to get into the castle even though today, being the examination day, they don't take deliveries...but I got in and was escorted to Lyoria, the royal maiden who is in our side and we went to gather roses for the feast when Hittle here, this little castle sparrow, he came and guided me to Clal."

"Then, Clal told me that he was cho....." Ansa stopped. She looked at Clal deciding that it would be better for Clal to share with Gwynn that he's the chosen one instead of her.

"I must warn you three," Gwynn said. "Something happened at the castle today and now the castle guards have been deployed into the city. And from what I gather, this is no trifling matter."

"Perhaps I was wrong to send you in their Ansa." She said. "They are talking about a girl who came to the castle unannounced at the same time that two boys may have escaped, something that has never happened since the history of the examination."

"I, we did escape, Gwynn, but under Morgrith's careful guidance." Clal said.

"Morgrith? He helped you escape? Why?" Gwynn said.

"Because..." Clal said looking both at Ansa then Rythe then back at Gwynn, "...I am the chosen one."

"And we have been tasked, all three of us, to begin a quest to fulfill the prophecies of old." Rythe said.

Ansa pulled out the Book of Legends from her pack. "Here," she opened the book, "this is where we feel to begin, and with the words of the prophecy we now know that we must find a key which will unlock the sun that will turn the dark one to ash."

"And we've also learned that there is, or are a people that have been lost and that part of our journey may be to find them." Rythe said.

"We have only begun and hope to learn our path as quickly as possible." Clal leaned over the table as he sat in the small chair. "Part of this path lies in understanding where the blacksmith, Tallon, is not there because the last Rythe told us was that one of the RISHK had threatened to forge weapons for him."

"Anything that concerns the RISHK now concerns us." Rythe said.

"But you are mere children." Gwynn said quietly. "How can you think to be equals to..."

"We are not equals to the RISHK, we are greater than them because we hold to the light, and the prophecies and the songs that sing of better days and glorious triumphs." Rythe said.

"Help us. Come with us to the smithy." Ansa said. "We must see within his shop and find out what clues might be there. There may be something that will help us on our journey."

"And weapons, we can take some that he's not using?" Clal's face wore a wry smile. "I think it would be okay if he knew the noble purpose we would be using them for. Besides," Clal said, "I was almost his apprentice."

Gwynn held her breath then let out a slow exhale. Her face looked off into the distance it seemed, through the wall and into another place, perhaps a memory.

"It's too risky," Gwynn shook her head. "The castle is conducting investigations and since I was with you, Ansa, when you went to the castle for our delivery...they will be visiting me here. I must stay." Gwynn stood up from her chair and walked over to Ansa. "But I will help you."

"When I returned home after parting with you at the castle gate, somehow I knew you three would be back." Gwynn disappeared out of the room for a moment then returned. "I labored all day making cloaks and tunics and an apron and some head covering. The colors are muted and the styles resemble that of the East where you will be returning back to. Though Rytte, yours is styled for more western culture."

"I've also secured some new boots, better footwear than you have currently." She continued to lay clothing on the table. "New packs for all of you, gloves, woolen hoods, socks, under tunics, everything new so as to not be recognizable to anyone who's ever seen you."

"Gwynn," Ansa leaped over and wrapped her arms around her, "this is incredible."

"You can thank me later." Gwynn smiled wide then divvied out the clothing. "Tonight, you will wear a hood along with your other new garments. You must not be detected."

Clal was garbed in blue, Rytte in red, and Ansa in green once they put on their clothing that was intended for them. Clal grabbed one of the new packs and emptied his belongings on the table. Gwynn caught sight of the necklace then gasped.

"Clal, that's Morgrith's necklace, is it not?"

"He gifted it to me just before we left to travel through the castle tunnel."

"And this, Gwynn," Ansa pulled out the Book of Legends, "this is an ancient volume that holds the history of Illia," She fanned the pages, "and even lore that has been lost for centuries. We..."

Boom! Boom! Boom!

"Gwynn! Open up! We'd like to have a word with you, by order of the King." Though far, the sound of the guards traveled down to the secret room they were now in.

"Too late!" Gwynn's fists balled up and she frantically ran through a few of the lower rooms to spy out a way for Clal, Ansa, and Rytte to escape. "Gather your things, quick like!"

Clal grabbed his things and stuffed them in his pack. Ansa's face started to look pale. Rytte clenched his teeth as his keen eye searched his surroundings.

Boom! Boom! Boom! "Gwynn, open the door!" the guard continued.

Outside of the room they had just been in there was a half window just above a table. "There!" Gwynn pointed.

Rytte grabbed a chair, leapt from it and caught himself on the ledge. He pulled at the lever to open it over and over again. "It's sealed."

"Who is it?" Gwynn said in an artificially produced yet believable sleepy voice.

"The castle guards! Now open, woman!" The guard's voice was gruff and unkind.

"Clal," Rytte turned, "we must either find a way out, now, or hide until they are gone."

"The back door!" Gwynn said. "Perhaps they have not discovered it's location yet. Come!"

They cautiously climbed the stairs. "Coming!" Gwynn hollered.

She led them to the back door, opened it slowly then let them out the back. She shut the door then quickly hurried to the front door to speak with the guards.

Once out of the shop, Clal led them to one wall of another attached building. They kept close to the wall and moved slowly. Clal was not sure what would happen to Gwynn. She had been so kind and the clothing that she had provided, though Clal did not realize it before, was sorely needed for the journey that they were embarking upon.

Rythe stayed behind Ansa as she walked close to Clal. They were just about to leave the area when someone snuck up behind them and grabbed Rythe. There was another dark figure and the two of them towered above them half lit by a light behind them. The first one released Rythe.

"Listen," the voice said. "Listen to me very carefully and you will be spared." These were two guards Clal began to see. "The town and castle are beginning to unravel with suspicion and investigations about the boys who escaped before the examination feast and the mysterious young girl who visited the castle today..."

"Jestro?" Ansa said, "Is that you?"

"Yes, Ansa. It is I." He said though his voice was not as jovial as it had been earlier that day. "This is Selorumus, who is also of the order of Morgrith. Have you been to the blacksmith's yet?"

"No," Clal shook his head. "We are going there now!"

"We will cover you, as it seems to me that this place, Tallon's smithy, is an important place for you to visit." Jestro looked around for a moment then continued. "We will relieve a set of guards that are close by. I have not told you yet but I am a commanding officer. I volunteered to be part of the forces who were to be stationed without the castle during this time of great alarm."

"You will go ahead and we will follow in the distance so as to intervene if you are on the verge of being apprehended by any of my counterparts. You will do your duty there at Tallon's and be quick about it, then be on your way." Jestro smiled. "Do you three understand?"

They all nodded.

"Your mysterious appearance, Jestro could not have been at a more perfect time." Clal said. "Thank you. And yes, though the ensuing danger is great, we must find a way to explore the inner parts of Tallon's shop before we leave town."

"Right!" Jestro nodded then motioned with two fingers for them to be on their way.

Clal led them through some of the back alleys and between buildings the best that he could. However, traveling on the main street became their only option after a while. There were guards everywhere, two standing one corner and one in another. As they quickly walked on Clal had an idea.

"Rythe," Clal said, "I think they may be looking for three people, though I'm not sure. Why don't you stay with Ansa; walk with her and I'll walk ahead...but keep me in your sights."

Clal rushed off not waiting for an answer. Rythe moved closer to Ansa then said, "Stay close to me, Ansa." He stole a glance at her as she closed in, then they hurried after Clal.

After a few turns and a long walk down a stretch of city street in the dead of night, they arrived at the front of Tallon's blacksmith's shop. Clal motioned for them to follow him around to the side of the building. Once they were under the cover of the shadow of the building Clal crouched down, then Ansa and Rythe followed suit.

"We've got to get in there and I'm not sure how to do that yet." Clal said.

"Leave that to me." Rythe jumped up and approached one of the side doors. First he rattled the door, then shoved it, then stepped back several paces and ran toward it. He rammed into the door with one shoulder leading. The door crashed open then Rythe disappeared into the darkness of the smithy.

"Rythe!" Ansa ran into the doorway and Clal followed.

Once in, Ansa shut the door and they all stood near the front counter of the shop. Hittle chirped then flew from her shoulder and disappeared somewhere in the room.

"What now, Clal? We can't see anything." Ansa said.

"Rythe," Clal grabbed his arm, "we must find something to light our way."

They felt around for a torch and some way to light it, but it was no use, there was no way for them to navigate through their surroundings. "Clal, can you use the stone?" Rythe suggested.

"I suppose."

Clal reached for his pack, pulled it to his middle, then reached in and retrieved the small pouch. He took out the necklace and slipped it over his head. The stone burst out with light which chased the darkness away.

"We've got to hurry now." Clal said. "We must look for clues and weapons."

"Just look at this place." Ansa picked up a broken bowl off the floor.

From the outside, Tallon's shop looked as it always had. But on the inside, the furniture and things behind the shop's four walls bore no resemblance that this was a blacksmith's shop at all. The shelves were torn from the walls, tables were broken and overturned. Iron works were strewn across the floor. The wooden planks of the shop that made up the floor were splintered into pieces in most places.

"What happened?" Clal whispered.

"There's only one answer," Rythe said through clenched teeth, "the RISHK, Renthar, I'm guessing."

"Well, let's look for any weapon that we can salvage." Clal turned over tables, anvils, tools and broken shelves.

Ansa was the first to find a weapon. "Look, a short sword." She ran her finger across the blade.

"Ansa, be careful. It could still be sharp," Clal warned.

"She knows, Clal, I'm sure." Rythe smiled. "I'd do the same thing."

Rythe searched near the corner of the shop and found a cupboard that had received no damage. He opened the doors. "Ah ha!" He said. "I found a stash of daggers over here." They ran to Rythe who handed Clal over a dagger to tie around himself. Then Rythe came to Ansa and fastened it around her waist almost before she noticed.

"Oh, Ansa, I wasn't thinking," Rythe said. "I didn't think you would know where to put this. We're just in such a hurry."

"That's okay, Rythe." She whispered. "Thank you...and you're right. I've never worn a dagger before."

"There, you two are equipped. All I need is a sword, but where to find one." Clal continued searching through the piles of the wreckage. They rummaged around for what seemed like a long time before finding anything. Rythe was the first one to find anything that would give them any clue about Tallon the blacksmith.

"Here. Over here," Rythe waved his hand beckoning them. "Come, I've found something and I need your light Clal."

Clal and Ansa ran over to Rythe who was crouching under the counter of the shop. "It's a note." Clal shined his light on it. "It reads: I am expecting a dark rider to visit me here in my shop. He required me to forge three weapons for him but I refused. When he returns I will have no weapons for him. If anyone reads this message, know that I am in grave danger, or worse, dead. Signed, Tallon the Blacksmith of Eldan Vyum"

"So he didn't follow through, he didn't serve the wretched man one bit." Rythe said with a wide grin on his face. "I like him. What a brave soul, that Tallon he is."

"But it cost him everything, Rythe." Ansa stood up and looked around.

"Sometimes people choose to make the right choice," Rythe stood up and put the note into his pouch, "no matter what happens because of it."

"But it is such a sad thing." Ansa brought her hands to her face.

"It can be," Clal too was disturbed by the shop being in shambles. But he also shared Rythe's excitement to find that Tallon was a good man, honorable, who stood up to the bullies of their day. He secretly hoped that one day he would meet Tallon and tell him this. He hoped that he was still alive after such an ill fate that had befallen him.

"But there's still a few unanswered questions." Rythe said, looking around. "Why was he in such a hurry when I saw him last? Do you remember me telling you about that?"

"Yes," Clal nodded, "and from your story it sounded as if he would have to work long days and use his greatest measure of skill to fit in three weapons among his other smithy work that he was behind on."

"Then, he must have been working on something else..." Ansa said.

"This Tallon is a mystery." Rythe looked around. "I don't know what more we can do here. I think we've found enough."

Clal reached for the stone then slid the necklace from his neck and replaced it into his pack. Right as he was doing so a noise was heard. Someone was opening the rear door of the blacksmith shop.

The darkness was thick and they could not decipher where anything was. "Put on your hoods and huddle under the counter, all three of us!" Ansa said.

"Ansa, they..." Clal replied.

"Trust me and do it."

They all did as Ansa said and hid. The counter was deep and though they had been there a moment ago, they hadn't noticed that there were two doors and a cupboard underneath that could be sealed off. Ansa pulled the doors shut and left a small crack open just as two men entered, each holding lanterns.

"This will teach the old man to do what he's told when he's told," one of the men spoke with a raspy voice. "Look at this mess. Isn't it beautiful?!" The man laughed.

"Imforo, how dare you imply that he deserved such wicked treatment. The man, Renthar told me, was ever so kind...and ever so skilled, the best there is in Illia. That's why Renthar took him away. Should this really have been fair treatment..." the other man laughed a hearty wicked laugh.

Ansa gasped then whispered, "Tallon's alive?"

“Skeldruc...what was that? Did you hear that?” Imforo froze then slowly scanned the scene. They were quiet and could hardly be heard as they walked around the room and closer to the counter under which they hid.

Rythe’s hand was on his sword and Clal held his dagger at the ready. Ansa was behind both of them well protected for what could possibly be their first encounter with the RISHK.

“Imforo,” Skeldruc motioned for him to join him. “Over here.” They were approaching the counter, their legs were getting closer. Their black legs came so close then Clal saw one of them crouch down reaching out to open the cupboard door they were hiding behind.

“Hey!” Skeldruc drew back before he had a chance to discover them. “What is that bird doing here?” They could hear Hittle screeching and whizzing around the room, launching into a full attack on the RISHK.

The men retreated waving their arms back and forth. Imforo dropped his lantern on the floor which quickly doused the remains of the shop exploding into flame and smoke. Skeldruc threw his lantern from him where another blazing fire erupted

“Imforo, get to the horses!” They ran for the door. “Then lets ride North.” The RISHK vanished as Hittle continued his onslaught.

Rythe was watching them like the sharp eyed hunter that he was then burst open the cupboard doors once they were gone. The smoke was quickly filling the shop.

One of the cupboard doors slammed into the wooden planked wall then broke off of its hinges and clamored to the floor. They all looked at the wall where a dislodged plank revealed a wooden box. Rythe looked at the fire which was getting ever closer, the heat almost unbearable, then reached in and pulled the wooden box from its hiding.

“It’s heavy.” He slid open the box, peaked in, then closed it. “Clal, you’re in luck. We’ve found your sword not a moment too soon. Let’s get out of this place.”

Clal looked at the wooden box, then up at Rythe. “What good fortune.” Then Clal turned and ran to the side door disappearing into the night. Ansa followed.

Rythe held the wooden box tightly to his chest as he moved toward the door, the light of the flames danced across his face and reflected in his eyes. He leaned then leapt into the open doorway, his crimson cloak fanning out, narrowly avoiding the flames.

Chapter 9: The Journey North

Clal looked behind him. Ansa rode his heels and Rythe was several paces back. Darkness of night and swiftness of flight was their greatest advantage in this moment. Clal turned a corner, ran down a dark road, then just before he turned another corner, he watched for the others.

Rythe had caught up to Ansa. He heard Ansa sobbing. He spoke nothing to her, only continued to hold the wooden box to his chest as they ran. They soon joined Clal.

"Where are we going and what do we do now?" Rythe said, bending over, his chest moving up and down quickly.

"We've gotta get out of this city and away from the threat of the castle guards." Clal said. "And we've got to get out tonight."

"Clal," Rythe pushed the wooden box toward him.

Clal took the box, "Let's find a more secluded place to rest for a bit."

Rythe came close to Clal, "You stay closer to Ansa and I'll lead us to a safe place. She needs you, I think."

Rythe moved past him and turned the corner. Clal wrapped his arm around Ansa as they followed. The further they went the darker their surroundings grew until they reached the forest edge. A waxing moon had risen in the East which shed a fair amount of light upon their wooded path. Rythe found a ring of trees that surrounded a small part of the forest, "Here. We can rest here for a time."

Ansa sat beside Clal who had found a fallen tree to sit on. Hittle soon returned and flew in front of Ansa's face, chirping. He landed on her hand then hopped up to her shoulder. He then flew to a nearby tree branch, sitting still and silent.

Clal noticed that Ansa's gaze was fixed on something in the city. Clal peered back into the city, then he saw it. From their position they could see smoke and flame in the distance reaching high into the starry night. That wasn't the fire from Tallon's blacksmith shop alone, he knew that other buildings were now ablaze and will also be a pile of ashes in the morning. Was this the intent of the RISHK or an accident?

Ansa began to sob again and Clal just held his sister. After she slipped away into a much needed slumber, Clal laid her down on the forest floor, moved away from her side, then approached Rythe.

Clal opened the lid of the wooden box as Rythe watched. He set the lid on the grass then ran his hand across most of the side of the sword. The blade of this doubled edged sword was etched halfway up with designs that told a story. The darkness hid further details from him at the moment, however. There were jewels both in the center and on the left and right of the guard and the grip of the sword had been fashioned with the softest of black leather. And the great blue jewel on the pommel looked exactly like the jewel in his necklace from Morgrith.

"This...is..." Clal began.

"...a kingly sword," Rythe said.

Clal stood, and held the sword out straight in front of him, "I've never held a sword."

"I have," Rythe stood back a step, "But nothing so..."

"Clal," Ansa rose, "is that the sword that Rythe found?" She was still sniffing.

He swung it back and forth in the air. "Yes."

"Clal, I found this in the bottom of the box." Rythe handed a folded piece of paper to him.

Clal squinted, then held it up to the light of the moon. "It says the year this was recorded, which was..." Clal counted with his other fingers, "forty-four years ago. That's a long time, the sword looks newly forged."

"What does the note say?" Ansa moved closer to read it.

"To our greatest hope, Seldinolum. If by chance you come, and this sword finds you, know that I was neither the only contributor nor the sole instigator of such a marvelous work and craft. For you, by far will need the greatest advantage in combat and this, by far, is my grandest masterpiece of all."

"For me?" Clal spoke to himself. "How did this all work out?"

"Some things are meant to be and we're all part of the way things work out sometimes." Rythe said.

"Clal, can you imagine if we hadn't gone back to Tallon's smithy?" Ansa shook her head.

"I knew that was part of our journey, and now look at our fortunate plight, though bittersweet." Clal could still see the flames and smoke.

"Tallon, whom we've never met," She turned to Rythe, "except for you, Rythe." She turned back to Clal, "Tallon is our loyal friend. We must help him. We must find him. He is in danger."

"I would, if it weren't for our greater purpose."

"Clal, but what if our purpose is to help him too?" She said.

"I don't know either way." Rythe said, stretching out along the grass they were standing on. "But I think we are safe here and I'm going to sleep."

"All right, perhaps you're right, Rythe." Clal said laying down. "We can discuss this in the morning. Now I have a sword to sleep on." He smiled.

Ansa was left alone. She sat there for a long time with arms crossed and a frown on her face. But as the night wore on, she swayed and wobbled until she too found the grassy oasis a welcome place for rest.

When Clal awoke, Rythe was standing and looking into the East as he leaned against a large tree. The sky was light though the sun had not risen over the eastern mountain range.

"Good morning!" Clal said, rubbing his back.

"Clal, we should be moving on." Rythe said, his back still facing Clal. "I believe this is our last chance." He turned to Clal, "I sense that they are looking."

"Yes, we must go, but where? Ansa has said to the North." Clal looked down at her as she lay there on her side with closed eyes, her hood covered her brown locks.

"I know we don't know our path yet. But I think it's you that should decide." Rythe pointed at his chest, "You're the chosen one. So, be the chosen one, Clal." Rythe walked over to Clal and clapped him on the back, smiling.

"I was afraid of that." Clal said. He sat there sulking on the ground frowning at the prospect of being responsible for the mistakes as well as the successes of their journey. It was a hard thing to now be the leader when he hardly knew where to lead them.

"Rythe," Clal motioned for Rythe to join him who was sitting upon the fallen tree. Rythe came and sat down beside him.

"So this much we do know, that there is a key, to unlock the sun, which the sun to me sounds like a weapon...a way to defeat the dark one. So, what is the key and what is this sun and where are they to be found and how do we learn the answers?" Clal rubbed his chin.

"Right, and then there's the song about the people, the second verse of the lullaby. Endeavoring to find a lost people." Rythe said, "How do we know where they are if they are lost?"

"Someone will have to tell us." Clal said.

"And what of the blacksmith?" Rythe patted Clal's knee then stood up and turned toward him. He waited for Clal to answer.

"I am afraid, Rythe. I'm afraid to make a wrong decision." Clal too arose. "But I think it would be the right thing to do, when someone is in danger, you try to help them, is that not right?"

"It would seem to be. And like Ansa said, perhaps it's truly part of our journey." Rythe smiled.

Clal looked out to the East again, the sun sending its first rays upon the forest like glass shooting through the sky. Clal thought for a moment, then remembered the Book of Legends and how reading from its pages gave them a clearer sense of their full purpose. He reached over to pull it from Ansa's bag, when Ansa popped up from sleeping and grabbed his hand.

She held him as her eyes were glazed over but came to her senses in a few moments as sleep left her.

"Oh, Clal. I'm sorry." She released her grip on his arm. "I heard something and thought...oh, how silly of me."

"Ansa, good morning! I've decided to take us North where we can search out Tallon, then continue on with our journey." He smiled. "Ready your things. Though I do want to read from the Book of Legends for a spell." Clal ran his hand through her hair and shook it so as to make a mess of her already halfway confused, twig filled hair.

"Okay. Okay, you!" She giggled handing him the book.

Clal stood and thumbed through the volume. A key. The sun. A people. He knew that all of these were important, but couldn't exactly pinpoint their direct relation. This is why he wanted to read from the book.

Just as he was about to turn one of its brittle pages, Ansa snatched it from him. "How would you like it if I read...while we traveled?"

Clal sighed. He never had been keen on reading. "Yes, I suppose I'm not up for reading at the moment." He winked at Ansa who smiled and spun around to return the book to its rightful place. She had appointed herself as the keeper of the book for now.

And so, they all gathered their belongings, strapped their weapons and packs tight and once again journeyed through the forest. While they walked, it was decided that they would follow a half a mile distance parallel to the main road that went north. They would cross many other roads and knew to be quick and careful as they crossed. They were not sure who would be watching. They could never be too careful.

Ansa read from the Book of Legends and occasionally voiced what she was reading. There were tales of Kings, of peoples, and of places that held great importance. She had mostly read to herself and at the moment was trying not to lose her step or trip while reading and walking.

Clal became aware that they were approaching the main road to the West. "Let's pass by quickly and be on our way." They ran across the road then Ansa followed. Rythe walked across the path peering off in each direction. When they had reached the other side and had only walked a few feet into the forest, Rythe turned and stopped.

"Rythe, what is it?" Ansa said.

"Hooves."

In an instant the rider appeared on the road in the distance. Clal dove into the underbrush then Ansa did the same. Rythe crouched near a tree. They waited for the rider to pass. The rapid beating of the hooves on the road told Clal that this rider was riding as fast as possible. Soon, the rider would be within sight.

"This is the day the boys return home. Perhaps it's just one of the boys." Rythe whispered.

"Whoever it is, they are working their stead to no end." Clal said.

The rider burst into view riding a black horse. It was Morgrith. Once known, Clal jumped out and called for him to stop. Morgrith reared his horse then turned and drove them into the bushes with his horse. They understood and ran several paces away from the path.

"My, it's been a busy few days." Morgrith dismounted with a smile. "Tell me, how are you here and not further along?"

"Further along where?" Clal spat. "The path is still not clear to me, Morgrith. Though we've acquired clothing," he lifted up his cloak.

"...and weapons," Rythe unsheathed his sword.

"...and now we're going north to help rescue Tallon from the RISHK."

"Though, we've also learned that there is a key and that I must unlock the sun, a weapon to defeat the dark one, and that there is a people hidden away that must be found." Clal said.

Morgrith smiled. "I have no doubt that you are on the correct path. I only wish I could go with you."

"What are you doing here, Morgrith?" Rythe asked. "Why do you ride with such haste?"

"It is your families, Clal and Ansa...and yours, Rythe." Morgrith looked around and pulled them in. "They have narrowed down all possible combinations and somehow have secured your three names as the arsonists who burned down several of the buildings in the city last night."

"What?" Ansa yelled.

"How did they..." Clal began.

"It was the feast. They read every name before the food was even served to the boys and when your name Rythe was called, no one stood, and they certainly had record that you had been examined. The other boy that the guards reported escaping with you, Rythe, which was you Clal, they figured had somehow snuck in as an imposter. Once another guard reported that a girl named Ansa had come to the castle on a day when no deliveries were acceptable, and another report from another guard that a girl with a rogue bird was wandering the castle halls, They figured that you three were all together preparing some kind of plot against the kingdom. They easily found your name Clal as Rythe lives close to a family with a daughter named Ansa. And so, I rode here as fast as I could knowing that your families are in danger of interrogation and the royal guards will be deployed within the hour." Morgrith shook his head. "Thanks to our good friend Jestro, however, none of this information could have been secured so quickly if it weren't for him." Morgrith turned to Clal.

"What did happen with the fire? Jestro had told me that he was covering you so you could investigate Tallon's blacksmith shop."

"We went because my coming to Eldan vyum was to become an apprentice to Tallon. But we later found out through our final visit that he was threatened by Renthar to forge weapons for him and he refused. So he's been taken." Clal shook his head and stepped closer to Morgrith. "And Skeldruc and Imforo, they arrived as we were looking for weapons for our journey. So we

hid. Then Hittle, Ansa's sparrow...he saved us from being found out. One of the RISHK, I can't remember who it was, one of them dropped their lantern and the place began to burn."

"But our time there was not in vain, we found out that Tallon is still alive." Rythe said.

"How?" Morgrith said.

"Skeldruc said something about it before they ran out of the burning smithy."

"And I found this." Clal pulled the sword from its sheath. "What do you know of this? Tallon, he is a true friend for this had been forged forty-four years ago and Tallon has been the faithful keeper of it. What do you know of it?"

Morgrith stepped back. He pushed the weapon up touching the flat part of the blade. "I have never seen this, Clal. But you might have guessed that I asked Tallon to forge this masterful weapon. Tallon never showed it to me, though I don't know why." He smiled and motioned for Clal to hand the sword to him. Clal surrendered the weapon to the enchanter. Morgrith held it up and read the words on the blade that Clal had seen last night but could not read in the darkness.

"May the hand that wields this blade,

Wield also the light and life of Illia.

May the heart of the warrior, true,

Carry her song and her call till the dawning."

"It is here, in an ancient tongue." Morgrith said. "And in the Book of Legends, you will find it there also."

"But what does it mean?" Ansa asked him.

"I cannot linger, my friends. But I will tell you this," Morgrith put his hands on both Clal and Ansa's shoulders. "Follow your heart, for that is the only way that you will grow to fulfill your destiny and the prophecies spoken of by our fathers. I can say no more."

Morgrith leapt onto his horse like he was a young man and not the ancient wizard that he was. "And this," he pulled a pack from the side of his horse. "Always am I found with victuals, for you never know who or what you'll find along the roads of life." He chuckled to himself. Clal took the heavy laden pack from Morgrith.

"I will warn your families and assure that their safety will be secured. If anything, they will hide until the royal forces are no longer a threat." His steed turned and Morgrith struggled to control him. "I will instruct them that you've done nothing wrong and that you are all safe. Have no fears and may you travel with the greatest aid Illia has to offer. Be well!" Morgrith shot off west and was gone in moments.

They were revived of sorts knowing that they were truly following the right course. Though their appearance and dealings in Eldan Vyum had stirred up a great level of alarm and attention, it was still manageable by individuals like Morgrith and Jestro. What's more is that their progress had been a tremendous leap forward in their overall journey. Now, they were well on their way to the northern realms of Illia.

Clal's pace quickened as he thought about the inscription on his blade. He repeated it over and over again and committed it to memory in a matter of minutes.

They travelled all that day through the woods with nothing but an occasional scraped leg from a stubborn branch or a sore shoulder from an unpracticed habit of carrying a pack for hours. They ate Morgrith's food sparingly and were all thankful for the moment when Clal said, "I believe we should camp here tonight."

Once again they found ample rest upon the forest floor, and when they awoke the next day, their northern destination being ever closer fueled their hunger to continue to move in haste.

They took turns carrying the sack of food from Morgrith, though Rythe carried it most of the time. Rythe also made sure that they drank from almost every stream and river that they crossed.

On the second day late in the afternoon during a time when they sat to rest and eat before their final few hours of journeying, Ansa opened up the Book of Legends and read from its pages.

"Ansa," Clal said after watching her for a bit. "What are you doing?"

"Well," she said while her gaze remained fixed on the pages, "I'm looking for anything that has to do with song, music, signing...that sort of thing."

"What have you found?" Rythe asked.

"Nothing," she said flatly. "But I will. I just haven't read too much yet."

Rythe stood up from sitting on the ground. "I would guess it's a day and half from where we will camp in a few hours from here."

"Another day and a half?" Clal threw up his hands. "I've always wanted to own a horse."

"I don't think a horse would help us." Rythe scolded. "Staying off the road, that's the only way to travel for this poor lot here." He chuckled. "What, don't you like the boots that Gwynn so graciously provided for us?"

"About the boots, my feet have never felt so comfortable." Then Clal remembered the last time they saw Gwynn. It was for them that she was risking her status, her business dealings, her safety, her very future and life...all for them.

"Bless her, our friend Gwynn." Clal said quietly. "Rythe, I want to be that kind of person, just like Gwynn and Tallon. True and loyal to others."

"I believe you are, Clal." Rythe smiled. "You are."

Ansa stood up, closed the book then placed it in her pack. Then she said, "I found something. But you'll have to catch me to find out what it is." She leapt through the trees and vanished.

Both Clal and Rythe looked at each other with their eyes open wide. Both of them had pulled out several items from their pack while resting. They were now shoving things into their packs, hands and arms blurred in their haste. Rythe darted off first, then Clal ran after him.

Ansa was known for her speed, and now with her tremendous head start, there was no telling when they'd catch her. Why had she decided to run anyway?

Clal ran, pumping his legs and arms, hunching over as he dodged tree branches and leapt over bushes. Clal watched Rythe tumble to the ground in front of him. He rolled then leapt back up like he had been running all along. Clal smiled.

Rythe was a good friend. Someone he'd always wanted to visit and spend more time with. He just never made it his way very often. But he always knew that they would form a lasting friendship. Clal never could have imagined that this would be their fate together.

"Ansa," Rythe yelled as he laughed. "You can't keep running like that. You're going to tire out."

Clal was beginning to close the gap between him and Ansa. But before he and Rythe could catch her, she burst through the last of the trees that lined the western forest then slowed down with arms crossed.

Clal and Rythe were at her side in moments panting and bending over. Clal fell to the ground and laid on his back with his eyes closed and hands on his forehead.

"Why..." He began, "...were you...running...Ansa?"

"Why not?" She laughed.

Rythe came up to Ansa still breathing heavily, "Where did you...learn to run....like that?"

"All you do...is you just imagine...you're flying!" She giggled then nudged Rythe on the shoulder. "I'll have to...teach you...some time."

Ansa sat beside Clal, opened her pack then pulled out the Book of Legends. Rythe sat down and watched her eager to hear what she had learned from its pages.

Catching her breath, Ansa looked up into the sky. Her head turned back and forth as she searched in the trees and above her. "Hittle!" She yelled. "Where are you, boy!" She put her two fingers to her lips and whistled. "Hittle!"

"That's strange, Hittle is gone." She half muttered to herself.

"I haven't seen him for a while now." Clal said as he sat up and turned to Ansa. "I'm sure he will be back. Now, what did you find in that book?"

"I said, you have to catch me to find out what it is." She smiled a wry sideways kind of smile. "You didn't catch me."

Clal just stared at her.

"Well..." She opened the book and turned to a section near the back, "I did find something interesting, though I'm not certain I understand it completely." She turned the book around.

"Here Clal, you read it."

Clal took the Book of Legends and read the page where Ansa had pointed.

"And thus our father's of old have written that in the land southward, years all but forgotten, the shining city of Shanlyran resided. No castle but the finest trade market in all of Illia. The people created handsome goods and were appreciated as fair and honest. There was no telling when their fortune would turn. It seemed as if it would last forever. It was here in the sands of Shanlyrogus one day when a sand storm began. It started from the west of the desert edges and swept to the East and out to the Beltorus Sea. The eye could not see neither the ear hear while the winds raged and the sand filled the sky. It lasted for only a short time. When the wind died off and the sands settled, the great Shanlyran City had all but disappeared. No one has been able to recover any facts about what great force caused the sand storm and where the city has since gone..." Clal kept reading.

"This is incredible. Here down further it talks about many who have tried to search for the city but have not been able to figure out even where it used to be."

"Yet another hidden people, I supposed." Rythe said.

"That's right," Ansa said. "I wanted to show you. I know that Illia has one desert, which is in the East and this is the second account of a missing people. And so, what if they can help us if we can find them?"

Clal thought for a moment looking at the sky. "I wonder who that person was looking for this invisible city. It doesn't mention a name."

Clal continued to skim the pages. He turned several pages before he sat up straight. "Look at this," he said.

"The Banished" He looked at Ansa, then back at the book. "And thus our father's of old have written...the people of Illia were few. A great many years passed away and the people became large in number. There were peoples in the North and in the South, in the East and in the West. Some were hid up, others were not. The peoples who fell away from the sight of the others were

never seen again. But there were some who were hidden, but did not mean to spread goodness, only darkness and shadow. The people sought for safety among them and so they banished the dark ones. Four peoples found one to banish and there were four. The Banished they became and their darkness drew them together. And the one, the dark one lurking, swept them up and they serve him and none else. The Banished, for the ancient evil was the first, the banished. They are the RISHK."

"Banished," Clal muttered. "They were banished."

"Clal," Rythe said, raising his hand slightly from off his knee, "We know...now...that there are people that only you can find and that only you can free, though we aren't sure of how all of this will come to be." Rythe continued as he stood up and began to pace around them. "And if these, the banished, the RISHK, came from these hidden places, these lost peoples, then they know where the hidden ones are." Rythe stopped. "And they know where to find them, I am sure of it."

"But being banished they can't enter the kingdom, I think, right?" Clal said.

"Banished by magic. But what kind of spell?" Rythe said, "It's hard to know."

"I think we need to understand what kind of men we are dealing with." Clal turned to Rythe, "Rythe, I remember when you told us about the four of them, sort of, hunting you in the forest. Then you said there was one, the one who held you fast for so long, it seemed like he came from a place in front of you. Wouldn't he have had to run very, very fast to be in front of you waiting to catch you in his grip?"

"I suppose." Rythe started pacing again, "Yes, it was uncanny."

"These people, how many are there? There must be four groups. There are four banished. And what if each people, they have certain powers, not like the other Illians. And so there's this common Illian population and an uncommon, or dare we say, magical, hidden population..." Clal jumped up.

"What I'm trying to say is the banished one that held you bound..." Clal said.

"Krothwing..." Rythe said.

"...his name says it...what if he flew, what if the people from Skyland, they fly?"

"Clal, that's...yes!" Rythe said, grabbing him, "which means that the others have some power they hold and wield."

Both Clal and Rythe were smiling and clapped each other on the back. They turned to Ansa who did not look excited.

"Clal, must we find the four peoples? Is this the path, so vast, so long?" She turned and walked a few paces into the open grass. "And their powers..." She turned to Clal and walked to him. "What about home? When do we see mother and father and Turl?" She sat down. "This seems all wrong." She put her head in her hands and sighed.

Clal stood up and walked over to Ansa. Rythe also walked over. "I know it's a hard thing to find that we are in the midst of so many changes. None of us could have guessed that we would be here right now." Clal said.

"And yet we are," Ansa lifted up her head. "We are going to search for Tallon, but we don't even know where he is. He could be anywhere, though we assumed the RISHK took him north."

The words rang in Clal's ears like the rushing of a great wind. It was noble to save someone from destruction or look for someone who has been found missing. But what of their task that was entrusted to them? What of the path they were to travel now?

As if Rythe could sense Clal's thoughts Rythe spoke, "Tallon is in danger, we know. But, we three do not have the means to save him." Rythe looked at Ansa. "I think it best to plan for another course. What do we know about our task?" He turned to Clal. "Clal, where do we go if we don't go north?"

Clal sat for a moment, unable to move. A flood of thoughts come into his mind, of his moments in the examination chamber and how he felt and the wonder; of Morgrith's ancient face and warm smile; of the chamber where he touched the wall and it vanished, and how the sword was meant for him. All of these things were encouraging, that he really was the one and that he belonged on this journey. And last of all he remembers Turl's words, 'Never doubt yourself.'

These thoughts gave Clal the strength to lean forward, to stand up, and to fish the Book of Legends from within the tall grass where it had been laying.

"I think, Rythe," Clal said smiling, "I better keep reading this book. Because the more I read it, the more I learn about the country of Illia and that it has a lot of secrets yet to be discovered; and in those secrets lies our charted path, our way, even our next steps."

Ansa came close to Clal as he opened the Book of Legends once again. She locked her arm in his, "Yes, Clal, you're right." Ansa said grinning. "There is so much in there, I think..." Ansa stopped, "Wha..." She stood up and looked at the sky, "Hittle?"

There, not twenty feet away, Hittle was sitting on a low branch watching them intently. He chirped twice then cocked his head.

"What are you doing over there?" She scolded. "Where have you been, Hittle? I was worried, just a little."

He flew over to Ansa's shoulder and rested there while she walked over to Clal once more and sat down beside him. Clal opened the book, fanned the pages careful not to damage the ancient parchment. Rythe too had gathered around them on Clal's other side.

They were in the shade of a nearby tree, though the sun was continuing to climb in the sky and it was beginning to feel warm as a summer day should.

Clal mumbled to himself as he skimmed through the words. He came to a part where there were some diagrams, circular, then some symbols none of them could decipher. The only thing that was readable to them was the title at the top of the page and a sentence of writing.

"The Legend of Amnbir"

"And so our forefathers have written, the place of Amnbir is a sacred place of ruins that only the wisest can find..."

"Amnbir, that's a peculiar..." Clal began but was suddenly cut off by Hittle's chirping that had begun.

"Hittle, what is it?" Ansa said, looking at him after placing him on her finger.

He was chattering and chirping. He then rose into the air shortly, then he landed on the page that had just been read by Clal about Amnbir.

"What, Hittle? What?" Ansa said standing up. "What is it?"

Hittle shot up into the air, circled two times above them then flew off westward.

Ansa looked at Clal. Then Rythe said, "I think he means for us to follow him. Was this his behavior in the castle garden when you first found him, Ansa?" He said as they gathered their things.

"Yes," She squinted in his direction. "He's up to something!"

Ansa turned then ran into the forest. Clal ran after her then Rythe jumped over the fallen tree and disappeared behind a large oak.

Chapter 10: Amnbir

Once again, Ansa was running ahead of them as fast as her legs could carry her. She could hear Hittle's chirping and singing ahead of her but he was nowhere that she could see. Clal and Rythe were soon by her side scanning the sky.

"Where is he?" Clal said.

"I don't know, just keep listening?" Ansa said.

"He's going..." Rythe said, "directly west. What's west?"

"More forest!" Clal said. "Can you hear Hittle?"

They continued to weave through the forest passing countryside that none of them had ever seen before; luscious meadows, an endless assortment of trees, and small streams of clear water. After spending half the day traveling west and continuing to follow Ansa's rogue sparrow they came to a fast flowing river, jogging to a stop. There were several rocks and boulders that graced its surface, but none of them trailed through to the other side for easy passage. Rythe ran up the bank, disappeared for a moment, then returned.

"There's a way up the river," Rythe pointed, "a massive fallen tree..."

Clal looked at Ansa, winked, then ran after Rythe as Rythe ran back up the river. They zig-zagged around the bank dodging tree roots and climbing up some of the boulders.

Ansa paused and put her hand to her ear. "No Hittle," she said.

"That's strange," Clal said, "I can't hear him either."

"It's all strange, the lot of us following a bird for hours across the forest." Rythe continued to move closer to the fallen tree that spanned across the river. "If I weren't on this, so called, sacred charted path, then I'd have been happy to take a nap in the forest grass somewhere far east of here."

"Rythe, you don't mean that." Ansa said, stepping over another large stone in her path.

"Well," he turned back to her half smiling, "only a lit..."

Rythe froze. He was half a yard away from the tree. Something caught his eye but Clal couldn't tell. "What, Rythe? Do you see something," Clal said, coming up beside him. He looked in the direction of where Rythe was looking.

Rythe started to slowly walk toward the direction he was now facing.

Ansa came to Clal's side and they both looked at each other, then back in the direction of Rythe's focused attention.

In front of them were many old and ancient looking trees judging by their height and the massive size of their trunks. The bark was gray and looked dead, if it weren't for the green leaves that sprouted from the tips of the branches like fireworks.

There were stones that were driven into the ground but rose high, covered with various shaped ivy like a green tapestry of earthen art. This wall appeared to be solid from left to right spanning many feet, almost endless. But, as Rythe moved closer, then closer still, Clal and Ansa behind, Clal began to see a gap that continued to widen.

"A doorway," Rythe muttered, giving a short chuckle, then stopping.

"Clal, you lead the way." Rythe said, nudging his chin up so as to encourage him. "I'll be close behind you."

"Clal, Rythe, have you seen or heard Hittle again?" Ansa whispered to them as she scanned the sky.

"No, Ansa," Clal shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes," Rytthe said. "He's through there," he pointed in the direction of the opening.

Clal, surprised at Rytthe's answer, moved forward and with more speed. They passed under low hanging branches swaying in the wind at dusk and past the massive tree trunks. When they came to the ivy laden wall, there, almost indistinguishable, was a small opening that looked like a hall between two walls of stone, the height of two grown men. Clal pushed into the crevice and the journey began through the narrow passageway.

They filed through single file and as the sun continued to dip down over the horizon, the shadows grew long and the darkness crept in.

They reached the other end soon, the path opening to a large partially enclosed area surrounded by other stone walls and high trees. There were crumbled stones and symbols etched in dark markings.

"This place..." Rytthe turned and looked all around as he walked into the center of the ruin riddled location, "was made or fashioned this way by design."

Ansa came close to one of the ruins with many writings on them. "I can't see it. It's too dark now."

Clal's hand went straight to the side of his pack that he was wearing. Like a reflex, he found the stone and necklace thinking perhaps to shine it here. It would be safe among the veil of the stone walls and tall trees, would it not.

Clal looked at the pack and his hand over the stone. "Rytthe," he said as he lowered his hand. "Can you light a fire in here? Do you have any flint or anything at all?"

"Alas," Rytthe said, "that was one thing I must have overlooked in bringing."

Clal looked up at the sky hoping the moon would be full, but all he saw was the crescent moon as thin as he'd ever seen it.

Ansa was walking all around, or so Clal could hear her. He could faintly make out her figure and hands sweeping across the stones and fallen stones. "What was this place?" She said.

"I've never heard anything about it till we started reading in the Book of Legends." Clal said remembering that when he read 'The Legend of Amnbir,' Hittle wouldn't let them read further with all of his noise and flying about. Clal realized they never read the legend.

Again he put his hand to his pack feeling for the stone. This time he pulled out the necklace and quickly pulled it on. "Ansa, do you still have the Book of Legends?" The stone started to glow.

"Yes, Clal," Ansa replied then gasped. "Clal, you put the stone on again. It's so beautiful..."

"Yes...I did," he said. "I don't want to use it too much for fear of...I don't know...it's magic and not...you know..."

"Yes, we know." Rytthe smiled.

Ansa handed Clal the book and once again they began to read from its pages. "Well," Clal thumbed through the pages, "Where did I read about Amnbir..."

As soon as Clal said the word 'Amnbir,' the glow from the stone at his chest burst forth. All around them it showered light upon the ruins, the boulders, the greenery, everything around them, and as it had in the castle chambers, the stone walls and ruins began to illuminate their patterns and the markings began to glow. Instinctively, they drew closer, backs to each other watching as the glow filled the cove.

One marking in particular, long and slender, shined brighter than the rest. It grew and grew until it took shape forming into a large bird. The glowing figure burst from off of the stone and into the air, its wings spanned out and flapped taking it higher and higher into the sky. The magical bird was the size of a man, made of golden light. Its eyes were red and the beak curved sharply. They watched as it froze in the air for a moment, then flapped its wings and dove down toward them. It was swift, like a flash of lightning through the air.

Rythe drew his sword first, but then, realizing that this creature was made of light and concocted of magic, he slid his sword back into his sheath.

Ansa began to crouch, moaning to herself, eyes fixed on the approaching bird.

Clal drew his sword then said. "Draw your swords!"

"But..." Ansa said.

"I think we better get used to it no matter what is coming our way." Clal steadied his stance. But the force of the great bird was too much. It hit Clal in the stomach and swiped the necklace from him. Unable to breath, he fell to the ground. He had never been hit so hard in his life, unprepared thinking that the creature would pass through him somehow.

"Wait, you!" Rythe picked up some pebbles near his foot and threw it at the creature.

"Clal, the stone!" Ansa cried.

Doubled over and regaining his ability to breath, Clal looked up and could see the bird like fire in the sky. Though blurred through his teary eyes from getting assaulted, he could see that the creature was swooping back around. This time, Clal would be ready for it.

When the bird of golden light dove from above them Clal gripped his sword and readied his stance once again. He could see the stone hanging from the necklace which the creature had tight in its talons. The bird screamed as it swerved avoiding the swing of Clal's sword then snatching Ansa's pack as it climbed into the sky again.

"My pack!" she said.

"First the stone, now the book?" Clal was beginning to feel outnumbered. How could they defend themselves from this unconquerable foe? The bird reared again, swooped around then began another dive toward them, this time, it was on them in a flash.

Clal swung his sword earlier this time hoping to match the magical creature's timing. At the moment when he thought he would find himself colliding with the bird, his sword sunk into the chest of the creature. The creature dropped its treasures from its talons and burst into flames causing Clal to be thrust backwards landing on his back. It lay on the ground with flames crackling and dancing.

The force of the blow sent Rythe and Ansa in opposite directions and they rolled backwards on the forest ground now covered in leaves and twigs.

The golden fire of the bird continued to burn. Clal sat up and watched as the other two did the same. Slowly, the fire grew taller and narrowed. As it morphed the image they saw was of a man, tall and thin, though was this a man only. When once at first the shape of the figure was its only feature, the distinction of a face and legs, flames turning to features and clothing of gold. From flames to features, the man stood before them. He stood for a moment as a statue, then, his eyes moved and he peered at the three looking back at him.

"I am Gulnerye, keeper of Amnbir, tamer of the birds. I am the great Bird. And I have been awakened." He looked around at the glowing blue light in the shapes of languages and pictures

on the ruins and on other stone surfaces. He looked at Clal who was still holding his handsome sword, though it was hanging loosely from his hand.

"Only at one other time in my lifespan have I seen these give their light as they do tonight." He stretched his arms out. "Is this, indeed, the time prophesied by our father's when the chosen one shall come? With whom am I in the presence of?" Gulnerye bowed low.

Clal hesitated, then, by the nudge of his never failing counterpart, he was provoked to answer, "I am Clal, son of Dalbus, and she is Ansa, my twin sister, and our friend, Rythe, son of Deamus." Clal bowed slightly. "We were traveling west following a..." Clal stopped.

"A hope," Ansa said awkwardly, "following a hope that we could find what we were looking for."

"What are you looking for, Ansa, sister of Clal?" Gulnerye replied.

"Well...we are looking for a small..." She looked at Clal who nodded slightly, "...a sparrow...we were following him here till we lost him just outside of this...Amnbir."

Gulnerye smiled. "He is not lost to me, for I notice every fallen sparrow and every fledgling emerges into this world from their sleeping places. I tamed Hittle, though he was not named when under my care. For I knew he would find one." He then bowed again. "I sent him to you."

"How did you know his name?" Ansa said.

"He told me."

"Where is he now?" Rythe asked.

"Among the trees," then Gulnerye leapt into the air and disappeared into the darkness of the night sky. He swooped once then Hittle appeared and came to Ansa chirping and chattering as he landed on her shoulder.

Ansa put her hand on her chest, "Hittle was sent to me by your hand? Why? How did he know..."

"Not all things can be explained, neither can all things be explained all at once," He came closer to them and motioned for them to approach him. "Come," he said, "for I am called to your aid in this hour. Let us speak together."

Gulnerye turned and they followed him to a secluded corner of the back of Amnbir where there was a stone table a few feet from the ground. Gulnerye sat on the grass and the others sat around the table. The designs and glowing light had almost completely faded. Gulnerye lit a torch which he used to light other torches around them.

Clal began, "Gulnerye, I am the chosen one. And though it is difficult to say those words, thus, it is. We all have had our time to accept our fate, to choose it or to choose to reject it. We are loyal to the light of Illia, though we are still finding our way."

Gulnerye listened, then slid hand over to Clal. He lifted it up and revealed the stone in the necklace. Clal took it, then nodded his head.

"What do you know about your path thus far, Clal?"

"We know that I must obtain a key and that I'm the only one that can unlock the sun, which we think is describing some kind of weapon that will turn the dark one to ash, defeat him. We also have discovered that there are four peoples who have been hidden and that the RISHK, a band of men who were banished from each of these civilizations, they are searching to destroy the light." Clal turned to Rythe.

"We also know that Clal has a sword with some kind of magical virtues and that he himself has magic running through his veins." Rythe said. "We also have seen the RISHK and have learned of their ways...to some extent."

"And on Clal's sword, there are words that speak of Illian light and that he must also wield" Then Ansa placed the book on the stone table. "And this," she said, "it's a Book of Legends that have led us thus far, though there seems to be so many paths to take when we study from its pages."

Gulnerye moved his hand over to the book. He turned it so that the words on the cover faced him and he read them slowly. He brushed his hand over the leather cover, almost affectionately. Then, he pushed it back toward Ansa.

"One of the legends we read was about an island, a floating island. This might be our destination, but we are unaware of its location or if it still exists." Clal said.

"All of these things have led you along your path to this point. Now, I wish to give you the aid that I've been called to give." He leaned toward the middle of the table and spoke in a hushed tone. "I am a Skylander. I come from the sky and am a citizen of the realm of the floating island, Edaphlas. I was during Skyland's Rising, and I was there when Krothwing forsook his noble state and was banished for all time." Gulnerye leaned back again, sitting up straight and erect.

"The Hiding, an event that took place upon a certain day, was glorious and terrible all at once. I was only a small child. I remember the ocean waves and the sun. Then, the rumbling and final crack. Then the winds, the cold, cold winds and the snowy storm that never ceased. Years later, I was told that the people were given a gift in return for safeguarding a stone. The gift to tame the wind, which also allowed most of the Edaphlasian people to wield it and to cause them to fly. And so we as a people began to wear the garb of the creatures of flight, a feathered skin. This is the tale, the legend, the myth. And it is true, for you see me here tonight and your eyes are not tricked by some fool's spell."

"And so the RISHK, they are searching for a way to get in, back to their realms, but there is no way, not alone. Unless, an outsider brings them in with them." Gulnerye leaned forward again. "They seek the stone, the crystal, for we are the crystal keepers. They were banished for the only reason of scheming to obtain it in the first place."

"Renthar...he was the only one who had ever held it in his grasp. All Illian fate was almost lost then. But it was Morgrith who retrieved it. Morgrith still bears the scar of that dark night's ill fate turned bright once again."

"We must get to Edaphlas then. Can you tell us where we can find it?" Clal spouted out.

"I can tell you where it is. I can also tell you how to obtain your footing upon its surface." Gulnerye opened the book and turned to the page where the whole of Illia lay on a map. He pointed to the North Western part of the map where an island now was. "It is here, though not as it is in this map. He then slid his finger to the corner of the page then off the page, further north and further west. "It is here, far from the eyes of men."

"Hasn't anyone ever gone to explore directly underneath the floating island? Surely, someone's seen it." Ansa said.

"Only by magic do the raging winds and the crashing waves remain all year and the clouds above veils its hiding." He said. "And the task is perilous and great to set foot there, it is an honor that must be earned."

"We cannot fly." Rythe leaned in. "How can we hope to achieve such a task as this?"

"This much I can tell you. A dragon sleeps there and can only be summoned by a dragon's horn. I do not know where to obtain the horn. I only know that Dragon Tail River may lead you to a clue, though I don't know where that river is. There were two rivers that had similar names, Dragon Tongue and Dragon Tail. I've never been able to keep them straight." He leaned back again. "This is all I know."

Gulnerye stood. "Find the river. Find the horn."

"And what of this crystal you spoke of?" Clal said.

"You must obtain it, for it is kept and guarded only for the chosen one. And only by your care will it find its true purpose, until it too finds the ending of its path. We all have a purpose, every living and sleeping thing. Even Illia has her own song."

Gulnerye turned and walked a few paces, then he turned to them again. "Krothwing..." He said, "He will try to take it from you. Somehow the RISHK...they know things through their dark magic. Be warned that if he obtains the crystal, there will be no chasing him into the endless abyss above." Gulnerye turned to Clal, "You must not let this happen!"

Clal stood, "I will fight to the death, Gulnerye." He looked at Rythe and Ansa, "And I know that I couldn't have asked for better companions."

Gulnerye bowed low and smiled. He was beginning to illuminate again as gold light began to emit from his figure. "We may meet again in a future time." He said nodding, then he leapt into the air and hovered there, "Until then, know that all of the light of Illia, the sun, moon and stars, all good will be at your command. Be well and may your light shine all the brighter."

Gulnerye bowed his head once more, gave a smile, then he darted through the air and vanished above the trees into the West.

With the torches still burning, Amnbir had become quiet once again. Clal sat down near the table again and they all sat for a moment taking in what had just taken place. Rythe spoke first.

"This is a perfect place to rest for the night." He turned to Clal, "Shall we get some rest then set out for Dragon Tail River tomorrow?"

Clal didn't answer for a moment.

"Clal?" Rythe said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right. I just had a lot of questions that perhaps I'll just have to wait to find the answer to."

"One day at a time, brother," Ansa said, smiling. "That's something we might need to learn along the way. One day at a time."

Rythe stepped away scouting out the area, "I think this place would do." He called from a distance.

Clal and Ansa came to where Rythe was standing. It was behind the stone table where they had sat with Gulnerye. They all sat on the ground and prepared their packs as pillows to rest for the night. Clal, Rythe, and Ansa laid down almost immediately. When Ansa's head hit her pack, however, it hit something hard. She reached in and pulled out the Book of Legends. Out of habit more than necessity she thumbed through the pages. Then, she gasped. She had opened to one of the very first pages of the book. "Look, Clal, Rythe..." She read as they both sat up then leaned over toward her to see what the page revealed.

"The Book of Legends

A record written by

The hand of Gulnerye

Upon sacred pages, never to be dimmed
Compiled from the scrolls and ancient markings of the forefathers of old.
Or in other words 'And thus our fathers have written...'"

"It was him...Gulnerye." Ansa said. "He wrote the Book of Legends. She hunched over the book looking at the page. There was a marking underneath the words, it was of a bird though standing. "It's his ruin symbol that came to life."

Rythe jumped up from his spot then walked over to where they had seen Gulnerye's flaming figure burst from. "It's gone," Rythe said. He looked toward Clal, "Gulnerye's marking here."

"We've got to meet him again," Clal half whispered to himself. "So many questions."

They came together again and settled in their places, stretched out along the grass and rock. Rythe had put out the torches and they bid each other a fond sleep.

Rythe and Ansa fell asleep almost instantly, but Clal remained alert and deep in thought.

This was an interesting find, to have met the one who penned the Book of Legends. Clal looked above him into the sky. The stars twinkled brightly. He thought of all of the questions he could have asked Gulnerye while here. But he'd not read the book much since obtaining stewardship over it. He was too late, but how could he have known to pay close attention to the book? It was a hard lesson to learn.

As he rolled to one side facing Ansa, and watching her breath in and out, he wondered if he had failed them, that he should have read the book from the beginning. Perhaps they would be further along by this point in their journey. Ansa was stirring then her eyes popped open.

She looked at Clal for a moment, then said, "Clal, go to sleep, you." She smiled. "I know what you're thinking..." she said. "Yes, if you would have known..." Ansa yawned. "You could have asked him more questions. But, we'll figure it out. You'll see." She smiled then drifted back to sleep.

Clal turned to lay on his back. He closed his eyes and wondered what tomorrow would bring. With his pack beneath his head and his sword by his side he slept in the cover of the great Amnbir, where the great bird tamer sprang from the ancient ruin rock, to sleep no more.

Chapter 11: To The River

When Clal awoke, the sun had not yet moved above the horizon. The sky was azure blue and there was a white mist that hung low to the green grass. Clal stood up and gathered his pack, swinging it onto his back. He tied his sheath to his side then walked around the ruins of Amnbir.

When they had entered the place it seemed so much smaller crowded by the dark of night and shadows of the trees. Now, it seemed like an open court. He slowly walked by each ruin with its markings gliding his hand over the different surfaces of the rocks. He noticed a language written there that he could not read and scenes and pictures that he did not understand. There was one in particular, it looked like a woman's face and hair but the body was that of a dagger or sword. The pointed end had or was in the process of cleaving stone in half. And above her there was a symbol that looked like three twisting lines that wound together to form the trunk of a tree, whose leaves were above. Clal stepped forward, touched the intricate parts, then determined that he would etch this one into his memory. There was something about it, it felt like it was something he needed to understand, but couldn't.

He left it after a short time and walked around the other areas of Amnbir. He heard birds singing above and occasionally saw a few fly from one tree to the other. One bird flew close to Clal which surprised him but as it flew closer he recognized that it was Hittle. He landed on Clal's shoulder and chirped twice. Then he chattered and chirped while Clal continued walking around the boulder and ruin riddled place.

Rythe walked up to Clal to join him. "Good morning!" Rythe said.

"Good morning," Clal replied. "I know we should be moving on, but..."

"You're not hoping for Gulnerye to come back, are you?" Rythe said, looking at the ground as they walked slowly.

This was Clal's wish, to see if Gulnerye was indeed destined to return. Somehow, he knew in his heart that there was another path, another errand, perhaps, that he was to attend to. But his hope would not allow him to leave just yet.

"We can always come by, Clal. And..." He smiled, "our journey is not here alone but we must be getting on, on to find the Dragon Tail River."

"Do you think you know where it is?" Clal asked him. "Do you have any ideas at all? You know the Illian country the best out of any of us."

"I know where it is not," he winked, "which is almost as good as knowing where it is."

Clal laughed then put his arm around Rythe's shoulder. "Let's wake Ansa. Perhaps we should look in the Book of Legends again." Clal smiled. "I've learned that perhaps that book holds more of the wisdom we need and is less of a weighty burden in the pack when used properly."

"Agreed, Clal. Agreed." Rythe said.

They walked together over to Ansa who was still lying there on the grass. Clal hesitated then turned to Rythe. "Perhaps we should let her sleep just a stretch longer. She looks so content."

Rythe looked at Ansa asleep there with some of her golden hair fanned out on the grass. He smiled, then looked at Clal. "Yes, let's not wake her." He looked at her for a moment, then back at Clal, then tilted his head in the opposite direction and walked back toward the long path between the rock walls. Clal followed.

"Rythe, where are we going?" Clal said.

"I wanted to look at the river over beyond Amnbir." Rythe said, looking straight ahead.

Clal remembered Hittle then said to him, "Hittle, stay here and don't leave Ansa's side. Come find me if anything goes awry."

Hittle chirped twice then flew from his shoulder behind him.

They walked through the narrow passage way then beyond the entry, under the hanging branches and past the massive tree trunks emerging from the river's rushing water.

"This river, Rythe said, it's wide and it turns," He pointed, "there, then there, then there again. I think this is the only river in the West that runs to the East, or at least for a stretch."

Rythe sat for a moment on the large tree that they had spotted and had planned to cross last night but were drawn into Amnbir. "I think, Clal...do you remember the river, the one I told you about when the RISHK chased me, the one that glowed that night?"

"Yes, how could I forget that story." Clal nodded then smiled.

"I think a Dragon Tail River, or a river that wouldn't be deemed a name as such, a river like that would be wide or narrow, one or the other for its entire span. Do you follow?" Rythe stood up and turned to Clal.

"What I'm trying to say is, the kind of river that would be called a Dragon Tail, it would be very small at its end, perhaps once having reached the sea or pooled up into a lake."

"Right." Clal stood up. "And not only that, but it would swerve back and forth and not be so straight?"

"And that river that night, it was small and I did notice that it curved many times. It was flowing from the West." He smiled, "It was that river that I followed for so long while running back toward my homestead. It gave me comfort and seemed to chase my fears away."

"Do you think this river is that same river?" Clal asked.

"I am almost certain," He said, "though I do not know."

Rythe turned around picking up a flat rock. He tossed it into the river's water splashing into the water. Then he turned back to Clal half squinting. "My wonder is this though, Clal." He walked over to Clal who was sitting on the fallen tree. "If Gulnerye wrote the Book of Legends and seems to be filled with every bit of Illian lore available, why wouldn't he know where the Dragon Tail River is when he spoke of it?"

Clal had wondered the same thing last night after Gulnerye had left. Why didn't he know? But Clal realized that there are some questions that don't deserve an answer simply because the answer doesn't seem to matter anymore. "I don't know, Rythe. But I do know that, before long, you might solve this riddle even before Ansa wakes up."

"What riddle?" Ansa said, walking over to the log that stretched the river's width. She hopped onto it then started to cross. "This is the river!" She said. Then, she started to walk faster across. "It's in the book." She was halfway across by now. "It's on the map."

"Ansa, be careful." Clal yelled, partly worried about her safety but also upset that she was ahead of them with a head start.

She glided across the smooth wood then bounced off and onto the opposite river bank. She smiled then darted off into an overgrown bush. She was gone again.

Clal rolled his eyes and Rythe let out a bellowing roar of laughter. He shook his head. "That sister of yours, she's one of a kind. I don't think you'll ever measure up to her witty ways no matter how much you might try." He chuckled as he leapt onto the log and bounded across it, landing on the ground on the other side.

Clal inched across. He was never fond of heights, especially ones that held him just above the rushing waters of a raging river. He tried to focus on his steps but he was getting dizzy and it was getting ever more difficult to drive forward. "Steady," he told himself. "I don't need a bath just yet."

Clal continued until he reached halfway, then, looking up the river, he saw as it curved back and forth before finally swerving off to the left out of sight. Could this be the very river that Gulnerye has made mention of? And if it was so close to this...Amnbir, how did he not know to tell us so?

Then Clal knew as sure as the waters ran beneath him. He must trust that he spoke the truth to them. He knew that the answer to the question, once again, did not matter and that, like the water passing under a bridge, he must let this curious detail pass from him. "It just doesn't matter." He whispered. "It is not worth wondering about."

Clal turned and continued to inch across the log. He felt confident and more determined when his thoughts were turned to the real goal, that is, to follow the Dragon Tail River, to find the Dragon Summoner, then to set foot on Edaphlas to obtain the crystal.

Clal hopped off of the log then ran through some nearby bushes. He couldn't see Rythe or Ansa. So, he called out and continued to run in the direction he assumed they were traveling in, alongside the river bank. After a few moments, Clal spotted the two of them throwing rocks into the river. He called out again then ran to Ansa's side.

"I don't think we should let ourselves get too far apart, right?" Clal said, breathing heavily.

"Why?" Ansa said smiling. "We are in the middle of..." She looked around, "...somewhere."

"Clal's right," Rythe said, "we aren't safe until the dark one and the RISHK are defeated. I don't think we can be too careful."

"Humph," Ansa said as she hurled a rock into the river's foamy surface.

"Ansa," Clal walked up to her, "you said that this is Dragon Tail River."

"Yes." She said, turning her attention to picking up another rock from the ground.

"Show me where in the book you found this out." Clal said.

She whipped around, her hair fanning out in all directions. She walked to her pack then pulled out the Book of Legends. "I thought I would look at the map while you were on your morning adventure. I believe it's as plain as day," She pointed, "this is a river that looks like a dragon's tail, winding and gradually growing in width. It's not like these other rivers here, and here," she pointed at several other places on the map, "or here, and not this one here at all." Then she looked up and pointed to the flowing river before them. "This, to my way of seeing things, was the only river that could fit the description of a Dragon's Tail, don't you see it?"

Clal looked at the map, dragging his finger from one black inked river to another. "You're right Ansa, which confirms what Rythe and I were also thinking." He smiled. "Little sister, you are wise beyond your years." He closed the book and handed it back to her. "Now, let's stay near the river and travel as fast as we can. I'd like to find..." Clal stopped. He just realized that they were only instructed to follow the river, nothing more. "What did Gulnerye say about what to do after we found the river?"

"He said that the river would lead us to a clue. This is all." Rythe said.

"I suppose then, we should continue west and follow this river." Clal said. He marched past them with a smile adjusting his pack in the process. Then Ansa followed. Rythe threw another rock in the river before he too followed through the forest growth.

The three of them traveled for most of the morning and into the early afternoon. There were moments when they trudged along in silence whether deep in thought or occupied by the nature around them. Other times they reminisced about memories of years past together when Rythe would travel an hour by foot just to meet them on top of Crescent-Keep Mountain or on the sandy shore. They laughed when Clal tripped over a stump on one occasion. He laughed too.

But, in the back of Clal's mind he was worried. And though he knew things would work out, as Ansa had said last night, the details of how the pieces would fit together along the way was still a mystery in his mind.

"Hittle! Where is that bird?" Ansa said. "I miss his chattering in my ear. Hittle?" In a moment Hittle circled around them then fluttered and rested on her shoulder. "There you are, boy. What have you been up to?"

Hittle chirped and chattered. Ansa smiled, her round cheeks balled up on her face as her smile lit her countenance. Clal was glad for Hittle's presence along their trip. He was a beautiful sparrow and his charm was evident in his behavior.

As Clal was looking in Ansa's direction, he noticed Rythe's expression on his face. His eyes were squinting and he was looking around ahead of them. He turned his head to one side as he long strides covered the forest ground, he was listening. Clal looked ahead into the forest a ways and kept his gaze there for some time, all the while the river became wider, though sometimes calm and other times filled with confusion over rocks and fallen trees.

Then, on his right above where the river would have been, he saw it, a steady line of stones, three rows across the width of the river. As they came closer Clal said, "A bridge," then he turned to his left, "there's a road that runs through here."

"I figured we would cross this road eventually. It's the Northern Road that splits from the western road five miles from where I live. It goes out almost to the ocean side." Rythe said.

Clal turned to Ansa who was looking at the bridge. She was holding herself with her arms crossed, though the day had been hot with no wind.

"Well, I don't suppose we should wait to cross the road. I just assume we have it done with." Clal waved to the others. "Let's go together..."

"No, Clal. We should wait." Rythe said.

"Why?" Clal said, chuckling as he continued walking toward the road. "Quickly!" he waved at them.

"Clal, I think I hear something coming." Rythe said, but Clal and Ansa were already crossing the road.

Rythe ran to their side, then he looked down the road each way. Clal and Ansa had already crossed when the thundering of hooves filled the air in an instant and Rythe was caught.

"Halt!" one of the two guards said to Rythe. Clal and Ansa ran quickly then hid behind nearby trees. "Who are you? What are you doing out here?" He unmounted then approached Rythe. "There isn't a homestead for ten miles. Speak lad!"

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"Yes, sire," Rythe said. "I am of the Northern realm. I travel this way to fish in the rivers for there is a place up stream a ways where the fish are particularly large. And my family, we are poor and we are in need of food."

The guard looked at him with squinted eyes. Then, without warning, he burst out laughing, slapping his thigh with his large hand. His comrade also burst out laughing then said, "Fishing? Where's your fishing pole, lad?"

Rythe pointed, "I keep it by the fishing hole. I have no need to travel with it for I have one at home as well." He smiled then said, "Good day, sire. The day is waning and I must be off to catch my fish." Rythe turned to walk away into the woods when the guard stepped forward toward him and grabbed his shoulder. Rythe winced then swung his arm around hitting the guard's hand from him, then swept his legs under the guard's feet which caused the guard to topple to the ground.

"Don't you touch me!" Rythe said through gritted teeth. The other guard quickly dismounted. Rythe turned then darted into the forest.

"After him!" the guard said, helping his counterpart up from the dirty road.

The assaulted guard dusted himself off then running into the forest said, "Insubordinate rascal. This one's going straight to the castle."

Rythe and the two guards ran past the hiding twins. Clal thought of something and decided to act on it instead of waiting. He ran to the horses, took the reins on the first horse and whipped his rump which sent the horse running down the road. He repeated this procedure on the second horse then ran back into the forest and followed the guards.

At first, the forest was full of yelling as the two guards angrily profaned Rythe's actions and threatened him with the most horrible treatment if they ever got their hands on him. But as the chase continued, they became silent and their whereabouts faded like the whisper fades from the lips.

Clal could not sense where Rythe might have gone. All that he knew was he needed to follow the river while avoiding detection from the two guards. The silent assailants were on the prowl as Clal and Ansa continued through the forest, but where. The day was turning into dusk and once again the night would be their enemy.

As Clal walked upstream he began to hear the roaring of water. They continued to follow the river and he continued to look in the direction of the thundering noise. It wasn't until Ansa noticed that they solved the mystery. "A waterfall," she said. "I believe this is when the water speaks the clearest, when it falls and becomes a new river. It's so beautiful."

Clal smiled. Ansa found meaning and beauty in the simplest things.

"Let's get closer to it. Can you see it?" Clal whispered.

They continued in the direction of the roaring waterfall and after several moments they began to feel the mist on their faces.

By this time the sun had set and there was only half the light that day provided. Clal looked around them and still there was no Rythe.

"Don't worry Clal," Ansa resting her hand on his shoulder. "Rythe can take care of himself."

They walked to where the waterfall was and were very close now on one side of the river. There were no rocks or there was no path that stretched behind the waterfall, for this was where Clal thought to go. Ansa walked away from where Clal was standing for a moment. She looked at the waterfall then gasped. "Clal, I think we need to cross to the other side." She pointed. "Look over there!"

Clal ran to her side then looked in that direction. There was a path and a way to walk behind, exactly what he had hoped to find. "Well, how do we get across?" Clal said. He looked down and could see no immediate way to ford the river. His heart sank as he looked around.

Then Ansa heard chirping and saw Hittle whiz by and come to Clal, hovering in front of his face. He then flew to a nearby tree then up then over then on the other side. Ansa understood in an instant.

"He is telling us to climb the tree here." She ran to it and started climbing. Clal looked up then across and there, over the river, were two large branches crossing, just strong and wide enough to support their weight.

Clal ran after Ansa, leapt up to catch a low branch, then climbed up the trunk, grabbing limb after limb.

"Be careful!" Clal called out as Ansa approached the section where the two branches met.

He tried to hurry after her but it was no use, he would risk a fatal fall at such a height.

He watched as Ansa crossed, then descended, and finally reached the river bank once again. She turned and watched as Clal attempted the same. It was twice in one day that he had to cross this river over a wooded path. And twice was two times too much.

Clal was now at the section where the two limbs were crossed. He walked over and passed them then continued to walk across. As he did, his foot caught upon a broken limb that was sticking out.

"Clal, hold onto something," Ansa said. Clal took a few steps forward, the forest below had begun to spin. Soon, his feet left the limb, he fell through the leafy branches and plummeted into the river water, the impact causing him to lose his breath.

From under the water he heard a muffled scream then the thundering of the waterfall only a few feet away from him. The falling water pounded into the depths of the river as it drove him further underneath.

Clal's lungs burst to be able to breathe the air again. He faintly saw a figure dive in after him from the river bank, then he saw no more.

Clal awoke to the sound of coughing, his own coughing. He was on the river bank and Ansa was crouched beside him. "Easy, Clal." She said as Clal tried to rise. "Rest for a moment."

"What happened exactly, Ansa?" Clal laid back down looking up at her.

"You fell. Then you didn't get up right away so I dove in and brought you here."

"You saved me Ansa." He smiled, moving his wet hair from his forehead. "It was impossible down there. How did you manage?"

"It happened so quickly, I don't really know myself." Ansa smiled.

"It's good to be able to breathe again. I was beginning to think that I never would." He reached over to take his pack off but there was no pack. He felt around for his sword. "Gone," he said, "all gone." Clal sat up. "How could I have let them slip away from me?"

He sat up then stood and walked to the edge of the river. He contemplated diving in to find the necklace with the stone and his sword, but the darkness of night was less than encouraging. He turned and walked back to Ansa.

"Somehow we'll get them." She said simply.

Clal stopped for a moment then turned. There out in the forest he heard pounding, no, footsteps, getting louder, running fast.

Rythe burst from some bushes and ran up to Clal. "They're right behind me."

"The guards?" Clal said.

"Yes."

"Clal looked around, remembering their initial intent. Then he told both Rytte and Ansa to follow him. They came closer to the waterfall and Clal peaked behind, then ventured a step or few in.

The roaring of the raging water passing by them only a few feet away drowned out almost all other noise. But over the sound Clal could hear the guards yelling.

"Lad, what was that screaming we heard? Who've you got with you?"

"The waterfall," the other guard yelled, "he's got to be over there."

They began walking toward them. "Listen boy, we'll bring you in, tell the authorities that you were acting out of fear, you know, just a little scared, and perhaps they'll let you off easy."

"What are you saying?" the other guard said. "We're going to make sure he pays for what he did to me."

Rytte and Ansa turned toward Clal who had vanished behind the waterfall. They kept close together, inching along their way. Then, when they were just about at the middle of the waterfall they heard the guards again.

"We'll catch you...like a mouse in a corner."

Clal heard their footsteps and watched as their faint shadows grew larger on the rocks beyond the waterfall.

"What do we do?" Ansa said. "They'll find us here."

Clal leaned back against the stone wall thinking of some way to distract them, lead them away. He watched the water as it passed in front of his face only a few inches from his nose. He closed his eyes then rested his hands upon the cold, wet stone they were leaning against.

All at once he felt his body fall backward falling on his back. He heard the other two on each side of him hit the ground with a thud. Ansa screamed. Hittle chirped loudly. The sound of the waterfall's roaring was now a faint hum. It was black all around them now. They were safe behind the stone wall.

Chapter 12: Voices

Clal sat up in alarm unable to make out where he was. He felt around clawing at the air and finally found the stone wall that was around them. The guards could still be heard, though faintly, cursing Rythe, and the waterfall and the stone wall. But they were safe, though Clal didn't understand how it had happened.

Ansa's heavy breathing was now echoing around them. "Ansa, we are safe. It's all right."

Hittle chirped and chattered.

Clal felt her hand rest on his arm. "It was all so sudden." She said. "How did you do that, Clal?"

"Me? I don't think it was me."

"Remember the castle?" Rythe said, though above them. He must be standing up already. "That stone wall? It was stone then you touched it. You must have touched the stone under the waterfall. Ansa's right, which means you saved us."

Rythe had spoken the truth, Clal realized that somehow he'd helped them avoid a disastrous fate. Clal smiled. But his smile disappeared when he remembered his pack and sword laying on the bottom of the river bed while they were behind a stone wall. If only he had been more careful crossing the tree branches.

Clal could hear Rythe rummaging through his pack slipping something out of it. He then heard Rythe striking two rocks together. A light burst from the darkness as Rythe's torch took to flame.

"I took this from Amnbir." He said plainly.

"Rythe, how could you?" Ansa said. "That's not your..."

"Yes, it is now!" he said laughing. "I found it in an obscure part of the enclosure. We need it, and our friends would have gladly offered it to us if we would have asked."

"Brilliant, Rythe," Clal said, clapping him on the back. Ansa scowled at Clal. "I lost my pack so I couldn't have lit our path forward anyway."

"You lost your pack? Clal, this is terrible news." He looked at Clal, "And your sword. Where? How?"

He told them of their endeavor to cross the river by way of an elevated tree branch and how Ansa crossed fine but that he got dizzy being so high and fell into the river. "Ansa jumped in and saved my life, I'm certain."

She snorted. "I hope I don't regret that someday." She stood up with the rest of them. "I don't know about you two. Thinking that stealing from a hallowed place is all right...I suppose we don't have to see eye to eye on everything but...taking a torch from Amnbir..." She shook her head and started to walk forward.

There before them was a narrow tunnel that led them deeper into the earth beneath. As they walked, Clal by Ansa's side and Rythe in the front, they continued to travel downward. The tunnel was straight and the walls were smooth, and there were no off shoots thus far.

They continued to drive forward by the light of the torch. Silence prevailed as the darkness had before Rythe's flame. The ache within Clal burned too as each step drew him further and further away from the stone and his sword.

As he walked, Clal thought of their travels thus far. He looked at Ansa and imagined the many times they were together on their adventures. It was difficult to imagine that time will get much

darker and much more dangerous as the perils continue along the way. But he would be by her side and she would make the journey more bearable.

Clal looked at Rythe, his faithful friend. He was so strong and capable and had some many qualities that Clal yearned to have. He was brave and what he did to that guard...Clal chuckled to himself.

Ansa and Rythe turned their heads to look at him, "What's the laughing about," Rythe said.

"The guard..." Clal couldn't keep another laugh in much longer. He turned to Ansa and tapped her arm with the back of his hand, "Did you see how he just dropped to the ground like a...like a..." Clal let out a hissing kind of laugh trying to keep quiet about it.

"I was there Clal," she said giggling.

"And boy did that guard deserve it!" Rythe said, starting to chuckle.

Their laughing was cut short however by a sound that was heard down the tunnel in front of them. They all went silent and their pace slowed. Rythe's hand was on his sword. He crouched down slightly as he walked looking from one side to the other.

"Rythe," Clal said after a while, "why did you take that guard down that way?"

There was silence and then Rythe stopped walking. "It's not right, the way they think they can treat people." He said. "Are we not just as good as they? I don't believe we should have to accept treatment like that," He turned and continued walking, "...from anyone."

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Ansa gasped, "Clal, do you know what this means?"

Clal turned to Ansa, "What means?" He said.

"The stone wall we somehow fell through. Don't you see, you can, move things." She grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "You are an earth wielder."

Clal looked at Ansa for a moment as they were practically nose to nose.

"A what?" Clal said.

"An earth wielder?" Rythe whispered half to himself. He stopped, slapped his hand to his thigh, then looked up at Clal.

"Clal, Ansa's right." Rythe half smiled. "Of course." Rythe looked up for a moment then back at Ansa.

"First, the examination as you described it. Then, the wall in the chosen chamber. Then, activating the character drawing of Gulnerye. And now this." Rythe stepped to stand next to Ansa who was still holding Clal's shoulders.

"Somehow you've been able to move the stone, the earth, at the exact moments with a command over the element that I've never seen nor heard of before." Rythe concluded.

They all three paused and Ansa let go of Clal. Clal stepped forward past them, hand on chin, as if in a daze. He thought about the strange ability he'd had to, as Rythe had described, move stone and wall, through some hidden force, at the very moments they needed most. Clal paused then spun around on his heels.

"Yes," Clal said softly, "But, how did this all happen? Why is this happening now?"

"I think," Ansa said as she walked toward Clal, "the only way to know...is to trace it back to when things started to happen, that usually don't normally happen."

Clal turned toward the dark of the tunnel and began to walk as the others started to follow. "...didn't normally happen...didn't normally happen," Clal repeated to himself.

He thought about before the castle wall giving way. It was before they entered the chosen chamber that he was with Morgreth in the chamber. Before that, however, he couldn't think of anything else.

"What about your dreams, Ansa," Rythe said, "That's something that had never really happened quite like that before."

"Me?" Ansa shot an angry glare at Rythe that was even distinguishable from her shadowed face in the darkness of the cave. "Clal's the one with the..."

"I know," Rythe said softly, "Just, follow my thoughts for a moment." Rythe continued. "You said you'd never had dreams like that before...ever." Rythe turned to Clal as they continued to move deeper down the tunnel.

"Clal, did anything happen at the camp that was also unusual?"

Clal slowly nodded, "Yes." Clal swallowed. "There were two things that happened. I don't remember if I had told you," Clal paused, and was silent for a few moments.

"It was the fire...in the fire that I saw something...a scene kind of play out." Clal looked down at his feet. "I don't know. It's sort of...silly, really."

"I think," Rythe put his hand on Clal's shoulder, "the impossible won't seem so impossible anymore and that what we'll be walking and talking among will surely be contending with the imaginations of our childhood." Rythe turned to Clal and smiled. Clal smiled back then looked ahead into the darkness.

"Well...I saw things in the fire that night." Clal cleared his throat, "Shapes. People. And, a ball that they passed to one another. But, I still don't understand it." Clal shook his head.

"Then, later that night I was awoken. And, for some reason, I went to the river's edge where we had stood earlier that day. And..." Clal stopped and turned to Ansa and Rythe. "I looked into the water and saw something there."

Ansa gasped, "Clal, what did you see?"

"I saw..." Clal continued, "a woman's face looking from behind me...sort of, over my shoulder," Clal touched his shoulder then turned around. "But, when I turned around, no one was there." Clal paused feeling the overwhelming rush of fear he had felt that night, all over again.

Ansa put her hand to her mouth.

"And when I looked back into the water," Clal looked into Ansa's eyes, "She was all but gone."

"But," Clal started walking down the tunnel again, "it just didn't make sense? What did it all mean? That's what I was thinking. I just didn't understand it."

They were silent what felt like hours, but was really a few minutes as they continued to walk. The Rythe broke the silence. "What else happened that night?"

"Well," Ansa scratched the top of her head. "We told stories, laughed, roasted our apples on the fire. Then we talked and went to bed." Ansa turned to Rythe, "I don't remember anything else."

"No," Clal interrupted, "There was more."

Ansa looked at Clal for a moment, then clapped her hands, "Gree's stones." She said, fishing around in her pack.

"And Mina's dolls," Clal said.

"Stones?" Rythe shined his light now at the twins. "What stones?"

Ansa related the entire scene to Rythe who kept his gaze fixed on Ansa, then said, "where are your stones now? Show them to me."

Ansa pulled out her stone, "Gree carved animals in mine."

Clal pulled his stone out of his pocket, "And Gree carved the phases of the moon in mine."

"May I see them," Rythe said holding out his hands.

Clal and Ansa dropped their stones in Rythe's hands. Rythe held the stones up to the light of his torch and studied them for a moment. "They are one in the same. Meaning..." He looked up at both of them, "They are the same kind of stone. But..." Rythe said handling the stones and rolling them in his palms, "I've never seen this kind of stone before." He pulled them closer shining the light behind the stones. "They are like the black onyx lava stone, but a deep, deep blue color."

Clal's stone was starting to glow with a faint light deep within. "Clal, your stone is glowing," Rythe said, handing the stone back to Clal.

"That's it," Rythe continued. "There must be something about your stones, because, the moment you received them from Gree..."

"There have been strange things happening, ever since," Clal completed Rythe's thought.

"Magic," Ansa whispered. "It's magic. They are magic. That's the only answer." She grasped her stone in her hand and pulled it to her chest, "Real magic," Ansa's voice trailed off into a whisper.

"It's awoken your ability to wield earth, Clal," Rythe turned and started to walk down the tunnel again. "But...you...don't know how to wield earth or use this new found force, so...it's unruly and raw, I presume."

"Wait," Clal stopped walking. "Ansa, you...you have been acting strange lately. Like when you ran in the forest...you ran...well...I'm usually faster than you. But, when Rythe and I caught up to you, you were neither breathing heavy or tired from running..."

"Clal, I have always been able to run that fast...though..." Ansa looked up lost in thought.

"It's like you were moving like the wind..." Clal continued.

"Air," Rythe said, "wielder of air. Ansa, you are an air wielder."

"Me?" Ansa said pointing to herself, "I'm a wielder too?"

"That's the only logical...er," Clal said squinting one eye, "if you can call that logic."

"Yes," Rythe said, "I see it now. Ansa...you were running through the forest with such speed, even a wolf couldn't have hoped to catch you."

"Wolves?" Ansa squeaked. "Oh, those vicious things."

"Needless to say," Rythe continued, "there's no other explanation that would make any sense. You both are wielders and you've found and grasped your elements already."

"A wielder?" Ansa whispered to herself slowly shaking her head.

"And..." Clal turned to Ansa, "you've been hearing things, with a keener sense, which..."

"Wait." Ansa stopped, "I hear...voices," Ansa pointed into the darkness, "down that way."

Rythe quickly blew out the fire. The dim light of Clal's stone that he was still holding cast a faint blue glow on their surroundings. Clal stepped further into the tunnel as the Ansa followed and him and Rythe trailed after them.

As they continued to walk forward the voices became louder and were soon echoing against the tunnel walls. Ansa squeezed Clal's arm as they walked. Clal placed his arm around Ansa and held her closer to him.

They soon approached a wall, and as Clal put out his hand to rest against it, Rythe quickly grabbed Clal's wrist and held him still, then guided his hand back down to Clal's side.

"Remember?" Rythe whispered into Clal's ear.

Clal nodded.

The voices were now close enough for Rythe to recognize the voices.

"Tell us again. What did he tell you?"

"I'd never seen him like this before. He...he..."

"Out with it," a voice boomed. "Spare us the details."

"He said, to never underestimate a wielder, no matter who we think they are. And that if we were to fail this time..." there was a long pause.

"Krothwing," another man's voice spoke next, "what? What did he say next?"

"He said that if we fail, he'll have to do it himself."

There was silence for several moments.

"Then..." a scratching of metal was heard, "we have no other choice but to succeed." The booming voice spoke.

"Skeldruc. Imforo. Ready the steeds." The man boomed again.

"Yes, Renthar," Krothwing said.

"And...this changes things, doesn't it." Renthar's said, his voice now quieter. "We will ride through the night and Talon will ride with us."

Ansa covered her mouth with her hand, eyes wide in the dim glow of Clal's stone light.

"Our plan...it has to work now," another voice demanded.

"Then we'll take the high road to Reubus." Renthar continued, "the other way around."

"It's too risky," another voice hissed.

"Don't..." Renthar boomed, "tell me it's too risky. Don't question me, Skeldruc."

There was rustling and a choking noise. Then, a crash of sound...then silence.

"Meet Imforo and I in one hour at the river crossing..." Renthar spoke, "with the goods and Talon too. Understood."

There was a sound of stone scraping and feet moving. Then, all was quiet.

Clal, Ansa, and Rythe hardly breathed until the silence was too deafening to wait any longer.

Clal reached out his hand and touched the wall. It melted into itself and revealed a dimly lit chamber with four floating balls of fire in each corner. Clal stepped through the opening, Rythe stepping through a moment later. Clal turned, beckoned to Ansa who, was holding herself as she slowly stepped forward. The wall closed in behind them.

Chapter 13: The Forbidden Lair

Rythe lunged forward the moment the wall had sealed shut. He started to rummage through piles of papers and thrust open several treasure chest looking containers.

“Rythe?” Ansa shouted in alarm, “Rythe!” Answer said again, this time in a hushed whisper, “What are you doing?”

“I’m looking,” Rythe said refusing to look up at Ansa as his hands continued to move quickly from one object to another, “for clues.”

Clal had turned to the wall that had just passed through and was studying its texture, eye brows down with his lips pursed tight.

“Why are we in here?” Ansa continued. “They’re going to come back and catch us.” She touched her lips with her fingers, “And then...” Ansa froze. “We have to leave...now.”

“No!” Rythe demanded. “It’s here. I’ve got to find it.”

“Find what?” Clal turned to Rythe who was now on the other side of the room crouching low near the floor.

“Do you remember the night we were in Talon’s shop...” Rythe continued to move his way about the room, “Before it burned?”

The twins nodded in sync. Clal stepped toward Rythe past a corner of the table that was in the center of the room.

“I saw Krothwing take something off the wall...” Rythe stopped and held up a glass vile to his face for a moment.

“What was it?” Clal said.

“A ring...” Rythe placed the vile on back down onto a pile of scrolls, “...of keys.” Rythe paused and looked up at them. “Many, many keys. And, I thought...there were so many keys on that ring that...Talon must have had them for a long time and they must be very important.”

Rythe looked back to where he had left off and moved further in the direction of a corner he had not searched yet.

“But, Krothwing...” Rythe continued, “I’ve learned, is not the brightest of the bunch...and has probably misplaced them, of which, I’m hoping is the case.” Rythe knelt down beside a leather satchel and opened it up.

“It was like lightning this thought came to me.” Rythe said as he pulled out a few scrolls and unraveled one of them.

“What thought?” Ansa whispered back.

Rythe was pulled from studying a half opened scroll in his hand, “To look for it.” Rythe paused looking up at her, “I’ve learned to always follow a thought like that.”

At once Clal and Ansa began to search nearby as now they knew what Rythe was looking for. But, a moment later, Rythe spoke again, “Clal, come look at this. Hurry.”

Both Clal and Ansa joined Rythe in the corner of the room. None of them had paid too close attention to the ball of fire that continued to hover and give light high up in the corner near the ceiling.

Clal took the scroll from Rythe and unrolled it.

“Can you read it, Clal?” Rythe said, looking up at him.

"I can try." Clal said. It was written in the same characters as the Book of Legends was written in. Clal had been studying the symbols but had not gotten very far. What he did know was that there were three columns of words.

"These are..." Clal squinted, "...names. A list of names."

Clal touched one name that was crossed through in red. "The word on the top..." Clal sounded out the word, "W...i...e...lders" Clal spoke slowly, "of...llia."

"A list of wielders?" Rythe said. "I was afraid of this."

"Names...and...some are crossed out in..." Clal looked at Rythe.

"Blood..." Rythe said, "...their own blood, but not by their own hand."

"It looks like they..." Clal couldn't finish his sentence.

"It's a death list..." Rythe concluded. "The RISHK are hunting the wielders."

The sound of Rythe's voice echoed through out the chamber. In that moment the air felt as cold as ice and the chill of the reality cut to Clal's center.

"Morgreth." Clal read. "Gwen. Talon. Jethro." Clal continued. "And...the boy...we met...in...the forest."

Clal looked up as Rythe slowly stood up. "Rythe?" Clal pushed the paper back in Rythe's direction, "that would mean you."

Ansa gasped, "I hear...footsteps."

Rythe stuffed the list into his trousers.

"Oh...no," Ansa continued. "They are coming back."

Rythe frantically looked around the room. "There!" He said through gritted teeth.

Ansa looked in the direction of where he was pointing. "The keys!" She said, then snatched them from a hook on the wall and shoved them into her pack.

Rythe turned to Clal, "Touch a wall, Clal. Any wall and quick." He spat.

Clal looked at the stone walls for a moment then noticed that one wall had no shelves or anything hanging from it. "It's got to be this one." Clal lept forward, closed his eyes then touched the wall with his hand. The wall began to melt into itself from the center outward. Rythe, refusing to wait until it fully opened, dove through it as Clal and Ansa jumped forward.

The light of day was blinding as the three of them covered their eyes with their arms and dove into some nearby bushes. The forest was dense and the sun was glowing on the horizon.

Rythe grabbed Ansa's arm and pulled her further into the forest. Clal ran after them. Rythe, however, stopped and turned, peering through the leaves of a nearby shrub.

Moments later, Krothwing and Renthar were marching back toward the hideout. Renthar thrust his arm to the wall that they had just pushed through, and they both entered the enclosure.

After a brief moment of silence, Renthar's booming voice echoed, "Where is it, you fool?"

Krothwing flew through the air and collided into a nearby tree. He had tried to avoid it but he appeared to be in a daze.

"I don't know. I don't know." Krothwing picked himself off the ground. "It was here...just yesterday."

"You lie...fool." Renthar jumped from the wall of their lair.

Rythe turned to Ansa and Clal as he stood up and began to walk, "They are looking for it." He shook his head. "And to think, if we had been a few moments too late..."

"I'm scared, Clal. Please...can we leave this place." Ansa said who had passed by Rythe and was beginning to run ahead.

Ansa didn't wait for Clal to respond. She darted into a pair of trees in front of her as Rythe dove in after.

"Not again..." Clal breathed a sigh.

Clal had never experienced so much fear as he had just then seeing Krothwing and Renthar in the flesh. All the talk of the RISHK from Rythe could never had prepared him for the feelings of emptiness and darkness that filled his mind and heart while within the walls of their hideout where their most evil deeds had been hatched and planned. Clal shuddered at the thought of it as he dodged low hanging branches and fallen trees in his path.

Several times Clal imagined being tackled from behind, just had Rythe had been months ago, along with the RISHK in the forests of the North. It was all he could do to keep going, holding onto a hope that Krothwing hadn't heard them or followed where they were now headed.

Clal didn't allow himself to look back. He kept his eyes and ears focused on listening to Rythe's occasional huffing and sound of his pouding feet against the forest floor as they fled deeper into the forest's sanctuary.

Clal did not know when he'd ever find the strength to breath deep again as his legs felt heavy and his chest pouded and he heaved great breaths just to keep up.

Chapter 14:

As Clal continued to run he noticed that they were following along a river that was widening more and more. Clal followed Rythe through a thicket of trees, then burst through to the rocky shore of what looked like an open bay. There Clal saw Ansa sitting on a large boulder with her head buried in her hands; Rythe was at her side and sat beside her.

As Clal approached, he heard her words between her sobbing. “Those evil men,” she breathed in, “how could they?” she sobbed. “Why? What did these innocent people do to them? How could they?” Rythe was holding Ansa as Clal knelt in front of her.

“Ansa,” Clal said, “I know what we just witnessed was almost too much.” Clal stood up then sat beside her.

“It was not by chance that we found that...” Rythe paused. “...list.” Rythe took Ansa’s hand, “We were meant to find it.” He looked away for a moment, then back at her. “And there, the wielders of Illia, their lives are now in our hands.”

Ansa was sniffing when she turned to Rythe, “They are so heartless. How could we ever hope to... to stop...”

“I don’t think we should think about that right now. Morgrith promised us we would not be the same as we are now when we meet that conflict in that far off day.”

Clal stood up and walked toward the river-bank. He picked up a rock and skipped it across the wide surface.

“And Talon,” Ansa continued, “Poor Talon. What’s going to happen to him? What are they doing with him?” She looked in the direction of where they came. “He needs us, doesn’t he?”

Clal looked around the horizon—the sun was a mere orange ball hanging low in the sky. Stars were beginning to dot the sky in the East. Clal turned toward Ansa and Rythe.

“It’s much worse than I would have ever realized,” Clal said. “That’s why I believe we need the dragon’s help.” Clal looked at the sky, then again back at them. “We can’t do this alone.” Clal sighed deeply. “We can’t rescue Talon now,” he said, walking forward; “it’s too risky.”

Rythe stood up. “Talon’s life isn’t in danger because they need Talon kept alive.” Rythe turned to Ansa, who was now looking up at him. “They need him for his wielded power.”

“Wielders,” Clal stated, “he must be an earth-wielder; how else could he shape and bend that metal so skilfully and with such speed?”

“And Talon,” Ansa said, “Why do they need him? What are they going to do with him?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Clal said, “but I do know one thing—the quicker we find and summon the dragon, the sooner we can understand how we have to begin to contend with the RISHK and their twisted plans.”

“It’s getting dark; we should be getting farther away from their hide-out, and then we need to find out what to do next.” Rythe picked up his belongings and started to walk into the forest cover again.

“Rythe,” Ansa said, “why were you the wielder list?”

“I don’t know exactly—perhaps because of the light in the river that day.” Rythe looked at Ansa, “But it wasn’t me!”

“Or was it?” Clal said. “How do you know, Rythe, it wasn’t you?”

“I don’t really,” Rythe said, “but the RISHK think so.” Rythe shook his head and walked another few steps into the forest.

“Then we’d better be moving on. We have much ground to cover before we rest.”

Clal looked at the darkening sky and started to follow Rythe into the forest. Ansa followed. They walked for more than an hour before Clal turned to them and said, “Let’s camp here for the night.”

There was no fire lit, just sleeping under the diamond-be-jewelled sky. There was no moon and the darkness ran deeper than any black sky ever could.

Clal awoke at the sound of the trees, like the ocean back home. He lay there for a moment gathering his thoughts, slowly pulling away from his night dreams. He sat up and looked around. Rythe was standing near the river, sitting on a fallen and decaying log. Ansa was still sleeping. Clal heard a familiar chirp and spotted Hittle on a nearby tree branch, beating his wings.

“Hittle, where have you been?” Clal said smiling.

Hittle hopped up from the branch, circled the sky, then flew to Clal, landing in his out-stretched hand. Clal pulled off a piece of bread from the loaf and Hittle pecked at it, then began to chew. Hittle quickly swallowed the food, then hopped onto Clal’s shoulder and chirped.

“Hittle?” Ansa said, sitting up from her sleeping place. “Hittle, is that you?”

Hittle chirped, then flew to Ansa, hopping around on the ground in front of her. Ansa scooped him up and held him in her hands. She rubbed his head with two fingers, then tossed him to the air. Hittle flew straight up, then returned to Ansa to sit on her shoulder.

Rythe returned from the river-bank. He walked up to Clal and turned to him. "So are we to reach the northern shore and cross?" He said swinging a stick he'd picked up off the sandy shore. "We summon the dragon once we travel through the ocean to the floating island... Edaphlas is it?" Rythe pointed out to the distant horizon. "That shoreline in front of us, if we walk along that, but keep to the shelter of the forest, it could take us maybe an hour and a half to reach a place to heave into the ocean waves, is my guess."

Rythe turned back to Clal, "I've been studying the horizon and noticed a dark patch of clouds over there which hasn't moved much." He tilted up his chin toward the ocean. "Perhaps we head in that direction and examine that region a little closer. What do you think, Clal?"

"I have no reason to disagree," Clal smiled. "I think this is the best plan we've got." Clal smiled at Ansa. "Let's get on our way before the morning wanes too long."

So they were trudging through the woods once more. Ansa fumbled through the *Book of Legends* as she walked; Clal held his pace. Hittle swooped overhead and occasionally landed on Ansa's shoulder, chirping.

Rythe reached the shore first. Ansa ran past him tossing her shoes onto the sand and ran into an oncoming wave, which surrounded her, knee deep. Rythe and Clal looked at each other and smiled. Ansa splashed some water up into the air, then scooped up some and covered her blond hair. Clal smiled and walked closer to Rythe. "I think she needed this," Clal said to Rythe, who was standing watching Ansa from the edge of the forest. Rythe nodded slightly. "She's a fish out of water, isn't she." he smiled.

(story continues)

Chapter 15: Lorem Ipsum

“And, now, our path turns Northward...again.” Clal said. “We have to find a way to summon the dragon. That means, our path should still be to Edaphlas. Gulnerye said that the dragon would be there.”

Clal watched Ansa adjust her pack and pull out the Book of Legends. “It’s here.” She pointed to a map. “Edaphlas is here.”

L-Ansa leaned over and said, “Where?”

“Gulnerye showed us.” Ansa said. “We met him not two days ago at a place called Amnbir.”

“He’s from Edaphlas, but was commissioned to keep Amnbir safe, as it is a place of ruins, a sacred place.” Clal said.

“He also was the one who wrote this book,” She raised the Book of Legends above her head with her finger holding the place where the map was. “Or at least he was the one who gathered the prophecies and histories, to put it together.”

“So where are we now, and how do we know where to go?” L-Ansa stopped walking.

“I can read the sky.” Rythe looked above him, then off into the distant horizon, then to his left. “I had to learn.” He paused, then said looking at the map that Ansa had exposed again. “We are traveling west now. We will need to head north again, north west for several miles.” He said pointing. “I don’t think that the shore line is too far away. Maybe a quarter’s day travel at most.”

“And dawn?” Ansa said.

“Only a few hours now. The moon is high and should light our way for most of the way before it sets.” Rythe said.

Rythe led them now through the rest of the grassy hills then into a stretch of sparsely wooded forest. They continued in the moon-lit darkness for a long while without speaking. Their course was set and the anticipation of summoning a dragon was more than he would have ever dreamed of experiencing.

An hour of trudging rendered them almost helpless and hopeless as Clal’s legs felt heavy and he watched as the others too were struggling to keep up with Rythe.

“Rythe, perhaps...we can rest for a stretch.” Clal finally blurted out.

“Perhaps we should.” Rythe looked around them then led them into a thicker part of the forest. “We can rest here for a few hours, maybe until the sun rises.”

Clal was the first to wake, the light from the sun filtered through the leaves of the trees. He opened his eyes and sat up. L-Ansa was stirring. He watched her shield her eyes with her arm. “Clal it’s bright.”

“It’s the sunrise, L-Ansa.” Clal said.

Rythe awoke, stood up, looked around them then said, “We should go.”

“Ansa, wake up. We are moving on.” Clal tapped on her shoulder.

Hittle flew from one of the trees then landed on the ground in front of her face. He chirped and chattered. Ansa rubbed her eyes with her fists then opened her eyes. “Good morning, Hittle,” she smiled then yawned.

“Ansa,” Clal pushed her slightly, “we must go.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m moving.” She slowly stood up, stretched, then slid her pack around her shoulder and waist.

"So, the plan is to arrive at the shore then summon the dragon by blowing into the horn." Clal said as he strapped his sword around his waist. "That sounds easy enough."

"Nothing on this journey has been easy enough," Ansa scowled at Clal, "how could summoning a dragon sound easy."

"We have the summoner," Clal turned to Ansa looking at her with one raised eyebrow, "which is all we need."

Ansa shook her head, "Let's hope it's that easy."

Before they trudged off again through the Illian landscape, Rythe pointed out their path as he showed them where he thought they should go. He pointed as they were to travel north then veer off to the left then down to the ocean's shore.

"A few more hours and I think we will reach the shore." Rythe spoke as he began to lead them once again.

The sun rose higher and higher as they continued through the country. Clal watched L-Ansa as she looked around with her eyes wide.

As they continued to draw closer to the ocean, Clal could see that at the place Gulnerye had directed them there was a large mass of clouds far out beyond the shoreline. As they marched closer to the seashore through tall trees and short grass, the wind grew stronger as if a storm front was blowing in.

They finally reached a high point, the last hill before descending to the shore. Halting, Rythe put his hand to his brow and squinted, "Is that a storm I see?"

It was then that Clal noticed the tall waves and the winds, the clouds, "The waves!" he shouted over the wind. "It's the waves...and the winds...the clouds Gulnerye spoke of."

"This can only be the doing of magic. But now that I see it...well...I didn't believe it when he told us." Rythe turned to Clal. "Let's try to summon the dragon from the shore over there," he pointed. "before the wind gets any worse."

Clal darted down the hill as the others ran after him. Ansa ran past Clal and reached the shore first.

They huddled around L-Ansa as she took off the white horn. The white dragon carved so delicately seemed almost to come to life. L-Ansa looked at Clal then picked up his hand from his side.

"Clal," she smiled, "you are its steward now." She placed the dragon summoner into his hand then pushed his hand gently toward his chest.

He bowed slightly looking at L-Ansa and smiled.

He walked toward the mass of clouds a few paces on the shore. Then, looking straight into the direction of the veiled island in the sky, he put the horn to his lips. Clal blew a long moan. Then he blew two more times. Turned and approached the others.

They watched and waited.

Clal searched the sky for anything, any movement that might reveal itself from the cluster of clouds in the distance.

Ansa pulled out the Book of Legends Clal knowing she was searching for any clues if the dragon remained silent. She stood with her head bowed over the volume next to Rythe who was also searching the sky. They waited for what seemed like a long time until Ansa broke the silence.

"Nothing!" she said, "I can't find anything else that could give us direction on what to do." She slammed the book and shoved it carelessly back into her pack.

"What did you read?" L-Ansa said softly.

Ansa folded her arms and looked toward the clouds. "It didn't say anything we haven't already heard. Most of what we know came from Gulnerye and he isn't here."

Rythe looked out in the direction of Edaphlas then back at Ansa. "We know that this wind, these waves, and those clouds are not a thing of nature alone, but by magic." Rythe said pointing. "And the dragon, it is on the floating island and we know that the only way onto the floating island is by dragon flight. And the dragon summoner is the only way to bring the dragon to us." Then Rythe turned to Clal. "This is all we know. What is missing?"

"Riddles." Clal shook his head. He walked past them, his hair whipping across his face. His feet sank deeper into the sand as he walked toward the shore. The ocean sprayed mist as the waves quieted against the shore. He squinted as he looked toward the veiled Edaphlas. Once more, he pulled the dragon summoner to his lips, slowly breathed in, then blew as hard as he could, the sound piercing the air. He waited, then returned the horn to his side still searching the sky. "Dragon, come to us," he whispered. "Come to us, Dragon. We have come so far?"

Clal began walking again up the shore line with his head down. He had not expected this, the dragon to have not come. He intended for this part of the journey to be simple. But it turned out that it was not. Standing there, Clal stared into the sky, into the horizon beyond.

He felt empty and alone wishing that Morgrith or his father was there to tell him what to do. He continued to search the sky and that's when he started to hear something. He listened, but couldn't make out what it was that he was hearing.

He turned around and to his surprise, saw that Ansa and Rythe were waving for him to come back, having walked quite a distance from where they originally were all standing.

That's when he had an idea. That's when he knew.

Clal held tightly to his pack with the Crystal in it then ran back to them as fast as he could.

When he arrived he was out of breath but managed to say, "I...know what...to do."

"Clal, what happened?" Ansa said, looking concerned. "Did you say you know what to do?"

"Yes," Clal nodded, smiling. "It's the wind." He pointed toward the place where he had just run from. "When I was there thinking for a spell, I started to hear you calling me, but I didn't know what you were saying. That caused me to think, what if, even though the winds and the waves are governed by magic, do we truly know if the summoner is too."

"What do you mean?" Rythe came closer to Clal scratching his chin.

"I mean that the wind, it doesn't carry sound. It only dashes it to pieces, so to speak." He shook his head. "Don't you see? If we are going to call the dragon, then we are going to have to blow the summoner directly beneath Edaphlas."

Clal looked out toward the raging waves in the distance and pointed. "We are going to have to cross through that."

Chapter 16: The Ocean Deep

Each one turned around to look squarely in the direction of the waves below the clouds. They were far into the distance. They were dark and the crest of each climbed many feet into the sky. They rolled in a pattern that did not seem normal almost in an exact measure. Toppling over one another Clal was sure any sea bound vessel would be splintered within minutes of trying to ford such waters.

Surprisingly, Clal noticed that however large and monstrous the waves were, somehow, they died down to gentle lapping upon the shore beside them. Magic was the only answer to such uncanny behavior, Clal thought. And it must be magic that can get us through it.

Clal turned to the others, "It looks impossible." He looked back out into the ocean then to the others again, "But if that is our course, if this is our path, then we must find our way through it."

He thought for a moment. The others seemed to be doing the same. Ansa placed her hand on her pack feeling for the book, it had become her way of connecting with the things that she had learned. Rythe remained silent and still. L-Ansa was looking off into the direction of the clouds gazing upwards. And Hittle was flapping his wings hovering above them as the wind was so strong he wasn't really gaining any bit forward in the least.

Clal looked down at the sand, knelt down and started to dig. It was soft and calming, the gray sand between his fingers which he let fall back to the shore. He realized that this was the same shore, the same sand that was miles south down where Crescent-Keep Mountain was and where they had played as children so often in years past. He found half of a shell, some seaweed, and a small piece of driftwood that was as smooth as cobblestone. He held it in his palm and rubbed it with the thumb of his other hand.

"We need some kind of vessel." He whispered to himself.

He hadn't realized but Rythe had crept up beside him and was watching Clal. "Wood," Rythe said. "We can find wood," he nodded.

Clal gasped then stood up grabbing Rythe's shoulders. "Rythe, I have an idea though I'm not sure it will work."

"Well, what is it?" Rythe said smiling.

Clal spun around, "Everyone! Look for some wood. And when you find it, bring it right here."

L-Ansa and Ansa turned and began to search their immediate surroundings. But, Clal grabbed Rythe's arm before he could turn to look for wood, "Rythe, it's magic that causes this storming. And it must be magic that will get us through it." Clal looked into his eyes for a moment, trusting his friend and knowing Rythe's keen eye and quick wit. "Do you suppose that L-Ansa and I can do something similar with our magic...combined...to work out a vessel, of some sort?"

"Clal," Rythe grabbed him by his shoulders, "this is exactly why you are the chosen one." He smiled and shook him once as he nodded, then turned to look for wood with the others.

Clal searched too but it wasn't too long before L-Ansa dragged over a large twisted up log and Ansa recovered a tree trunk that she's finished pulling from the ground, fallen many years ago it appeared.

The two columns of wood lay beside each other in the gray sand. The wind was quickly blowing say up against and over it and it seemed that they could be buried within a few minutes.

"L-Ansa and Ansa, thank you. These were what I was hoping we would find." Clal swallowed and tried to summon the courage to state his idea. Hittle came and fluttered above one of the logs then gently landed and stood upon one.

"Of course, Hittle," Clal said, "you're invited too." Ansa and L-Ansa laughed then Hittle put on a show by chirping and cocking his head and fluttering about before he settled back down and was still.

"We can make these two here our vessel, but not in any way any of us have ever fashioned together a vessel before, or so I can almost safely assume." Clal swallowed again thinking that that came out all wrong.

"L-Ansa," Clal said as he was kneeling beside one of the logs. "Your violet flame, it seems, you use for light...illumination."

"That's right," she nodded.

"But of another flame, you once spoke of. That you used it only in the most dire need, when all else...when all other options had fled, so to speak." He grabbed her hand, led her beside the log, "I believe that if you can use that flame upon this wood that we might be able to make something for our usefulness. Would you try?"

"I can try." L-Ansa spoke, staring at the wood. She slowly knelt beside it, placed her hand upon it then closed her eyes, her hair flapping in the wind. As the rest of them watched, a small glow started to appear under her hand. It grew to be an unmistakable flame then it enveloped L-Ansa's entire hand. Then suddenly it jumped from L-Ansa onto the wood and the wood burst into flame and smoke.

Before long the first wooden log had all but disappeared into a small pile of ashes which soon blew away in all directions.

Clal breathed in then sighed.

"I'm sorry Clal." Lear frowned.

"L-Ansa, that was incredible." Clal said smiling. "I don't know from moment to moment sometimes what we are supposed to do or where our path will lead, but, I know that this is the next thing we are to do, though I don't exactly know how to do it."

"There's still one more log here." Rythe said smiling. "Try something different."

Ansa came closer then knelt down across from Clal. "What of the Crystal?" She pointed to his pack.

"The Crystal?" Clal said looking down.

"No, I mean, how you and L-Ansa both touched...you know...together. That was the only way we were ever getting out of that predicament right before leaving Kelvkoroth."

Clal looked at L-Ansa, "Should we try it?"

L-Ansa smiled then nodded.

They both knelt down beside the twisted log while Ansa knelt across from them and Rythe stood over their shoulders.

Clal pulled his necklace from his pack and L-Ansa placed her hands upon the wood.

"Clal, your powers, it's not the necklace or the stone," She told him, "It's within you. It's in your blood." He looked into her eyes as he tucked his necklace away. Then he too thought of the greatest joy and the happiest moment not being very far removed from his memory. He focused this thought and closed his eyes pushing all other thoughts behind him.

L-Ansa and Clal were silent as from their hands an almost identical light appeared. L-Ansa's grew into a brilliant flame while Clal's encircled the wood with a blue glow.

Almost the same smoke and flame appeared, but this time, the blue light from Clal shifted and molded the smoke as the wooden log dwindled to ash.

The gray and black smoke rose and twisted higher and higher into the sky, a blue glow encircling the mass. Slowly, Clal's blue magic began to form the narrow point of a structure and soon half of the boat stood before them elevated in the air. It slowly revolved around as the blue glow and fire danced around the smoke, weaving together the sides and bottom of a sea bound vessel. Hittle was now hovering above the phenomenon darting back and forth just above. Once completed, the boat slowly lowered till it pressed into the sand and rested there before them.

Ansa, Clal, and L-Ansa had stepped back once the flame and blue glow began to function independent of Clal and L-Ansa's touch. Rythe hadn't moved but only watched with one hand at his hip and a slight smile gracing his lips.

Hittle had landed on one of the sides of the boat then he hopped down into and stood looking here and there. He chirped twice.

"There is something to this," Clal said. "Our powers," Clal looked at his hands then to L-Ansa. "Together, it's..."

"...beautiful." Ansa finished Clal's sentence.

"And it's only the beginning." Rythe stepped forward. "We're going to need some oars." He looked at L-Ansa then at Clal.

Clal looked around him and picked up a nearby stick. "This," Clal said, eyeing the smooth gray wood, "this is what we need." He looked up at the others as each one turned to venture off along the shore and into the grassy hill beyond.

Ansa came back first with a straight and thick branch. L-Ansa returned shortly thereafter, holding her contribution. Rythe walked up behind Clal then passed him, setting his gray piece of wood next to Clal's. Ansa and L-Ansa set theirs beside the other two, then Ansa stepped back and L-Ansa crossed over to kneel beside Clal again.

"Again," Clal said, looking at L-Ansa. They both turned their attention to the wooden sticks touching each together. The blue glow and white flame grew and the smoke began to rise. Just as before, each piece turned black as ashes replaced the wood and the blue light wove the smoke and flame into four oar shaped figures. They rotated around then slowly came to rest in the soft sand where the ash had once been.

The vibrance of the flame was permanently set upon the surface of the oar as golden streaks resembled the flame as the paddle of the oar was shaped almost like a cluster of flames itself.

"Remarkable, indeed," Rythe shook his head.

Clal caught hold of the long shaft of the oar then picked it up and stood on his feet. He ran to the front of the boat and placed it in.

Ansa grabbed one next, tapping the oar on the sand. It produced the same thumping sound that one would expect, low and long it rang. She walked over to the side of the boat then placed it carefully in the boat. Then, one after the other, L-Ansa picked up one, then Rythe grabbed an oar, tried bending it, then satisfied, brought the other oar to the boat and set it inside. L-Ansa looked at the sand that still had the markings of ashes. Clal watched her as she stared into the sand. Then she looked at her oar then to Clal. She smiled at Clal and he at her then slowly walked to the boat and placed her oar in.

The boat had the same golden streaks as the oars with the dark wood and the flame like designs. He leaned over, placed his hands on the side of the boat and planted his feet firmly into the sand then pulled the boat forward. The others followed suit and they soon brought the boat to the water's edge.

Clal turned to them being in the front, "We must journey long to be in the place where I think we can summon the dragon." He pointed to the back of the boat. "Rythe and Ansa, you keep the to the rear while L-Ansa and I, we will be in the front."

"Tie your packs tight and as close to your body as possible." Rythe added. "Though we hope none of us are thrown into the waters," he let out a nervous, short laugh, "If we are, we don't want to lose anything." Ansa hugged her pack and caressed what Clal knew to be the Book of Legends under the cloth.

Clal turned back around to look at their destination then said, "Everyone pull." Just then, a gust of wind blew water and sand into his eyes and mouth and he stopped pulling. He leaned over to spit out the salty water and gritty sand.

"Clal, are you all right?" L-Ansa leaned toward him.

He opened his eyes and looked at her. "Just the sea saying hello, I suppose." He shook his head looking out at the waves then back at L-Ansa, "If only there was a way through the waves and not over them."

L-Ansa looked at him for a moment.

"Clal?" Ansa said from behind L-Ansa. "What did you say?"

"I said that I wished there was a way through the waves instead of having to sail over them. But how could that be?" He laughed.

L-Ansa and Ansa looked at each other then back at Clal.

"Maybe there is." Ansa replied as she retrieved the Book of Legends from her pack. She knelt beside the boat and opened to the first few pages where several maps resided.

"Ansa?" Clal put his hands on his hips. "Now? Do you have to read it now?"

"You want to know the answer to your question, don't you?" She looked up squinting from the wind's ever vicious onslaught. "You want an easier way, one that would ensure our mortal safety don't you?"

"I supposed." Clal shook his head.

"Then come over here and help me find something in this great book!" She smiled at him as he sauntered over to her side. "It's been too long since we've journeyed through its pages." Ansa leaned over the book and began examining the pages, her fingers whipping back and forth along the pages.

There was the main map of Illia in its ancient and initial state. There, Gulnerye had pointed out the location of Edaphlas. Ansa turned the page. Other maps of places that were not known to Clal. Then Ansa turned to another map where there were circles that started small then grew in size with a landmass that was in the middle. There were four markings, some kind of shape with the bottom of each marking touching the line of each circle from the center most circle, out to the last.

"This looks interesting," Ansa said, then she turned the page.

On the back was a poem or a song. Rythe read it aloud,

Ocean deep, waters rage.

Death...

...a sleep for all who age.
Yet it is written there beneath,
Upon the sky,
Escape death's sleep.
Ocean deep, calmer winds.
Find the path,
Then rest within.

Rythe reached over then turned the page back to the map bearing strange markings and circles. He turned to Clal, "Clal, what do you think this is?"

Clal walked around the front of the boat to where Rythe was crouching beside Ansa. He placed his fingers on the image of the land mass then traced his finger around it. His finger then traced the bottom of the page. Writing began to appear where it hadn't been before. Then Clal read the words as they lingered in and out of fading and being clear.

The Hidden Realm of Edaphlas
the Way Across the Raging Deep

"Clal," L-Ansa gasped. She knelt beside Ansa and pointed to the four markings, "Are these not doorways?! Look at how they are shaped."

"They do look a lot like doors." Ansa repeated.

"Doors?" Clal looked out into the ocean. "Out there?"

Rythe looked up at Clal then back at the page, "I think we have all we need right here," he pointed to the diagram. "These circles," he rubbed his chin, "must be the lowest point or base of the wave...where it's most calm before the next wave." Then he turned the page and read the poem over again, "And these four markings," he jumped up and looked above them, "they must be the markings in the sky that show us where we are to find the opening of each door."

"Wouldn't that mean the underside of Edaphlas?"

"That would be my guess," Rythe replied.

"If we can navigate the boat directly under each point, perhaps we'll find the door to get through." Clal squinted as his hair whipped back and forth against his forehead.

L-Ansa stood up then walked back to her position as the others were at the ready to pull again. L-Ansa turned around then announced, "I believe we can do this." She said. She then turned to Clal. "I believe in you, Clal."

He smiled, looked out into the ocean then said, "Everyone pull." They moved the boat several yards forward then the boat hit the water and started floating. "Ansa, L-Ansa, get in!" The girls carefully stepped then sat down in the boat while Clal and Rythe continued pulling the boat out into the water. They were waist deep before they both dove in.

They all took their oars in hand then Rythe called out, "Together. Follow Clal." Once they were set in a pattern of rowing together, they cut across the ocean water as waves, first small, then growing in size, began to dash against the boat's bow. They rowed for what seemed like a very long time and then the waves suddenly became like giant hills rolling toward them in the form of endlessly shifting waters.

Clal looked back at Rythe who smiled and nodded. Clal knew that Rythe would be there for them, his seasoned nature and strong sense for survival. However, L-Ansa and Ansa had a similar demeanor pass over them, a fear for their lives as all color left their faces. "We'll be okay," he told them. "Keep rowing!"

Clal and the others were drenched already and Clal feared for the Book of Legends.

When Clal thought they were close enough, he looked up above them into the sky. But, all that he saw were dark clouds swirling around.

"Ansa," Clal yelled as they were about to climb up another swell of ocean water. "Where is the first doorway?"

Ansa pulled out the book then said, "It's to the right of the front tip of the island." Then she added, "But I don't see the island above us yet."

They continued to row into the waves as the wind raged against their boat and into their ears. Then, it seemed as though they were not gaining any traction, like they had hit a wall, for they could not drive any closer.

"This feels...suspicious." Rytke said as they came down the backside of yet another monstrous wave. The light from the sun on the shore shone that it was past noon but as they had traveled further into the ocean it seems that the clouds cast a dismal shadow over them.

Clal looked up in desperation. But still, only the fast moving clouds above were all that could be seen.

"Noooo!" Clal moaned. "How can this be? We are going to be swallowed up before too long if we can't find our way.

Then Ansa called out, "Clal, I have an idea. What about sending Hittle up there?" She spoke quickly as a wall of water was coming their way. "What about asking him to find the marking of the first door above us?"

"It could work." Clal said, whipping away water that was dripping from his hair. "That could work, Ansa!" He said more excitedly as he believed that it could be exactly what they needed. "Yes!"

"Hittle!" Ansa waved to Hittle who was standing between Clal and L-Ansa. He hopped around to face Ansa then hopped cautiously to her feet.

"Hittle, look" she said, showing him the first door on the map in the Book of Legends." This is the marking we need you to find. It's on the bottom side of Edaphlas. Once you find it, we need you to fly below it, below the line of clouds and stay there until we find it and then pass through the door." She smiled at him. "Can you do that?" Ansa said, continuing to row with the others.

He chirped twice then leapt into the air and flew in a straight line toward the clouds above.

"I hope it works." Rytke said.

"Watch the little rogue bird." Ansa smiled.

Every one of them balanced the work of rowing with watching for Hittle in the sky. He was lost for a moment as he penetrated the clouds above. It wasn't until they had battled seven more waves until Ansa yelled, "Clal, I see him." She stuck her hand out to point but quickly remembered that her rowing was of greater importance. "He's not here, he's over there a ways."

"We're off the mark." Clal yelled.

They rowed, not forward now but sideways out of necessitation. A complete turn to the right would mean an immediate capsizing if they were not careful.

L-Ansa looked up, spotting Hittle. She rowed so as to move the vessel in that direction. Ansa was gritting her teeth wet and worried. She glanced above and saw Hittle hovering below the clouds. Rytke was rowing hard and fast trying to guide the boat over yet another mammoth wave which threatened to tip them over.

Clal looked behind him, then over to L-Ansa, then up to the sky, and to the ocean waters where he thought they might need to head toward. He winced as fear overtook him, another wave tipping the boat near sideways.

"Faster!" He yelled, then all doubled their efforts for the race to the first ocean door.

After battling the sea and taking on much more water into the boat than Clal had ever imagined, he looked up into the sky and found that they were directly underneath where Hittle had faithfully remained flying.

"Here!" Clal shouted. "It's here."

He searched the waters as another wave was coming. But what was he looking for? They maneuvered up, over and down the next wave then they reached the base before the water began to rise again.

"The lowest point Clal. We'll find it when we are at the lowest point." Rythe yelled from the back of the boat as he rowed furiously trying to stay below Hittle.

Clal searched the water, but it was the invasion of another wave that stole the moment away from him. Up they went, then over, and down once more, this time the wave had nearly tipped them over.

Clal looked up again struggling to see where Hittle was and if they were off their mark again. Rythe, sensing that Clal was distracted called out to him, "Clal, us three can row. You find the doorway." Then he added, "It's there. I know it is."

They reached the calm part between the waves then Clal had a thought. He stood up, took a few steps forward, then knelt down at the furthest point of the bow. The rising water was inches from his face. L-Ansa immediately moved to the center of the boat once Clal had left his rowing spot. There was nothing left to do but to search the waters and discover the door.

They climbed another black swell of water then down they sailed. Clal was ready this time, waiting for the moment when the water would remain tame for a few short moments. It was coming. He could see it. Any moment and he'd try to find the door below the water.

When the time was right Clal leaned over the tip of the boat and thrust his hand into the water dragging his fingers back and forth. All that he felt was the cold ocean water. No door. Not that time.

"Anything?" Ansa yelled out.

"No," Clal shook his head.

"Try again." Rythe said.

Clal frowned. "That wasn't very fun." He shook his head.

Rythe just smiled then said, "Here comes another one...and it's a big one. Lean forward when it comes, everyone!"

Clal looked ahead and saw that the wave was already gaining a height they had not yet experienced as of yet. It began to curl into itself even before it approached them. Clal leaned forward again and reached into the water, this time much further than before. He reached, then reached further and thought he touched something.

Further still Clal reached. "Clal, no!" Ansa screamed.

Then he felt it, the top of something, for a moment, but lost his grip.

The wave came, tipping the boat almost to a vertical angle. Clal had let go of one side of the boat and lost his grip with his other hand. He yelled out, "I found it!" as he lost his balance. He

tipped, then, to his horror he watched the black water come ever closer as he toppled over the side of the boat, disappearing into the darkness of the sea.

Chapter 17: A Way Through It

For a moment, Clal was not coherent about what had happened at all. All he knew was the blackness below and the dim light above him as the water current pulled him further under still. He turned and thought he heard voices so he swam toward them. He caught a glimpse of the bottom of the boat nearby then remembered that he was looking for the doorway through the ocean waves.

Not over but through them, he thought.

He swam toward the boat then came up for air. His hand held the side of the vessel then he threw his pack into the boat, the Crystal and the sword within it landing with a loud thud. "Hold onto this, Rythe." Rythe responded with a nod then dashed over to retrieve it, hefting it onto his shoulders.

"What are you doing?" Ansa yelled. "Clal, you'll drown!" Ansa burst into tears as she rowed. "Don't do this!"

Clal looked at her then said, "Ansa, it's the only way." He took one more look at Ansa, at Rythe, and at L-Ansa whose elf ears were plain to be seen amid her wet and matted hair, then dove into the water.

As he swam Clal put forth one arm to feel in front of him. Then he had a thought. He popped his head above water, looked for the boat again then swam to its side. "Rythe," he yelled. "Hand me the necklace with the stone."

Rythe obeyed and passed the necklace to Clal who slipped it onto his neck and dove back into the water.

Clal searched again with his hand but this time the stone within the necklace began to glow. Then he saw it, a faint outline of the door that he had been looking for. It was there. But Clal was too far away to touch it.

He swam toward it as the light illuminating from his chest revealed a faint path within the water. He followed the path and was coming close to reaching the door when he ran out of breath and had to come up for air again.

He looked around but could not see the boat anywhere. Clal knew that if he found it that they all had to enter in together. But how was this to happen if Ansa, Rythe, and L-Ansa were not immediately nearby?

Clal turned to the door which was now glowing blue as the stone shined upon it. He pushed on it but it wouldn't budge. Clal looked for a handle but could not find one. He tried to swim around it but as hard as he tried, the force of the current was too strong to allow him to see the other side of the door.

He screamed out of frustration, but all that occurred was the explosion of bubbles spinning around his head and the muffled sound of his tired voice. He came up for air again and looked around for the others.

This time, he saw the boat as it climbed another wave. "It's here." Clal yelled. "I found it. It's here." He held up his necklace that was still emitting the blue light then waved for them to come to him.

Rythe saw Clal then waved, "We hear you!" He said. "We are coming!"

Clal watched as Rythe said something to Ansa then to L-Ansa. They immediately began to drive toward Clal and were soon navigating the waves as Clal treaded water in waiting.

"I cannot open the door." Clal said. "It's here, if you can believe that. It really is." He smiled looking at Ansa. "But, I cannot open it." He grabbed a hold of the side of the boat shaking his head.

"What have you tried? Whoa...hold on," Rythe said as another swell of water lifted their boat up.

"Pushing, pulling, swimming around it," Clal said breathing heavily from his belabored swimming. "Nothing has worked."

"The necklace, the stone," L-Ansa said as she leaned forward and rowed while they passed over yet another monstrous wave, "have you touched it with that?"

"No," he called to her, but somehow Clal knew that would not be the answer. "I will be back." Clal said then he dove into the water once more.

The glowing door beneath the water's surface was once again fading from sight. Clal could barely see it when he came close and touched its surface. He slammed his shoulder against it though it didn't budge. There was nowhere to grab onto. Clal began to lose hope.

He came up for air, whipped his head around expecting to see the boat, but only saw the black waves rolling endlessly on, as the wind danced about him. He was puzzled wondering how they all were to get through the door. He looked into the water and saw the blue glow of the door distorted from the water's surface. He knew that the quicker he were to find the dragon, the quicker they all were to find safety. He couldn't believe what he was about to do but he was willing to try it.

"They will weather the storm. Rythe is with them," Clal whispered to himself. "I have to try." He said, then dove again into the great deep.

Clal approached the glowing mass, now more like an impenetrable wall than a door. Clal almost turned around thinking that he must be insane for trying something he'd already tried, and failed. Nevertheless, he touched the door with his hand then pushed the door away from him. This time it began to swing open on invisible hinges. A light, brighter than the blue glow, filtered in from the other side which stunned Clal for a moment. He swam in through the door then up for air.

When his head broke through the surface of the water, Clal gasped, breathing in as much air as he could. Then, he looked around in amazement. "Where am I? What is this?" He whispered to himself.

The raging, black mountains of incessant sea waves he'd just escaped from were no more. Instead, he was in the midst of the sparkling, blue ocean waves he'd always known. He swam around in a circle then smiled, then laughed out loud.

Clal laid on his back for a moment but realized the sky wasn't blue above him. He stopped celebrating his safety and entrance into an inner realm, and focused, once again, on his initial objective, to pass through the other three doors and summon the dragon.

The underside of Edaphlas was now bare and open to his view. No longer did clouds veil its existence. He clearly observed the four markings that signified the doors within the waters. And there, he saw the second marking, then dove into the water to find the corresponding portal door.

Clal swam for a stretch, resurfaced, looked up above to align himself with the location of the second portal, then dove back into the water. When he thought he had arrived he dove back under the water then placed his hand in front of him to feel for a door.

There once again he felt the flat surface and pushed upon it. It budged, then swung open like the first. He swam through with ease then resurfaced to take in more breath.

This time, his surroundings were different. In fact, his head had poked through an icy surface. He lifted himself from the icy cold water then stood upon the ice that had been a shifty surface of salty ocean water only in his mind just moments ago.

Clal wrapped his arms around himself and began to shiver violently. He closed his eyes, teeth chattering. He would have jumped back into the water if it hadn't frozen over a few moments after he emerged from the opening that he had made.

He looked around but couldn't see through the fog that had begun to creep up on him. Clal realized that if he didn't find the third door before the fog overtook him, he'd never make it through the clutches of the bitter cold surrounding him.

Clal looked up and was relieved to the Edaphlas still hovering high above him. There, the third marking was clear, though he would have to walk a considerable distance to align himself directly under it.

He ran upon the ice which was short lived. For Clal slipped, then fell, his head colliding with the ice. He lay there on the ocean's frozen surface dazed. A deep sense of fear and abandonment crept into his mind and he felt as if he would lay there forever. He closed his eyes and let out a long breath. Clal wanted to surrender to the easier path. But then, in his mind, he saw Ansa and L-Ansa and Rythe struggling through the raging sea, desperately trying to survive as they thrust their rows into the choppy ocean depth for the cause that he was now on.

Clal opened his eyes then lifted himself from off the ice, the icy surface stinging his palms. He looked again into the sky. Still able to make out the marking through the fog, he proceeded to the place that he imagined would be directly below.

When he arrived at a place that appeared to be directly below where the doorway would be, he stretched his hand out before him, then to the right, then to the left. One of his fingers graced the surface of an invisible door. Then, after Clal's touch it slowly turned to a blue glow and revealed a door as he had witnessed beneath the surface of the ocean waters.

When it was fully illuminated, Clal pressed upon it. The door swung slowly open, submitting to Clal's will. A thick and cold fog rushed out toward him as he pressed into the unknown that would surely meet him within moments behind the open door.

Clal stepped carefully forward, shivering amid the fog. Then trusting the path, he ventured out through the door. However, his next step met no solid surface and he fell through the air, a pile of sand stopping his fall. Clal couldn't breathe as the air had just been knocked out of him. He lifted himself on all fours, then stumbled to stand on both feet as he began to survey his surroundings.

The ocean now was not a living body of rolling waves. Now, it resembled a large span of rolling flames as if a sea of fire. Clal was standing on white sand that was hot and burned the soles of his shoes. There before Clal was a ring of fire where he himself was within. Clal looked above him and saw that the final marking that showed the place of the doorway was indeed beyond the ring of scorching flames he now found himself captive by.

Sweat began to fall from his brow and his clothes, though drenches before, had dried in moments, and now was becoming wet from Clal's perspiration.

"Impossible!" he called out. "Impossible, I tell you." Clal yelled, raising his fist into the sky. He turned around and looked for a break in the flames. But it was solid, the fire never ceased to burn.

He imagined himself finding the end of his days here, within the ring of fire. No one would find him. No one would save him. He didn't understand why this was the way through to reach the dragon, but he was determined to keep going. Just one more door and he would be through it.

Clal thought that using his magic would be a fair endeavor so he stretched out his hands and touched the flames. Immediately he pulled back and stuck his fingers in his mouth. Then, he let out a great laugh, "Of course," Clal said, "it's just fire!" He shook his head and decided that there was only one way to beat the flame, he would run as fast as he could through it.

The safety offered by his wet clothes was no longer a reality. He regretted not acting sooner. He peered up into the red sky and saw the last marking of the doorway upon Edaphlas' underside. "There it is," Clal said softly. Then, he looked at the flames and wished he was not here, but fighting to stay above the waters of the raging waves in the depths of the Illian sea again.

Clal saw no other option. He backed up three paces then dug his heel into the sand. He leaned forward, "One...two..." He hesitated, "...three!" Clal leapt forward then ran toward the flames. When he reached them he leapt through them. The fire covered his clothing and smoke began to rise. His worst anticipations were being realized before his very eyes.

Clal looked above him, still able to see the marking of the final door. He desperately slapped his clothing to put out the flames as he ran through the sand and smoke. "No!" Clal said realized he couldn't put it out.

His only hope was to get through the door where he might find refuge from this inferno he was now in the midst of. The flames began to cover Clal and he felt the pain of its heat. He looked up again knowing now that he was in the right place, then frantically feeling the air Clal began to panic. Now completely covered in an unquenchable flame Clal knew he had little, if any time now.

"Ahhhh!" He heard himself yell. Then, he looked down and noticed that pieces of his clothing were dripping off him like water replaced with a silvery blue cloth that began to cover his body. He looked closer at his skin and realized, though he was in tremendous pain, his skin was unharmed. He now knew that if he could endure the pain, he would make it through this stage of his journey.

Clal continued to search with his hands in the air. Still not finding it he walked forward a step then to his right. That's when he felt the invisible door and the moment he touched it, a great column of smoke began to materialize in front of him. He watched as the form of a door appeared. Once complete, he pushed through the door then dove through it.

Clal awoke to the sound of distant singing. He sat up shielding his eyes from the brilliant light around him. He was no longer engulfed in flames but now wore silvery blue garb only adorned by the kings and queens of his day. The air was sweet. A light mist hung over the ground. And that's when he saw it, the sea of glass from the white stone he was standing on all the way out to the horizon, and beyond, Clal imagined.

He was standing on a cluster of flat stones that formed a sizable yet small island. And below, the ocean was still, silent, like a mirror. Nothing moved but the mist, ever slowly through the air.

Clal looked up and was surprised to see Edaphlas, this there, though it looked different, also white and gloriously shimmering.

Clal looked around noticing that the countryside, the forests, the shore had melted away into the sea and all was like glass, one stretch of silver surface.

Clal was suddenly filled. His emptiness, his fear, his doubt, swept away like an ocean wave upon the seashore, by a joy he never has felt. Clal knelt down upon the white stone. He was a solitary boy, upon a lone island, surrounded by the stillness of the sea of glass as the songs in the distance called for him.

Clal would have liked to stay in the midst of such bliss for eternity, if it weren't for the necklace and dragon summoner that was hanging from his neck and stayed with him along the sobering journey that he had just completed.

Clal looked down and grasped the white horn. He turned it slightly to see the full measure of the white dragon that was etched upon it. He stood up then looked above him in the air. He winced as the brightness of the sky was too much for him so he looked down again.

Clal put the horn to his lips, closed his eyes and blew.

The noise that came from the dragon summoner was not the same as before. Though he only blew once, he did not need to blow again. The horn let out a melody that continued well after he removed his lips from the tip of it.

Clal waited and listened. Then, Clal looked up. He searched the underside of Edaphlas. He was sure that this time he would meet the great dragon who had come from the ancient world.

Then, Clal's joy could not be contained. It was then when his joy knew no bounds.

In that moment Clal thought he heard a deep screech high above him. He searched the sky. A small, white fleck was moving high above him. As Clal watched it circle the sky, the dragon grew in size until Clal could make out the flapping wings of the great white dragon. It continued to circle the sky and Clal could hear the breaking wind upon his massive wings. It soon reached the white stone island gently placing its talons then feet on the stone. He rested his long body upon the longest stretch of the island then turned its triangular head toward Clal and let out a long and heavy breath. Then, the dragon remained still.

Clal bowed low then knelt on the ground, awkwardly trying to honor the sacred nature of the ancient dragon. "Great dragon of ancient days," Clal heard himself say, "I am Clal Winden, son of Dalbus. I come from the West from the Valley of Lyrune. I have come to urge you..." Clal paused, not liking his choice of words, "...to ask for your aid. For I am the chosen one." Then Clal added, "I am honored to be in your presence, great dragon. Thank you for answering my summoning."

The dragon remained still, then turned its head and sniffed as he stood up on all fours. The dragon slowly walked toward Clal who was soon standing before the dragon.

The dragon smiled as only a dragon can. "Brave and noble Clal of Illia's Lyrune, I welcome you." The dragon paused looking Clal over. "I am the great white dragon from yestorage. I am Sedrak. I am the steward over all of Illia. Your time has come. My time is now at hand. And in the days ahead, the gathering of Illia and the course that has been hid up will yet unfold."

The dragon walked around Clal and circled back to his original place. "As you are now, and what you see around you is what will be if you stay your course and complete your task. For I have shown you the end, so that you can bear your beginning. And though the flames that belong to every noble quest may threaten to quench the cause of the noble hero, it is your

destiny, Clal, to rise, ever nobler as the great weapon to defeat are made from flames of the dark one, changed by your hands alone.”

“Hear the song of Kelvkoroth” Sedrak began.

“The flames of fire can take their toll
And snuff from man their mortal soul
For then is joy exchanged for grief
Which causes men to beg relief
Yet with each pow'r exists a law
That governs it both great and small
Thus if possessed this key to wield
Man's mast'ry o'er the flame is sealed”

When Sedrak was finished singing the song he turned around then returned to the place where he originally landed.

Clal walked toward him then said looking into this great dragon eyes. “I have taken the stone from Kelvkoroth, Sedrak. And now I must do with it...” Clal paused, “...well, this is why I am here. I do not know what to do with the Fire Crystal and I have come to ask you what you know of it.”

“Yes, Clal, I can help you.” He smiled, “But I must warn you, as the prophecy says, there is danger, mischief, and vicious crime beyond the bliss of where we are now.” Sedrak looked at Clal. “Where is the Crystal now? I see that you don't have it in your possession.”

“I am with a party of three other travelers who have taken an oath to carry out my task that has been laid upon me.” Clal looked out to the direction that he had come. “I could not enter through the hidden doorways unless I was alone so I would imagine that they are still battling the sea as we speak or have returned to the shore since I last saw them.” He looked back at Sedrak. “They have the Crystal with them.”

Sedrak lifted his great body up with his muscular legs and arms. He unfolded his wings then flapped them once. The gust of wind brushed up against his face and hair which was the first movement of air since entering this realm. Sedrak looked at Clal “Your noble quest will not be without the emptiness of doubt and the bitter coldness of how you will feel alone in your cause, like the frozen, still air that holds you fast.”

“Come, Clal,” Sedrak leaned his head and shoulders low. “Mount upon my back.” Clal obeyed and walked up to the side of Sedrak's long neck. He grabbed a hold of one of Sedrak's spiny fins that protruded from his white scales then pulled himself up and sat upon the dragon.

Sedrak extended his wings. Then pushing them downward, they lifted Sedrak and Clal into the air. As they rose higher and higher above the white island and sea of glass, Sedrak spoke to Clal.

“When you left the raging sea through the first door, you entered into the realm that resembled Illia as it is now.” Sedrak continued to raise them higher into the sky. Soon they would be approaching Edaphlas.

“May you never forget where you came from. It defines who you are and who you will always be.”

Clal watched the small island shrink, now only a speck below. They were soon level with the edges of Edaphlas and Clal could see the unexpected frozen landscape that spanned the surface of the floating land mass. “Ice and snow?” Clal said to himself. He felt the depth of its

beauty match the chill of its climate as they passed by rising higher and higher toward the blue of the sky above.

"Who are you?" Sedrak asked Clal.

"I am Clal Winden, a mere boy?" Clal replied.

"You are a son, more than anything else. The son of Dalbus, one of the sons of Illia, and a noble son of those who share the bloodline that marks you as the chosen one."

Then Sedrak turned his body and they spun in the air, all of Illia now below them shining brightly in the golden rays of the sun above.

"Look!" Sedrak said, "To the left."

Clal looked over on the other side and spied a small island hundreds of miles away off of the shoreline of the western side of Illia.

"And you are a son..." Sedrak said, gently flapping and remaining in a hovering state. "...of the people of Hanone. The ancient land of a time now forgotten."

Clal squinted, "Is that where we Illians migrated from? I thought it was only a...Legend."

"Be careful, Clal. There are many legends. You must learn which ones are truth and which ones are the devices of the dark one lurking."

"Long ago the threats of Womlon were too great upon the land. King Ottomus and his son, Prince Felsawn, devised a plan. The plan was to mark a bloodline, your bloodline. They searched the land far and near for a noble and upright man to carry the infusion of such virtue. There, amidst the king's most loyal band of followers, the leader of his army, Sir Neiulus, was brought into the kings courts and by way of ancient sorcery was endowed with the rights and powers that, in a coming day, would emerge to author the final victory over the greatest evils this world has ever known. The plan also included a place, for the death toll upon the land of Hanone was rising."

Sedrak began to flap his wings once more, taking them slightly closer to Hanone. Clal could see that it was not as it had first appeared. It looked dark, black even, the unmistakable semblance of dark smoke hung in the air above it like tens of thousands of crows flocking as one.

"The people of Hanone needed a place for refuge. It was decided that I would carry a great stone seed far across the ocean and deposit it into the sea. It grew," Sedrak said, looking back at the Illian landscape far below. "and was named, Illia."

"Your path was set, a destiny to be fulfilled. And now, I am at your command, oh noble Clal. I am your humble servant. No more will you blow the horn and I not come. For I heard it, but could not come to you. No longer will the days of your coming be overshadowed by your youth. For the land of Illia will know your name. The time is now in motion and the race for final victory is at hand."

"But what will I do and where will I go? I still don't understand everything." Clal called out.

"You are to always doubt your foe, but never doubt yourself." Sedrak smiled as he continued to hover in the sky. "Have you not come this far by the words of the Book of Legends and by the help of many along the way?"

"I have, but..."

"This then is the pattern. Fear is fatal." Sedrak turned again toward the direction of Hanone. "Look," he said, "and listen carefully."

"The people of Hanone are strangers to this land Illia. You must bring the people to their home again, uniting Hanone and Illia. This is your quest, Clal. This marks the great purposes and tasks summed up into one grand design." Sedrak turned his head to look at Clal. "Once divided for a time. We must seal the two so as to never be divided again."

Sedrak turned his great neck then faced forward once more. Clal could tell that he was looking upon the place he once knew long ago. Clal wondered where his thoughts had turned. Was he remembering the great King Ottomus and Prince Felsawn? Was the pain of the carnage he must have witnessed heavy on his mind? So Clal asked, "Sedrak, what is it that you think about when you look upon the land of Hanone?"

Sedrak paused, then slowing his wing flaps they began to descend. "I remember the beauty. I think of Hanone as it once was and believe that it will be once again."

The great white dragon spoke no more of Hanone. They continued to dive lower, passing Edaphlas, and soon they were hovering over the small white island amidst the still, glass ocean.

"The time has come now, Clal, when you must move on from this place of bliss and wonder. Yet, along your journey, may you often cast your thoughts upon this moment when all things sad and empty were replaced by a joy that fills to overflowing. For is this not the way life was always meant to be?"

"Now, we must save your friends, Clal, for they may be in dire need." Once more Sedrak lifted them higher into the air then began to fly forward. "Hold on Clal. We will need speed from here on out."

The rush of wind began to almost overtake Clal as Sedrak dove downward then forward. Ahead of them Clal could see that they were approaching what almost looked like a window, the scene behind being distorted.

"Hang on, Clal!" Sedrak's voice boomed. "Hang on!"

The warning was timely because not soon after they passed through the translucent wall and entered into a place of flame and smoke, one that Clal had not wished to return to.

Sedrak flapped his wings fast and Clal plastered himself to Sedrak's neck. Clal knew that Sedrak was a dragon of ice and could not endure the heat and still keep up his full strength. Sedrak's scales began to increase in temperature which was making it more uncomfortable by the moment to be sitting on them.

They sailed through the air as Clal looked for the ring of fire that had held him captive. There below they passed over it and now it was small and inconsequential, when it had once seemed so menacing and impossible to move beyond. He remembered the fire that had engulfed him. He looked down and was once again wearing the clothes that he had worn when first he left Gwen's shop.

Another gust of wind reminded him that he was atop Sedrak. Once again they dove through a translucent barrier and the cold air hit Clal like a stone wall which took Clal's breath away.

Sedrak climbed higher into the sky and spun around once, revived by the freeze in the air that filled his lungs. When he reached the apex of his flight pattern he let out a deafening screech, then he lurched his head forward sending shards of ice, like daggers, from his throat and mouth. "An ice dragon!" Clal whispered to himself. He had assumed that his color was only white because of his bread. But, now Clal found out then that it wasn't fire that Sedrak breathed like other dragons he'd heard of. It was a shower of razor sharp ice crystals that could cause mortal damage when carefully inflicted.

They dove back down into the frigid air as Clal started to wonder if he could stand being here much longer. With the feeling in his fingers, toes, and face all but gone they flew through yet another barrier that held the distorted images behind it.

In moments, Sedrak had returned Clal to the calm and beautiful scene of a much kinder Illian ocean setting. The waves were gently rolling and the wind was quietly blowing, reminding Clal of days when Ansa and he would play at the foot of Crescent-Keep Mountain.

Clal expected Sedrak to take him to the shore and there he would dismount and quickly find Ansa, Rytte, and L-Ansa waiting for him. But, just as Clal thought Sedrak was turning that way, they dove through the final barrier that had kept Edaphlas safe from those who bore not, the name of the chosen one.

The raging storm that Clal had left, what felt like ages ago, was once again swirling and twirling around him. The sky was dark, and the sea, like the turbulent lava flow of onyx stone. Sedrak rose higher into the sky avoiding the monstrous waves from all sides.

Clal scanned the scene, spied glowing lights a mile down the shore, then gasped. With a great thrust from an unknown force, ...

Chapter 18: The Cliffs of the Dawning of Time

Sedrak winged at a steady pace as they passed over river, forest, mountain, and grassland pressing ever Eastward. From high above, Clal observed the foreign Illian landscape of which he'd never beheld before. Though others could say differently.

"There!" Rytthe shouted. "Clal, do you see the road where it turns sharply?"

"Yes, I think so." Clal replied.

"This is where I first met the RISHK." He said. "And it was also the place where the river glowed."

"It is the road to the northern Kingdom." Clal said. "Perhaps we'll go there someday."

"I want nothing to do with the RISHK." Ansa frowned. "How dare they tie us up and burn our things." She reached down and patted Hittle's head, "And they hurt Hittle..."

"We can get more clothing and more weapons..." Clal said, turning his head to face Ansa.

"...weapons which we shouldn't need..." her frown turned into a scowl, "...but somehow we do."

"But we prevailed," Rytthe shouted, "did we not?! Think of it," Rytthe laughed, "we were strong and together we fought for what was right."

"I don't regret leaving Kelvkoroth," L-Ansa said, "though our path has been difficult." She looked toward Clal, then to Ansa and Rytthe. "You are true friends."

"I...we are glad you are with us, L-Ansa." Clal looked at L-Ansa then looked at all of them. "I am glad to call you my friends," He winked at Ansa.

Hittle chirped two times then hopped up Ansa's arm and sat on her shoulder.

They continued to sail over the countryside soon reaching the Northeast region of Illia. Clal and the others looked all around as it was new to them, a dry and desert wasteland. In the distance, Clal saw three peaks jutting up from the flat terrain. As they came closer still, he could see the cliffs and the odd formation they made together. It was as if they were not complete. However, Clal let this fact slip from his mind as they came close, flew higher, then Sedrak landed on a shelf three quarters of the way up the span of the cliff.

Sedrak crouched, then each one dismounted. Hittle leapt from Ansa's shoulder then swirled around in the air above them.

"This," Sedrak's voice echoed off the walls of the stone around them, "is the Cliffs of the Dawning of Time." Sedrak turned and walked closer to them. "Around that way to the left," he said motioning with his head, "you will find a pathway that leads to an opening with two doors. Go there now."

Clal turned to Rytthe who handed him the Crystal of fire then turned and marched down the narrow corridor. The orange walls appeared to be sandstone and were rough as Clal reached out to touch one.

Clal led the group as they made their way through the tunnel though it was lit by slits in the rocks above. Hittle flew ahead and was standing on the stone ground when they arrived in front of the doors. They stopped in front of the door mesmerized by the beauty they now beheld.

"It's just as it was in the castle..." Clal said.

"...and at Amnbir," Ansa stepped forward tracing her hand upon the wood.

"It's beautiful." L-Ansa said, joining Ansa as they studied the scenes on the door.

"A key hole." Rythe said. "We have no key." Rythe turned to look behind him. "Does the dragon hold a key?"

Clal looked at the keyhole then he looked up at the door. He touched the door with his hand then closed his eyes. Nothing happened.

"Clal," Ansa shouted.

He opened his eyes and was startled. "I don't think it's that kind of door," she said. "Or else there would be no keyhole." She turned toward him. "Clal, don't you remember the key in the chest back at the castle?" She tilted her head then put one hand on her hip. "Don't tell me you left it in there?"

The key, Clal thought. He faintly remembered a key, yes, had he grabbed it and did he still have it?

"I...remember taking it, I think, Ansa." Clal pat himself checking his many pockets. "But, we've come so far and have..." Clal felt something in chest pocket, "...wait...I..." he reached deeper then pulled out a small, golden key. It had once been at the bottom of the chest in the secret room in the castle, but was now in hands of its rightful owner, Clal, the chosen one.

Clal thrust the key in, turned, and heard a loud click. He stepped forward, pushed the large, wood covered iron door open on its giant hinges. Hittle darted through the opening and Clal walked through and into a long hallway while L-Ansa walked beside him bearing her flame cupped in her hands. Rythe and Ansa walked behind them in silence. They traveled for a short distance then into a small chamber.

A solitary stone protruding from the center of the chamber bore a metal plate which was nailed at its front close to the floor. Several lines of words were etched into face. The stone was cut diagonally and sloped downward toward them, the highest point only reaching the middle of an average man's middle. There were five large holes upon its surface which surrounded a thin slit in the center. Hittle stood at the top watching Clal and the others.

Clal approached the stone, crouched down then read:

"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 was one who roamed 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 with fade without a fight"

"The Prophecy," Clal said, turning to them. "It's happening."

He turned back to the metal plate that bore the words. Clal wondered who etched them and how long ago.

He stood, then with the Crystal in hand he approached the stone. "These are large holes." He looked at the Crystal. "I suppose this is where your journey ends," he said to the Crystal. Then, Clal leaned over and placed it into the uppermost hole. It slid down with a scraping sound then there was a pause, then and a soft thud.

Clal turned to the others. "Do you see?" Clal pointed to the stone. "There are four other places."

"It's the people, the hidden kingdoms, the other stones..." Ansa said.

"And we are to search for them..." Clal said.

"...and free them," L-Ansa said, looking off into a distant place, too distant then the walls that surrounded them.

"The Crystals, these are what we need, but why?" Rythe said, rubbing his chin as he studied the stone in the center of the chamber.

Clal returned to the prophecy, crouched down and read through the words again.

Ansa came and knelt beside him. She followed the words with her finger then stopped. "Wait...it's here," she said.

She stood then touched the places where the holes were, then the slit. "Clal," she motioned for him to stand up. "bring your sword here." She held her fingers above the slit in the center, measured with her thumb and finger then placed her fingers against the sword, "It's an exact match," She said. "Clal, do you understand what this all means?"

Clal shook his head, "I'm afraid I don't."

"You deposited the stone, the Crystal of Kelvkoroth, which wielded the flame within it." She pointed at the slit in the center of the stone.

"And now, look," she chuckled, "you must thrust your sword into the narrow opening, then Clal," she held his shoulders, "you are creating the weapon to defeat the dark one lurking." She let go of Clal waving both hands in the air.

"I think the flame of Kelvkoroth..." she bit her lip, "I think your sword, Clal...I think it might..."

But before she could finish, Clal thrust the sword into the slit. An immediate flash of light erupted and a force which threw all but Clal backwards sliding on the floor. Then, a terrible rumbling deep in the earth rocked the mountain and chamber they were now in. Just when they thought it would increase in intensity they felt a tremendous jolting then all was quiet and still.

The light from the stone died down and Clal pulled out the sword. There, Clal held his sword up high into the air as a brilliant flame shimmered and swayed along the long, two edged blade. Hittle was circling near the ceiling above.

The other three were still sitting on the stone floor of the chamber. Ansa sat up with her hand cupping her mouth. Rythe squinted then bore a half smile as he nodded. L-Ansa pulled herself up, cupped her hands, then produced her fighting flame; it was the same flame that was wrapped around Clal's blade. He looked at her and smiled then looked up at the sword he held above his head.

Rythe broke the silence and said, "Clal, what was that jolt?"

Clal pulled down his sword then held it at his side, no longer sporting a sheath, it having been taken by the RISHK. "I do not know what it was."

Clal walked out of the chamber and down the short hallway. The others had now followed and were at his heels. Clal pulled the doors open to an entirely different scene than when they had entered just moments ago.

There, to their astonishment, filling the space where cliffs dropped off, was now a towering mountain that fit precisely into the other three mountains.

"This can't be the moved mountain, can it?" Ansa stepped forward looking above them.

L-Ansa gasped then leapt forward running to see more. Clal ran after her, "L-Ansa!" he called. "Could this be?"

When Clal reached L-Ansa's side he could see that tears were streaming down her face. She stopped running, turned to Clal then buried her face into his chest sobbing. The others caught up to them shortly thereafter waiting and marveling at the great height of the mountain.

L-Ansa looked up at the Clal, "This is the Moved Mountain...but...I don't know why I am crying, Clal." She whipped her cheeks. "Happy that my people are free or sad because things will never be the same now." She turned and looked at the mountain, "And to think that I wasn't there with my mother."

L-Ansa looked into Clal's blue eyes then said, "But I am here with you, Clal." She turned. "And I am here with you, Ansa...and you, Rythe."

Hittle chirped and L-Ansa smiled at him. "And you too, Hittle."

"Clal, I forgot to mention," Ansa smiled, "I saw something," Ansa turned and pointed back toward the chamber. "...it was on one of the walls in the chamber of the Dawning of Time."

"What was it?" Rythe wore a curious expression on his face.

"Come," she said walking toward the doors, "I'll show you."

Ansa trotted toward the door while the others followed. Hittle flew and settled himself on Ansa's shoulder.

They entered the hallway then walked into the chamber. As Ansa turned then approached one of the walls, Clal could not help but notice a door that was directly across from the wall Ansa had brought them to. He also noticed a pool of water and an opening from the ceiling.

"Here," Ansa pointed, Clal turning his attention back to the wall, "is what I had seen and..." Ansa stopped, cocked her head, "...but now..." she turned to Clal. "It's us, Clal. It's us, here." Then her hand traced two figures, "...but not all of us."

Clal looked at the wall, and there, indeed, were six figures. Three men and three women surrounded a great white dragon.

"What could this mean?" L-Ansa asked.

"It means that our paths and our purpose will continue to unfold." Rythe said.

"But who are these two, these others?" Clal shook his head. "Did we miss our mark or take a road that was not intended?"

"I don't think so, Clal." Rythe put his hand on his shoulder. "I think we've done well. Some things we'll have to wait to find the answer to."

Clal looked back at the wall and placed his fingers on the dragon. "Sedrak!" Then, as if something snapped inside of Clal he looked toward the hallway. "Sedrak, I wonder where he might have gone."

"Clal," Ansa said. "I'm fast. I'll go look for him then come back." Ansa disappeared before Clal could protest.

In a matter of moments Ansa returned, "I can't see him anywhere, Clal. Not in the sky or on the cliffs or on the Moved Mountain."

"Gone," Clal whispered to himself then he lifted the dragon summoner from around his chest then around out of frustration.

He drew the horn to his lips as he thought about their journey home. He was facing the door that he's seen against one of the chamber walls then let the summoner fall to his chest.

"What's this?" Clal said, walking closer to the door. He reached for the handle and turned then remembered the key. Pulling the key from within his clothing then putting it through the keyhole, he twisted the key, turned the handle, then pulled the door open. A familiar smell rushed in toward him and he stepped inside the darkness without hesitation.

"Apples" Clal said to himself.

L-Ansa then followed Clal into the passageway that appeared to be some kind of tunnel. Ansa, sensing that they may be leaving, ran to the double doors, studied them for a moment, then locked the great doors and ran back to where Rythe was standing.

Rythe waved her in and Ansa leapt through the opening with Hittle still on her shoulder chirping. They disappeared into the darkness.

Rythe entered the darkness but turned and studied the small chamber now dark. He pulled the door shut then turned and followed Ansa.

They walked in darkness only until L-Ansa's violet flame bore the light they needed to press forward. Clal's sword having long since gone out for reasons Clal hadn't yet learned.

As Clal walked forward he could see another door in the distance though not far from them. The air was sweet, familiar and warm. Soon, he was pressing upon the door before him. And it opened.

Each one stepped through the doorway entering the small room of a distant cottage. Rythe closed the door behind him.

Clal looked around, then said, "This is impossible."

The door they had just come through opened, this time Turl entered the room carrying a basket of apples. Seeing Clal, then Ansa, and the others, and with his mouth gaped open, dropped the basket sending apples rolling across the floor in all directions.

"Clal!" Turl exclaimed, then turned to Ansa. "Ansa?"

"Turl! We're back!" Clal smiled, almost laughing. "But we can't stay long."