

LEGENDS OF CLAL: Book 1

Draft 1 | Version 2

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Author's Note

This is the author's message to you.

Prologue

The black waters raged below as a crescent moon hung from a silent curtain of stars above. The waves, like the great thundering of hooves, rolled in and waged war upon the feet of the cliffs that separated the land from sea. The night was heavy and the darkness thick, yet, the moon's faint light was still useful to the distant traveler who scaled the cliff's ridge high above.

Clothed in a dark, worn robe and with a large leather sack on his side he climbed over underbrush and fallen trees, for there was no trail. He wore no cap and his gray hair whipped back and forth against his weathered face. His pace was steady, but not hurried, though he knew that he was being followed. He wore a white signaling horn at his side with a creature etched into it

Hand over rock, foot over root, the figure continued to climb the steep side of the mountainous terrain. When he reached the pinnacle of the summit he moved surprisingly close to the edge of the cliff. The ocean hundreds of feet below could not be heard over the screaming sound of the wind. The man looked down and breathed in for a moment, then he turned and gazed in the direction that he had just come. He stood silent as a statue with the faint moonlight glimmering in his eyes.

A dark figure emerged from around the face of a large boulder. The figure stopped, and a few moments passed before the silence was broken.

"Felsawn," the dark figure spoke, his voice deep and harsh. "Your intent is already well known. Why run? Do you think to hide?" He too wore a horn at his side, but it was black. The man stretched his hand out and retrieved a dead tree branch. He held it in front of him, waved his hand over the staff which instantly burst into brilliant red flames. The man thrust the burning torch toward Felsawn which landed on the dirt halfway between the two figures.

Felsawn and the man were instantly illuminated and there was no hiding their presence now. All who had a view of the cliff could make out two figures in close proximity.

Felsawn's eyes remained fixed on the man as he remained still. He said nothing.

"My brother," the man continued as he began to slowly creep towards Felsawn, "there is no power, no wizardry strong enough now that can waylay my efforts to obtain victory over your feeble attempts." He chuckled, "You are a fool. You always have been, Felsawn." He paused, then added, "We will find it!"

At that moment Felsawn began to slowly inch backwards keeping distance between him and the man, though closer to the cliff's edge which was a few feet behind him.

"You are not my brother, Womlon." Felsawn spoke, his voice calm like the ocean's waters had been the day before." And the power that you call great, will abandon you in that very hour when you need it most." Felsawn was at the edge of the cliff now, heels over the edge, he leaned slightly forward.

Womlon waved both hands from his side up through the air. The flame of the torch grew rapidly and burst high into the sky. Womlon stepped closer.

"Where will you go?" Womlon's lips curled into a wry smile. "What hope is there?"

Felsawn never let his gaze off of his foe. His blue eyes were glowing. "Farewell," he spoke. "We will meet again." Then Felsawn pulled his horn to his lips, blew, then paused, only for a moment. For he then leaned backwards, his feet left the edge of the cliff side and his body fell out of sight.

Womlon sprang to the edge of the cliff and yelled. He watched as Felsawn's figure shrank rapidly as he fell. Almost out of nowhere appeared a massive, white figure heading straight for Felsawn. It

swerved, flapped its wings to slow in speed, paused, then turned in the direction opposite the cliff.

Womlon watched as the great white dragon, Sedrak, carried Felsawn away to safety. The white dragon shrank far out to the horizon then disappeared.

Womlon, still laying on the ground over the cliff looked up at the sky for a moment, then looked at his own horn at his side. He pulled it to his lips then blew four slow times. He waited, then far in the distance, four horn calls returned.

The flame of the torch was still burning high. Womlon waved his hands from left to right, and with a deafening crack, the stick exploded and shrouded the surrounding area in flame. The wind quickly carried the fire down the side of the mountain.

Other torches could be seen across the mountain side and on the shores below. More horn calls were heard. The boats were readied hours ago.

Womlon reached the shore and approached one of the men standing near one of the hundreds of boats, "We will leave at once." He said gruffly.

He looked at the cliff where he knew Felsawn had leapt from. Now, it was a blaze in red fire. He squinted and spoke through his clenched teeth, "The plan will fail."

He turned, then announced in a bellowing voice, "Men...it is as I guessed." Womlon turned to the men who were approaching on the shore in droves. "We sail west...and we will leave immediately."

Chapter 1: An Old Friend

Clal scanned the shore line from high upon Crescent-Keep Mountain. "Nothing," he said whispering to himself as he shook his head of wavy, blond hair. Standing up, Clal put his hand to his forehead, squinting against the sun to get a better look.

"Ha!" Clal exclaimed as he dashed down the mountain and onto the sandy shore. He bolted towards the pile of rocks ahead where he had just spotted his sister, Ansa.

He poked his head around one of the large rocks, but there was no Ansa. He was only aware of the sound of laughing behind him.

"I warned you, Clal." Ansa said between gasps and giggles. She emerged from a clump of bushes Clal had passed moments before.

"But I saw you, Ansa." Clal said, now walking in her direction. He was scratching his head with a look on his face like he had eaten a mouthful of sand.

"Look closer." Ansa said, pointing her thin finger toward the rocks.

He turned around then slowly approached the rocks. There, between two large boulders was a round rock propped up by two sticks. On top of the rock there was seaweed fashioned in the likeness of a young woman's long head of hair.

"See?" said Ansa, now smiling from ear to ear. "It worked."

Ansa put her hand to her mouth and attempted to control herself. But it didn't last long. She burst out into another fit of laughter.

Clal rolled his eyes and marched past Ansa refusing to look at her. Ansa turned and slowly followed.

They both ascended the west side of the grand Crescent Keep Mountain mostly in silence. Clal's heavy footsteps matched his heavy heart. His own sister, wiser and keener than he. Almost every time

they played finders, she outsmarted him. His misfortune today only added to his ever vibrant losing streak.

He grabbed one of the remaining autumn leaves from a passing tree, tore it in half, then torn it in half again.

They had almost reached the top when Clal heard his mother calling them. "Mum's calling, Ansa," Clal said jogging to the top. Clal put his fingers to his mouth then whistled, signaling back to his mother.

"Come on!" Clal said, reaching the top then racing down the other side.

"Clal, wait," Ansa said, "you know I can't keep up."

Clal sped down the mountain side dodging rocks and low hanging branches. When they finally reached the flat forest ground below, Ansa ran to Clal and grabbed his arm.

"Clal," she said as Clal turned toward her. "We don't have much time."

Clal smiled. "They won't leave without us."

"I'm already packed." She started to giggle.

Clal just shook his head, "Figures." Then he smiled. "I bet I can beat you to the house," and he bolted through the trees out of sight.

"Wait, Clal." Ansa yelled after him. "Wait!" Ansa watched as Clal jumped through the front door and disappeared into the house.

Ansa entered the house completely out of breath. She retrieved her pack and belongings then went outside to put them into the cart. Clal was at her heels and they both tossed in their packs.

Ansa climbed the short ladder as Clal followed after her. They settled themselves sitting on the wood planks.

Their mother came out of the house shortly thereafter and climbed in at the front beside their father.

Their older brother, Turl, walked out of the small cottage, smiling and waving. "You take care of him, Ansa. He's liable to get into trouble." Turl smiled wide. "Oh and Clal," He took a few steps

forward, "you were born for this adventure. Never, ever doubt yourself my brother."

Clal and Ansa's father cracked the whip, and the cart lurched forward.

"You're going to miss us twins, Turl." Clal called out as he smiled and waved.

"By the time I see you again, I'm sure you'll be reminding me of your names." Turl retorted.

"Don't eat too many apples, Turl." Ansa said, standing up and waving with a half eaten apple in her hand and a mouth full. "And don't get too lonely."

"I don't know how I'll manage without you two." Turl pulled an enormous, red apple out of his back pocket. "Good-bye," Turl said waving, then walked inside the cottage.

Clal and Ansa watched as their home grew smaller and smaller. Clal knew the days and weeks ahead would be different from they had ever experienced. But, Clal was happy Ansa was with him, inseparable as they were.

The horse pulled the cart around their first bend in the road and the small cottage was no more. Ansa looked down at her hands picking at her fingernails.

"Father?" Clal turned to the front of the cart, "How many days till we reach Eldan Vyum?"

Dalbus turned to face Clal, "Only a day and a half Clal. It's really not that far." His father turned back around to face forward. "Now from Eldan Vyum to Reubis, that's about a three day journey."

"Even so," Dalbus continued, "your mother and I may be coming into town for supplies and for other things. We'll be able to visit you two then."

"You'll have nothing to worry about, going to two very good establishments and all." Nareete remarked.

Clal and Ansa watched as they passed the forest by on as the cart jostled along. Then 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? What if I talk too much? And what if..."

"Ansa," Clal said, "don't worry." He reassured her, "You'll have her wrapped around your finger in a week. I'm sure of it." Clal smiled.

"I'm sure you'll quickly be a favorite among the blacksmith's customers." Ansa smiled. "Is it true that Tallon is the very best blacksmith in all of Illia?"

Clal nodded, having heard this fact from his father only a week ago.

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 looked past their horse down the road and noticed that they were approaching the point at which he'd never trespassed before. As they approached Clal looked into the woods remembering when he visited last.

"This must be the place where..." Clal squinted then stood up, almost losing his balance. He walked to the side of the cart then gasped.

"Hey! Hey!" he yelled, waving. "Ansa, it's Rythe." He turned to Dalbus, "Father, there's someone coming. Do you remember Rythe?"

Dalbus looked into the forest then slowed and finally stopped the cart.

In the distance a young lad with dark brown hair and a pack on his side was bobbing up and down through the forest. Rythe was running fast through a clearing between two thick sections of the forest. He was waving his hands up and down and calling out Clal's name.

By that time Rythe had reached the side of the cart. He thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out a few coins. He gave them to the Dalbus who kindly refused. "We're going to Eldan Vyum anyway, Rythe. Why don't you just join us?"

"Thank you." Rythe said, tossing his pack into the cart. He climbed in and sat 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. "You're heading to Eldan Vyum, though Turl isn't here with you?"

"My mother and father are relocating to Reubis. Turl is remaining with the family farm." Clal looked at Ansa then back at Rythe, "And we are going to Eldan Vyum for four 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.

"Yes," Ansa agreed. "Perhaps we are after all." She smiled, "And what about you? What brings you to Eldan Vyum?"

"The examinations," Rythe said, "I turned fifteen in the first week of the first month."

"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."

"What kind of examination?" Ansa said.

"To see if one of the sons of Illia is the chosen one," Rythe said.

"For what?" Clal said.

"Well, some believe that the evil in Illia will reach a tipping point, that a hero will rise up, and that by conducting a search to find the one early, the forces of good will again take advantage over the dark forces."

"That's incredible, Rythe," Clal said, "but why fifteen?"

"I don't know, really," Rythe said.

"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 though," Rythe smiled.

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."

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."

"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 was looking out into the trees, sun rays poking through occasionally. His gaze was frozen. Clal knew that his friend was troubled.

"I tell you only because you ask," Rythe began to say slowly, "and only because I know you will keep what I'm about to tell you...confidential."

"Yes, Clal, you are right," Rythe continued, "I have stayed away these past several months, hidden, I've become a recluse of sorts."

"For that I am sorry." Rythe said, smiling slightly.

He leaned in close, "Earlier this year I took a trip to the North." He pointed. "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."

"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 smiled. His face, however, returned as if to stone and his eyes were still gazing into the forest.

"I was eating that apple and 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 something that some great darkness was approaching."

Ansa slid closer to Clal and clutched his arm.

"And so I 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 four 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. But now, I feared for my safety, my future, my very life."

"They were all searching the surroundings, looking here and there. 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?' one of the riders still on their horses said."

"'Must we delay?,' said another."

"'Quite,' said the leader. 'There's someone here...and they think to hide from us.'"

Rythe laughed nervously. "Clal, these men were no ordinary men. Mind you, I don't take to recoiling easily."

"'See here,' the leader 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 others close behind."

"I wondered why four men would pay attention to and even torment one who was alone almost in the dark of night in the middle of the forest. 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 riders dismounted in a moment and I found no comfort in staying hidden any longer."

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 fist hit his open palm, "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."

"I also noticed that one of the men had disappeared, the other two had grabbed their horses and were now dismounted and at my side. The other held me tight."

"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 was." 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 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. Nothing happens by chance."

"So what happened next?" Clal said.

"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, is it not?'"

"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. My name is

Doren. Can I do anything for you?' 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 rider said"

"...then we'll leave you to your journey,' the large one said."

"No,' I said."

"You told them no?" Ansa said.

"Yes. I wasn't about to let them take anything from me without a fight." Rythe said, shaking his head.

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

"No,' I said, 'you can't have anything. I'll be answering no questions...and this dagger was given to me by my father who died last year. 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 four 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."

"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, that doesn't sound like you?" Clal said.

"Clal, I felt something there, like I was bigger than myself somehow."

"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 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 one of the others, "'Krothwing!' The large one said motioning with his arm, 'Lower your sword.'"

"I ran towards the water. The men didn't follow. I felt free from their evil intentions for a moment."

"'It seems as if we've metted with the wrong boy 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 added, "I never did find out where the fourth rider had disappeared off to."

"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."

"'Thank you,' I said, '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 few weeks 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."

Dalbus turned and looked behind him. "What are you three up to back there?" He said. The three of them jumped in surprise. Dalbus laughed a hearty laugh and wore a wide smile, "Telling tall tales, eh?"

"Rythe is always good for a story, father." Clal said. Clal was still captivated by the story Rythe just told them. It was mysterious.

"I believe our horse is due for a watering stop." Dalbus said. "There's a stream just up ahead about a mile or two. We'll stop there for a time if that's all right with you lot."

"Is anyone hungry?" Nareete asked, turning around. "I have some bread and cheese..."

"I am mother," Ansa stood up then walked over to the front of the cart.

<< add - convo with Ansa's mother

Nareete handed her some cheese and bread then Ansa returned, passing out some morsels to the others.

"Thank you Ansa," Rythe said smiling.

"Wouldn't it be great to be able to stop men like the ones you described, stop them from causing trouble?" Rytke said.

"I think so." Clal turned to Ansa who frowned at Clal.

"So the RISHK you said?" Clal said, confirming what he remembered about their name.

"Yes," Rytke replied, "that is their name."

"And if they've given themselves a name they must have a purpose," Clal concluded.

"Right," Rytke said. "They must, and that's what I thought." Rytke smiled, "So I had to find out."

Ansa shook her head. "You mean there's more?"

"I mentioned that I traveled to Eldan Vyum a few weeks later," Rytke continued, leaning in again and speaking quietly. "It took me that long to find my courage to venture out on my own. I traveled to Eldan and 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 soon enjoying some long needed food and drink."

"There was a group of men at a neighboring table who were boisterous and beginning to make much noise. One of them stood on his feet, wobbling and spoke."

"He was large and rode a tall steed." He burst out, holding his hand out high to the height of an imaginary horse.

"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 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, "Tallon, the Blacksmith."

"Yes, it must have been," Rytthe 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. Then Tallon said that the horseman pulled something from his saddle pack and threw it toward Tallon. 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 Tallon 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, Tallon told them," Rytthe continued, "that the man tossed down a second sack of riches as half payment and told Tallon that he would return in two weeks to provide the rest of the payment and to obtain his three weapons."

"Then," Tallon said, "can you believe that he turned and up and left!"

Rytthe continued, "It sounded like the leader, Renthar from the description."

"And one of them asked for your dagger," Clal said. "Wasn't that one of the weapons this man that Tallon was describing asked for him to make?"

"Yes," said Rytthe, "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."

"You're making the broadsword for that man, aren't you?" I asked Tallon the blacksmith. Tallon 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. Tallon 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."

Clal and Ansa remained silent for a time as the cart continued to creak and sway. Clal's parents engaged in small talk now and again.

As Dalbus promised, they arrived at the watering place just before the bridge that spanned the river ahead. There they stopped.

Dalbus unhitched the horse and led him beside the edge of the lazy running river. 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 she had also knelt down. She cupped one of her hands and dipped it in the water then pulled it out and let the water stream down her fingers and back into the moving water.

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."

They heard Clal's father's voice in the distance for them to return to the cart. 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 the cart and climbed in.

Clal walked slowly to the cart, climbed in, then caught a glimpse of Ansa still smirking. He shook his head and looked away.

When the cart started moving again they all returned to their own thoughts. The clip-clopping of the horse's hooves on the wooden planks of the bridge that spanned the river echoed against the trees. They reached a clearing and the hot sun beat down on the three of them. The cart continued to climb and soon reached the top of a small hill.

"Eldan Vyum," Nareete announced.

"Clal look," Ansa said. "Eldan Vyum! It's enormous."

"Look at that," Clal said, "it goes on for miles and miles and miles."

Clal and Ansa had never set foot in the great central city of Eldan Vyum. They had never seen such a place. They had only pieced together in their minds depictions of what it might look like from stories and conversations over the years.

The sun sank lower and lower toward the horizon as they continued to talk about their plans while in Eldan Vyum. Rythe planned to head straight home after the examinations to care for his mother. He mentioned, though, that he promised to visit Clal and Ansa before he departed for home.

"I'll be talking again to the blacksmith so I will most assuredly be visiting you Clal." Rythe said.

They continued to talk and hardly noticed how dark it was getting. Though it was dusk, there were many people still walking along the streets who filled many of the buildings.

"It's the examination," Rythe said. "It brings people from every corner of Illia."

Before they left the main road into the city, Dalbus stopped the cart then said, "Okay, children." Both Dalbus and Nareete stood up then walked down from the front, onto the ground, to the back of the cart.

"This is where we say our goodbyes," Dalbus said. "If you'll walk the rest of the way, we have a long journey ahead of us before we sleep."

"Mother!" Ansa hopped down and embraced Nareete. "I will miss you."

Nareete smiled, "Ansa, you're going to do wonderfully."

Clal jumped down from the cart then Rythe did the same.

Clal turned to his Father. "Does this mean I'm finally a man, going to work in the blacksmith's shop making swords and all?"

Both Dalbus and Turl burst out laughing. "Well, Clal," his father said, "at thirteen I believe you'll be there soon enough." His father looked at Clal and winked.

"In fact, when I was your age I was..." his father started to say.

"...building one boat a week for the Illian naval fleet, living on my own, free as can be." Clal and Ansa both finished his sentence in unison and they all four burst out in a fit of laughter. Rythe just watched.

After they said their goodbyes and watched as the cart turned a corner into the trees, Rythe asked, "Where to first?"

"To Gwynn the seamstress. It's on the edge of town near Ordon's wood works." She said, "Do you know where that is?"

"Yes," Rythe said, "I do."

They meandered around the streets of the city, dusk having turned into night. They eventually stopped in front of Gwynn's shop door.

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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. Are you Ansa Winden?"

"Yes, I am."

"I have been anxiously awaiting your arrival." Gwynn smiled widely. Ansa hesitated.

"You'll be fine," Clal said as he embraced his sister. "We'll visit each other often." Clal smiled then winked. "I'll be back in just three days from now to see how you're getting along."

Ansa looked up into Clal's blue eyes, "Okay, Clal. That's not too long from now, I guess." Ansa said.

Ansa gave Clal another squeeze then walked toward Gwynn. She turned and waved to Rythe who smiled back.

"Don't forget to come see me before you leave." She said winking.

"You?" Rythe smiled, "I wouldn't miss it, Ansa."

Gwynn walked toward Ansa and 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.

Rythe turned from Gwynn's door and Clal followed. "So, you know where the blacksmith shop is from here then, Rythe?" Rythe nodded as he took Clal down a city street where many other boys were running rampant with laughter and great excitement. They turned down several streets and passed many short and tall buildings.

It wasn't long before Clal said to Rythe, "I miss her already, Rythe. Can you believe we've never been apart until now?"

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

Then Rythe stopped walking and looked at 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 on the back as they resumed their journey through the streets of Eldan Vyum.

As they passed by endless buildings and walked by nameless faces, all that Clal could think about was his beloved twin sister, Ansa, and how right Rythe was.

Ansa was an incredible individual and they were truly inseparable. Their days had been spent, not climbing apple trees in their orchards, surprisingly, but fighting dragons in the clouds and escaping shapeless thieves in the forest shadows. Sticks became

swords and leaves became golden coins. And the great Crescent-Keep Mountain was their castle fortress.

They knew each other's thoughts and often felt each other's feelings. And, though he resented her for her witty ways and overly keen abilities, those really were the things he liked most about her. Clal smiled as he remembered the rock with the seaweed as hair, and how he had fallen for it.

"My, Ansa," Clal whispered. He shook his head and chuckled.

A few more feet and they arrived in front of the blacksmith's shop. "This is it," Rythe said, "though it is all dark inside. I'm sure this is the place. I'd know it anywhere..."

Both Clal and Rythe stood in front of old shop with their mouths wide open. Clal walked toward Tallon's shop and knocked on the door. They waited, then Rythe knocked, but the result was the same. Silence.

"I don't think there's anyone here, Rythe."

"No," Rythe said, "it looked so different from when I was here last." Rythe looked through the dirt laden front window. Clal walked around the side of the building then came back in a moment.

"Rythe, I don't know the last time anyone has been here." Clal said. "What am I to do now?"

"You can stay with me at the inn until we figure out what you're going to do." Rythe said. "The inn, Clal?"

"I suppose," Clal said reluctantly.

"Right then. The inn is this way," Rythe said pointing.

Rythe heaved his pack on his back then began to march down the cobblestone road. Clal was at his heels. There were less people now and more dark windows as they ventured through the city during the night hours. 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.

"Tallon the blacksmith, have you seen him? Has he come to your inn lately?" Rythe said.

"Old Tallon?" 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 3: 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 Rythe 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. Rythe 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.

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

Rythe 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 Oliothe. 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 plannings 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 4: 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 least 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 Rythe 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 in. 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? Rytne 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 Rytne 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, Lyroia." 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 it's 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 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 Rytthe 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.

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

"Follow my lead, Rytthe." 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!"

"Rytthe, 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. Rytthe and Clal also stood and stayed close together eyeing every doorway.

"Tell me, Clal," Rytthe 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?" Rytthe 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: 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 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 Rythe who was quietly watching the conversation listening to every word. "Rythe," 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 it's destined origins?"

Rythe 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." Rythe 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.

Rythe 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 Rythe 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, Rythe, 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." Rythe 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, Rythe, 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?" Rythe 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." Rythe 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 Rythe 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 it's 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," Rytthe 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. Rytthe 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." Rytthe 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 Rytthe entered the shop and the door closed behind them.

Chapter 7: Tallon 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 Rythe, 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, Rythe 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 Rythe to escape. "Gather your things, quick like!"

Clal grabbed his things and stuffed them in his pack. Ansa's face started to look pale. Rythe 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.

Rythe 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," Rythe 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 Seloromus, 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, Rentharr told me, was ever so kind...and ever so skilled, the best there is in Illia. That's why Rentharr 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 8: 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 9: 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," Rythe said. "He's through there," he pointed in the direction of the opening.

Clal, surprised at Rythe'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..." Rythe 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. "Rythe," he said as he lowered his hand. "Can you light a fire in here? Do you have any flint or anything at all?"

"Alas," Rythe 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." Rythe 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 Rytthe 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, Rytthe, 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 10: 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 Rythe 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."

Rythe 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 11: The Steward

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 Rytthe turned their heads to look at him, "What's the laughing about," Rytthe 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!" Rytthe 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. Rytthe's hand was on his sword. He crouched down slightly as he walked looking from one side to the other.

"Rytthe," Clal said after a while, "why did you take that guard down that way?"

There was silence and then Rytthe 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."

They continued through the tunnel as it gradually sloped ever downward. The light flickered against the walls and the sound of their steps were evident. It seemed a long while before Clal realized that the air had changed from musty and stale to cool, and the air moved more freely across his face.

Clal noticed at one point that the sound of their feet were swallowed up somehow. Not a few steps ahead they walked into a large open underground room. There were two small torches on each side of the room and statues stood in two corners. There was an archway which revealed only darkness beyond. The ceiling, low and rough, dripped occasionally through the cracks that were almost invisible.

"What is this place?" Clal whispered to himself. Ansa huddled closer to Clal as they all stood in the center of the cavern. The air moved the flame that danced atop Rythe's torch and the shadows of the statues in the corner moved.

Clal reached for his sword but remembering his ill fortune, sadly retracted his hand. Clal's hand was on his sword.

"Who goes there?" A voice was heard. "Speak!"

"We are somewhat lost. We are seeking the lord of this dwelling." Clal said.

"Who goes there?" The voice continued harshly. "Speak your name!" One of the statues in the corner began to move toward them.

"I...I am Clal of the Western realm." Clal said, his voice shaking. "We are here..."

"Gulnerye sent us." Rythe spouted out hoping that his name would mean something.

"Gulnerye?" The statue turned and walked toward them a few paces. This was no statue of marble or stone, but only a man, though clad with light armor, and armed with a sword. "Gulnerye? He's just a legend if my memory doesn't cheat me so." He stared at the three of them, "No matter, how did you get in here? The other..."

"Through the wall," Clal said, waiting for the man to respond. "The stone under the waterfall, we just, in a way, fell through it."

"Through?" The guard said. Clal could see the whites of his eyes more clearly now.

"Yes, through," Ansa replied. "It wasn't a very graceful entry. Can you imagine falling straight on your back after thinking the wall was a perfect place to take some rest? Ugh," She smiled. "And now, here we are. Er...where are we anyway."

"Kelvkoroth," the man said. "The outermost edges of it." The guard turned, then he whistled a long low whistle down the hall which led under the arch way. A faint whistle was heard only

moments later. "I think I know what to do with you." The guard walked toward the archway, then disappeared into the darkness. "Stay put there." His voice was heard trailing from the darkened hall, though there was a soft glow of light around the guard now.

"I've never heard of Kelvkoroth." Rythe said.

"We might have heard of it somewhere in the Book of Legends. But I don't remember seeing that particular name." Ansa pulled out the book and began to thumb through its pages. "No, that's not it," She would say occasionally. Then, she looked up and over at Clal, "Clal!" She almost shouted. "We're here. How, I don't know, well I do know but, I thought this...anyway...this is what we've been looking for." She smiled and looked Clal straight in the eye. "Kelvkoroth is one of the hidden people." Her voice echoed against the rock walls. It took him a moment to realize that this could possibly be one of the hiddens...the legends.

"What else does it say, Ansa?" Rythe did not turn to look at them, only spoke as his eyes were fixed on the dark hallway.

"It talks about a people who can wield fire and that a great mountain came and rested over the valley that they once lived in. They dug deep. They two were elves, like the people of Edaphlas." She looked closer at the book, "Let's see here...the moved mountain it says. And it talks about a crystal of fire..."

The guard had been gone for the space of many minutes, which gave Ansa time to search through much of the book's content. But the sounds of many footsteps now began to converge into the stone room they were standing in. "I hear footsteps..." Rythe said.

"I didn't expect to be visited by a whole host of these. The sounds of many footsteps..." Clal said, moving closer to Rythe and pulling on Ansa's arm to follow.

"I'm not sure what to expect given our recent circumstances." Rythe said as he steadied his sword and tightened his grip. "Stay behind me."

Hittle was sitting on Ansa's shoulder one moment but flew into the air and around the room the next. He was chirping and then, as if by command he came to Ansa's shoulder and rested there once more.

Light began to spill into the room as soldier after soldier filed in and surrounded Clal, Ansa, and Rythe. And last of all there came three, a woman, a man, and a young maiden all adorned in fine jewels and a luster around like the moon on a misty lake. The woman and maiden remained near the arched entry while the man approached Clal's band.

"Greetings." He bowed low, his long red hair almost glowing. "I am Fendaln, Lord of Kelvkoroth." He turned with an outstretched hand. "Lady Lyluria and Leara are my kin." Leara was tall and thin, hair as the wooded oak bow, long with curls below her shoulders. Fendaln walked toward the three of them and said, "My guard has told me that Gulnerye has sent you. How can this be..." He smiled slightly, "being that Gulnerye's legend has been part of Illian lore for centuries. For what purpose have you come?" Fendaln stood erect and clasped his hands just around his waist.

Clal looked at Fendaln, regal and was just now noticing that he was not of human race, but was an elf, judging by his pointed ears and eyebrows which curved up at the ends.

What to tell him, this was not always easy to decide. Was he friend or foe? Clal wanted to believe he was a friend, though, as someone had once told him, you can't be too sure about trusting anyone but yourself.

"I am Clal, from the West along with Ansa, my sister, and Rythe, our companion. We did see Gulnerye, just yesterday in the ruins of Amnbir. We have traveled from Eldan Vyum to fulfill our a sacred purpose." Clal stopped. He felt as if his words were jumbled and that he was speaking things not at all what he had intended to say. He tried again.

"We are seeking the steward of, what Gulnerye termed, a Dragon Summoner, a kind of horn." Clal looked upon the maiden, Leara, for the first time as he spoke, "Then...we...uh...wish to..." Rythe jabbed him with a stiff elbow and Clal regained his gaze on Fendaln.

"Yes, then we intend to seek out Edaphlas and continue our quest." Clal raised his eyebrows unsure of what to do next.

Fendaln turned then walked closer to his kind then turned to them once more. "And, how did you come to enter this tunnel? My guard instructed me on this already but I am curious to hear for myself."

"We encountered two guards on the road as we were following from the East up the river. They began to pursue us out of no fault of our own..." Clal said.

Clal heard a faint "Humph!" come from Rythe at that moment.

Clal continued, "...and we knew that by Gulnerye's bidding we were nearer to our goal of finding some way to obtain the Dragon Summoner..."

"Then we hid behind the waterfall and right before the guards discovered where we were, Clal touched the stone and we fell backwards through the wall." Ansa burst out.

"Though I'm not certain my touching the wall did anything at all. I just don't know exactly how we got here." Clal concluded.

Fendaln looked at Clal, then Ansa. Then, he turned to Rythe and opened his mouth to speak but Rythe spoke first, "We seek the Dragon Summoner. Can you guide us to where we can obtain it?"

"I may be able to help you, however, there is one question left that I have not heard the answer to." Fendaln's stately figure slowly approached Clal and stopped just in front of him. "Hold out your hand, Clal."

Clal obeyed and raised one of his arms holding his palm out flat. Fendaln fabricated a stone, from what seemed like nowhere, then placed it in the palm of his hand. It was blue and it began to glow at

its core. As his own stone the glow intensified until it began to illuminate the entirety of the stone cavern. Fendaln turned, then crossed the room and stood by Lady Lyluria. This time, the stone did something that Clal did not expect. It went from a hold, smooth stone, to a warm, then hot stone. "Ah...it's getting too hot." He said dropping the stone then waving his hand at his size to ease the pain that had come.

"Guards," Fendaln said in a stern voice. "Please return to your posts." The guards immediately began to file out, all except for the first guard who regained his statue-like composure in the corner. Fendaln turned to him however and said, "Gorg, this post is now no longer needed. Join Meldish on the Eastern cavern line." Gorg nodded, then exited through the archway.

All that remained were Fendaln and his kin and Clal with his band. This time Lyluria approached Clal. She touched Clal's hands and raised them slightly. Her eyes sparkled and a single tear tumbled down her pale cheek. "Are you...the chosen one, Clal?" She said turning to Fendaln.

"I...suppose so." Clal nodded slowly. "It's been all so sudden. I don't feel like the chosen one. But things keep happening and...it was Morgrith whom first discovered that I..."

"He was examined." Rythe slid his sword into his sheath, "And we were smuggled out of the castle, so to speak."

"Now," Ansa looked at Leara, "we're trying to learn our way. Who would have ever imagined we'd be here, down in these dusty tunnels..."

"The paths we take and the roads we travel are not always for our own choosing." Fendaln smiled as his gaze spanned between the three of them. "Fate has a way of weaving itself in and out of the great tapestry of time, and sometimes in ways we would have never imagined plausible." He looked in Leara's direction and smiled, which caused her cheeks to blush.

Leara was staring at Hittle and could not keep her eyes off of him. Clal wondered why this might be. He'd never seen such behavior.

Looking back at Clal, Fendaln motioned with his hand, "Come," Would you be opposed to some victuals and a night's slumber. Then, in the morning we can resume our conversations about your quest?"

"I would be much obliged, Fendaln." Clal said. "There's one thing that I'd like to know, however. Do you know where we can obtain the Dragon's Summoner?"

Fendaln bowed slowly then said, "Yes, for I am its steward."

They followed Fendaln, Lyluria, and Leara under the stone archway and along the ever downward sloping path as the darkness held them once more.

Chapter 12: Negotiation/The Price/The Trade/The Offer

Clal awoke breathing in the heavy air around him. There was a light in the corner of his chamber, a carved out circular room with a bed and polished stone floor. Clal's feet hit the cold floor, then he remembered his fitful night, it was coming back to him. He slowly sat back onto the bed and raised his hand to his head.

An echo lingered in his mind, first thought to be from outside the room but Clal knew it wasn't. He had spent much of the night endeavoring to sleep but finding little rest. A strange voice, distant and faint, but clear, nonetheless, filled his heart and mind with a sad song. She sang of lonely times, of waiting and of hoping. Clal could not imagine who belonged to this voice and why he had been hearing it. Now, it was gone and he wondered if he should learn its purpose.

After Clal had a chance to recover from the little sleep he had, he pulled his outer clothes on, stood up from his bed, then walked through the short passageway and out into a larger hall.

By the golden designs and decorations on the stone walls, Clal assumed that he was in the halls of the Lord's realms, a royal guest. He tiptoed over to another passageway and found that Ansa had been placed in the room beside him. She was still sleeping, her breath faintly heard.

Clal returned to his chamber and sat on the bed that he had found rest on through the night. Hittle flew into his quarters and stood in front of him on the bed. He chirped a few times then cocked his head. Clal smiled, "Hello friend." Clal reached over and scratched under Hittle's beak. "We've been through quite an adventure so far, haven't we, boy?"

Hittle chirped and twittered then ruffled his feathers and hovered above the bed for a moment, then zoomed out the room.

Clal shook his head and smiled, "Crazy bird!" Clal wondered how Hittle had managed to stay with them under the waterfall.

When they had left the place where they first came to meet Fendaln and the ladies of Kelvkoroth, they had journeyed for a long stretch of time before reaching the grand halls of Fendaln's realm. Through many tunnels and hallways were they led, almost always downward. There had been no one, not one soul who had been seen but the guards and Fendaln, Lyluria, and Leara. It was curious to Clal and he wondered what civilization this was.

It wasn't too much longer before Clal heard footsteps down the hallway. Ansa's head poked around the corner at the end of the hall to his quarters.

"Good morning, Clal," She said. "What a feast last night. Did you sleep well?"

"A little more than a wink or two," Clal said smiling. He stood up. "Though, I'm eager to be off and continue on our journey."

"It was a strange thing coming into it like this...I mean, the tunnel and meeting up with these hidden folk." Ansa said. "Do you think Gulnerye meant for this to happen the way it did?"

"I don't know." Clal looked down at the floor searching inside himself. "And Morgrith, whom we met on only a few occasions. What have we to understand from him?"

"But we've found one of the hidden peoples that we must find," Ansa said approaching Clal, "which tells me that we've made some progress."

Hittle chirped a few times as if in agreement.

She looked at Hittle then turned and smiled at Clal. Then she put her hand on her shoulder. "I do trust Fendaln. We'll have to see what he says and what kind of aid he lends." Then Ansa added.

"Leara...isn't she beautiful."

Clal looked straight into Ansa's deep blue eyes and blushed only slightly. "She is...a wonder." He said with a half smile.

They both walked over to the bed and sat. Ansa felt the soft bed cloth with her hand and looked around the small room taking everything in. It was light, partly from the torch but the room also seemed to illuminate from another source she could not quite understand.

Suddenly Clal gasped, "I almost forgot," he said. "My sword...and the stone...and my travel clothes. Before we leave this place..." He stood up again, "Ansa, don't forget to ask if there may be some way they can help me get my things."

"I will make sure we all remember." Ansa said.

Just then, Rythe came into the room, undetected. "Good morning," he said simply. "What are you two up to?"

"Clal was just reminding me that he lost his sword and his other things in the river...and to ask for help from Fendaln to retrieve them."

"I see." He said smiling. Then, he walked out of the room for a moment and returned, bearing gifts. "Clal, here are your things. Not by my hand, but by Fendaln. I mentioned that you had lost them in the river last night during our supper. He assured me that he'd have them found and returned." Rythe handed them over to Clal who was wide eyed and smiling.

"Rythe, I am in your debt, friend." He took the items out of his pack. Everything was accounted for and dry. The sword and its sheath, all unharmed and unadulterated. He pulled out the sword, held, then swung it in the air. Both Rythe and Ansa leaned back slightly as the room was cramped, too cramped for sword's play.

Footsteps were once more heard, this time, they were Fendaln's. "Ah, I see," he said, walking in chuckling. "A sword in the hand and a smile on the face tells me you are pleased to be reunited."

"My deepest gratitude, Lord Fendaln," Clal said bowing.

"Oh, Clal, no..." Lord Fendaln spoke in almost a whisper, his face like stone, when a moment ago he was smiling. "Please," he said, his

face grave, "do not bow to me. For it is I who will forever be in your debt, all my days." A slight smile began to return. "Why, you might wonder, do I speak this way? Do you not know your future? Do you not understand the place in which you have been set?"

"I haven't done anything yet." Clal said.

"Oh, but you will," he waved his finger in the air.

He walked over to Clal, "We have much to discuss. Please, bring your things for you will not be returning here. We will go to my council room where I meet with the grand council. Though they will not be there, we will hold a grander council. And we will reckon with one another, for I wish to give you all the aid that I can possibly give." He smiled, put his hand on Clal's shoulder. "For, I do not doubt that you, Clal, are the chosen one." He turned then walked out of the room.

They followed Fendaln into a narrow and high hall that was lit with torches. The ends of which disappeared into darkness in both directions. They traveled down until they passed under an archway into yet another hall, wider and taller still.

The stone all around, walls and ceilings, were a deep gray, and they were adorned with golden items as well as, what Clal thought might be, gold paint, sometimes intertwining around itself, or curling, sometimes thick and at times, thin streaks adorned the walls.

The first set of guards they saw were positioned on either side of a large archway. They passed the guards, entered the room, then entered another room with a square, stone table and wooden chairs, each chair with tall backs and stubby legs. The wood was dark and very smooth.

"Please, sit." Fendaln said. "Lyluria and Leara will join us momentarily."

Clal, and the others sat across from Fendaln who wore a golden tunic with shining blue fringes. Today he bore a necklace, intricate in

design, thin chain and a tangle of golden wires wrapped around what looked like sun. Clal hadn't noticed that Fendaln wore it the previous day. Perhaps if it hadn't been for the dark, he might have.

As they sat there, Clal looked around the great hall. There were torches that hung from enclosures from the ceilings on golden chains. Their flames were constant and they neither flickered nor dimmed from what Clal could tell. There wasn't much else besides the large stone table and chairs. This room, in Clal's mind, had one purpose, and that was, to council together and probably not to leave until there was a clear path for whatever decision was being discussed.

Ansa had been looking down at her hands, then, she rummaged through her pack. Out came the Book of Legends. She opened it to where she'd placed a leaf to mark her previously visited section and she began to read.

Rythe studied Fendaln who was watching Ansa at the moment. Then, the silence gave way to Clal's curiosity.

"Fendaln, I meant to ask, who was it that retrieved my belongings at the river bottom." He half smiled. "If it weren't for Ansa, I believe I might have drowned trying to save myself."

He looked at Clal, then smiled. "My Leara. She volunteered. Her eagerness is oftentimes too difficult to oppose. Besides," he added, "She's the best swimmer that I know of. And she did well, for I sat on the river bank and watched."

Leara, it was her? Was it her? This was something that Clal had not expected.

"I'll have to thank her." Clal said, trying not to smile too much.

"You can thank her now, in fact. She comes." Fendaln said, nodding to them as they had been waiting for a moment outside the chamber.

Lyluria and Leara approached the large table and took their places on both sides of Fendaln.

"Greetings," Lyluria smiled and clasped her hands then rested them on the table in front of her. Her golden hair was brilliant and reflected the light around them. She wore a long azure blue down and a necklace that almost matched Fendaln's.

Clal turned to Leara, "Lady Leara, I've been told that you were the one who retrieved my belongings from the bottom of the river. I wanted to thank you. I was worried that I had lost them and would never see them again."

She smiled slightly, "If I had lost something of such great importance, I really couldn't bear to give up on trying to find it." Her cheeks were turning red as she spoke, "I thought I would see if I could help in some way."

Before he even realized what he was saying, Clal looked into Leara's eyes and said, "Then, I am in your debt."

"Perhaps," She smiled then looked at her father who had been looking at her, but turned his gaze to Clal.

"From what I gather, there is some level of urgency by which you are traveling on your quest before having come to us. And as this is most likely the circumstances we come together under, I propose that we proceed with our council."

Fendaln motioned to his guard and the guard closed the heavy, wooden door to the room. He leaned in and put his hands, clasped on the stone table.

"Long ago, in the days of my fathers' father, a king, Lord Gidrik ruled Kelvkoroth. In those days, the light of the day shined upon our land and upon our people. We were here, right here where we are now, but above the ground, in a valley we called home.

Before this plight we are now in, we were cave miners and some dwelled in the ground, though it was not our nature to begin with. There were elves, as we were, and there were men. We were proud and we were strong in our own right."

Fendaln sat back, as his long hair lay upon his chest. "Then, one day, like wildfire, a mention of a stone that was found deep in one of the mines reached the ears of Lord Gidrik. No one could handle it, wield it, touch it. When Lord Gidrik came to see it deep in the darkness of the mines, its beauty was above all others that he had seen. He lusted after it and claimed it for his own. They broke apart the stone that was around it so that when hauled out from the mine, they the stone within was cradled by the stone without."

He took it into the castle, stowed it away in a secret place, and kept it for himself.

That day, they say, the king changed then. He was no longer himself.

"A week went by and a strange visitor came to Kelvkoroth. It was the wizard Felsawn, who had been heard of, but some believed in him only slightly. The king refused to see Felsawn at first. He kept him at bay for three days. No one quite knew why the king had taken to acting this way. But, they would soon find out."

"By the coaxing of the queen, on the fourth day, Lord Gidrik provided a meeting place and met with Felsawn. And lo, Felsawn came to discuss the fate of the Crystal not found but kept by him."

"Felsawn knew, by some magic power, that the Crystal had been found, unearthed, and moved. He said that it had reached out to him, and that it was searching for another."

"The king became furious, having come under a spell of some sort, lusting after the Crystal's beauty and magic within. Felsawn then knew, as it is written, that this Crystal was not safe within the hands of Lord Gidrik. It was a disgrace to our people. This King, my own blood," Fendaln pounded his fist on the stone table, "caught with greed. He lost the faith and trust of the people that day."

"Lord Gidrik went mad and threatened to forsake his kingdom and take the Crystal and flee."

"It was on a starry, clear night when Felsawn came next. He stood in front of the castle gates, with his arms raised to the stars above, he called upon the powers of magic and cast his spell upon Kelvkoroth. The clouds above appeared, began to curl and thunder and the winds and lightning began. No one knew what was happening. The moon was once bright, the stars twinkled, but no longer."

"Then, a great sound came and it was known from then on as The Thousand Winds. This was the name we called the Great Earthquake when the darkness came, and never left."

Fendaln stood. "A great mountain, Mount Pelteronth, had been pulled from its resting place, only by magic could this have been done, and in the dead of night had sailed from one side of Illia to the other."

"That's incredible," Ansa said quietly.

"Yes, and the great wizard set this mountain upon the valley of Kelvkoroth. And there it stayed ever since that day."

"He came and insisted then to speak to the King, for he was not finished with his task just yet. But the Lord of Kelvkoroth was nowhere to be found. And so Felsawn entreated the queen for a word. She had been weary of her husband's misfortune and was willing to listen to Felsawn, and this is what he said."

"He told the queen that she was now keeper of the Crystal. And that someday, in the future days ahead, there would be one who could wield, who could bear the powers that it possessed and that she, her kingdom, was to keep this Crystal safe, away from the world."

"She accepted the sacred stewardship, and Felsawn was content. The Lord Gidrik, all that was left of him, was a pile of his clothing that was found by the queen near where the crystal had been."

"They were a sealed and hidden people." Fendaln came and sat down again. "But there was one thing that I have failed to mention." He smiled. "He gave the queen in secret a gift, for she was wise and

loyal and had a believing heart. She was given the power to wield the flame, spoken by Felsawn, so that if need be, she could keep those who also lusted after the Crystal at bay."

"Time went on in Kelvkoroth. Neither the sun nor the moon rose nor set any longer. All life changed, and they came to know the beauty and power and gift that light and fire could bring."

Fendaln turned to his queen, Lyluria. She leaned forward slightly, "Time moved on and the queen found another to marry. They wed, there was a new king, and a baby son was born to the throne. That baby grew, and wed, became king and queen, then had a son and daughter of their own. The queen kept the secret of the flame, until her kin began to discover it for themselves. The queen did not know that the power to wield the flame was tied, in part, to a blood line."

"But, one day, the king found that he could gift this flame, this power, to others. And so he armed his forces that protected him with the flame of Kelvkoroth. Then, a war began to kindle."

Fendaln continued, "The power of the flame was too strong for the people. Before long the power to wield the flame had been turned over to every dweller of Kelvkoroth. The war to obtain the Crystal began."

"There was one who was first to wage war on the kingdom, Imforo. The Crystal keepers, all those who wished to retain the hiding and the unmolested state of the Crystal, banded together. They gathered in the castle and came to protect the stone. Imforo and his army came, with fire raging at his command, the battle was fierce as men were at the flame's mercy. One by one they fell, burned to stubble, lost to the power of the flame. And when Imforo breached the final entry and saw the Crystal for the first time, he swore to gain possession of it, he, himself, and no one else. He'd promised his men some kind of remuneration, but he forsake them upon seeing the stone."

"The Crystal shed a great flash of light in a moment during the battle in the halls of the castle for the Great Crystal. By magic, Felsawn was summoned and came standing between Imforo and the Crystal Keeper band. He spoke words that no one present could understand then he commanded Imforo to leave and said that he was banished forever from the realm of the Kelvkoroth kingdom. It was then that Imforo cried in agony, ran like a mad man from the castle and could be heard throughout the rest that night until he was seen no more."

Fendaln stood again, "I am the Crystal Keeper. I am the steward. I am also the wielder of the flame of Kelvkoroth." He held his hand on his chest. "You, Clal have come for the Dragon Summoner, of which I too am steward over. But should we not change hands, the Crystal, and you, to be in one, having stewardship over the long awaited coming of the hidden stone?"

Clal's mouth dropped open. He had not expected to be in possession of a Great Crystal so soon. "I suppose," he said, "but we are on a journey to obtain the stone from Edaphlas first. I would not know...I think we might need to understand where to take it or what to do with it since we can't carry it for long..."

"I see." Fendaln said, sitting down again. "I do, however, request from you payment of some kind, and here is why I make such a bold request."

"Everything changed for our people when we became Crystal Keepers. It was of ill fate, however, we have been loyal and have honored our promise. Ever since our King Gidrik was no more, we never wavered." He stood erect with chest out and hands behind his back. "Unless the great mountain is removed and we are returned to what we used to be, the kingdom that shined beneath the summer sun in the valley..." He looked at Clal, "We cannot turn over the Crystal, even to the chosen one until you find some way to reverse

what Felsawn bore upon us that dark night, deep in the annals of history."

Rythe snorted, chuckled, then slowly stood up. "How..." he began, "can you require something so..." he held out his hands like he was holding a great boulder, "...so impossible, such a grand task?" He looked at Clal.

"Rythe, I think we can talk through this." Clal said. He turned to Fendaln. "Lord Fendaln, we are mere fledglings in our quest. Yes, I may have touched the waterfall's inner wall and bore through it by some...magic. But I have yet to understand any of this sufficiently." Clal sighed. He looked at Ansa and Rythe.

"And what of the Dragon Summoner?" Clal said. "Perhaps this could be a part of helping in moving the great Mountain of Pelteronh." He smiled slightly. "Would not the great white dragon bear some knowledge of the mountain and the moving of it?"

Fendaln came to the table again and sat. Leara was beginning to squirm in her chair as her calm and smiling face now bore tightened lips of which she bit her lower lip ever so often.

"Perhaps you're right, Clal. Though, I would want to require of you that you give your word that you will help us. We have been captures, it seems, for so long. Only you have the power to bring us home to the land and life we once knew."

"Though, I know your heart is noble...but do you have the power yet to free us, to not bear away your journey to some other land or some other people?" He put his hand on his chin. "As the prophecy says, spite..." He paused, put his hand on his chin, then said, "No, I can't risk it. We must have the mountain moved before the Dragon Summoner and the Crystal are relinquished from my care."

"I am sorry Clal. But as the steward of both, I bear the burden of reckoning the demands upon their fate. I must take great care."

Clal felt a lump beginning to form in the pit of his stomach. He could hardly contain his frustration, such great requirements seemed

to be piling up, first the Crystal and now the Dragon Summoner, he would be unable to obtain both unless he figured out some way to move the mountain. As Clal spiraled downward into despair Leara broke the silence that had engulfed the room. Just moments ago it had been a welcome place, now, through Fendaln's demands, had turned into a fiery furnace of negotiation.

"Father?" Leara said with her hand on his arm. "Would it please you if I accompanied Clal, Ansa and Rytthe while they journey beyond Kelvkoroth and return once this deed to remove Mount Pelteronth that you require is finished?" She looked at Clal then back at her father. "And, along with my journeying with them, I also retain stewardship of the Dragon Summoner until it is time for Clal to gain his rightful possession of it? Would that be a fair compromise?"

"No...Leara." Fendaln spoke, "I can't let you go. None of us here know what lies ahead."

"But father, is that not the same fate that we live day to day...never knowing what will be from one moment to the next?" Leara folded her arms. "You've taught me, father, to consider what is before me and all that I can see is that Clal needs the Dragon Summoner in order to carry out your wish," She looked at Lyluria, "our great wish."

Fendaln's firm facial expressions began to fade slowly. He looked at Leara, then at Lyluria who Clal thought nodded slightly. Then he looked at Clal. "This is a strange turn." He said, shaking his head. "Strange indeed, to have ever thought that this could be."

Lyluria leaned toward Fendaln. "Is this our path?" Fendaln only looked into her eyes. She turned to Clal, "Leara, she also wields the flame of Kelvkoroth." Turning back to Fendaln she said, "Perhaps the flame given long ago was meant to abide with the chosen one, to aid, to light the way when the pathway seems dark."

All was quiet for a long moment. No one stirred. Then, Fendaln leaned his palms against the table as he stood from his chair. He

walked over to a nearby table in the corner of the council hall. He stood there, still, for what seemed like a long while. Clal watched him pick up something and hold it close to his chest. Then he turned and walked toward the table.

He carried back with him a leather pouch ornately decorated with gold lines and markings. Laying it on the stone table he pulled the strap and lifted the flap, then pulled out a brilliant, white horn made from a horned animal. Upon its tip was a silver metal and all along the horn was carved a great dragon. The tail wrapped around each side curving in tight curves until it ended with a flat, pointed tip. The face of the dragon was neither fierce nor empty, but the skilled hand who carved it had captured the very essence of a wise and noble creature.

"This," Fendaln spoke softly looking at Clal, "is the Dragon Summoner." He turned to Leara and slid it over in front of her. "Keep it safe."

Chapter 13: The Plan

Fendaln pressed his hand on the white dragon summoner and held it there as if his hand was stuck to the side of it. "Keep it hidden and always with you."

He turned to Clal. "I have much to show you before you leave in the morning. Let us be done with this council," he said gruffly and stood up leaving the table.

The rest of them stood up and left the table, Clal being the last out of the room before the guard closed the door.

Clal felt as if he had won a great battle, though the prospect of finding the means to move the mountain was already beginning to weigh heavily on his soul.

They were taken to another smaller room and served a light breakfast. Fendaln asked questions about their homesteads. Clal and the lot of them told stories of home.

Once finished, they were ushered into a hallway where they circled around Fendaln as he was about to instruct them. "I wish to show you the Great Crystal before your journey here for the time is complete. Come." Clal, Ansa and Rythe followed the three stewards of Kelvkoroth through the maze of halls and down, down, down, once more, into the depths of Illia herself. Fendaln carried light with him though Clal never could see a torch.

As they continued, Clal began to feel deep within, a new feeling. It was like there was a voice within him, though ever so faint. Ansa noticed Clal's furrowed brow and slower pace. "Clal, what is it?" she whispered cautiously.

"I don't know, Ansa..." Clal whispered. "I feel...do you supposed..."

"...it's the crystal." Rythe said quietly.

They walked through two more doors then down several stairs and came to a great iron door with two guards standing in front of it.

"Unlock the door, my good Elbin," Fendaln said.

"As you wish."

The guard turned to the others, "I would ask that you turn and face the stairs."

"Do as he says," Fendaln told them.

They did so and Clal heard the scraping of stone on stone, the unlocking of three locks, then the scrapping of stone once more.

"You may enter," said the guard.

Clal, Ansa and Rythe turned around then followed Fendaln, Lyluria, and Leara into a red glowing circular room. Oddly, it was a room that was much like the room that he was examined in, and the room where they received the Book of Legends from the chest.

"This is the Crystal of Kelvkoroth." Fendaln looked upon, smiling. "Some believe that the flame of Kelvkoroth burns at the heart of it beneath its stony walled exterior."

Clal looked upon the stone. Its red glow penetrated his soul. The slight pulsing that emitted from the stone was extraordinary. It captivated him and the feeling within him that he felt moments before grew. It was a voice, he knew now, that was there. And it spoke to him, the Crystal to the chosen one.

"I am Seeshalar, from the ancient world before the birth of Illia. Long have been the days that I have awaited your coming, Seldinolum." Clal looked at Ansa who too was staring at the stone. She looked at Clal and smiled. Was she not hearing the voice of the stone?

Seeshalar continued. "It is your place and right to obtain my passage, to carry me beyond this realm to my rightful and honored resting place where I will remain. Take me now, for there is no time that should be wasted here."

Clal was breathing heavily, but tried not to show his great alarm. *Take it? Take it now?* Clal was confused. Was this a trick? Was this what happened to Lord Gidrik that caused him to go mad?

All were gazing upon its beauty when Clal began to feel as if he was being pulled in many directions, and could barely keep from drawing attention to himself. An overwhelming desire to scream arose within him and just as he was about to burst out, Rythe spoke.

"We thank you, Fendaln, for bringing us here." Rythe said, turning to Fendaln. "It's beauty is beyond description."

Rythe turned to exit the chamber, then Fendaln walked toward him. He turned and looked at the stone then exited the room first. The others followed.

They climbed up the stairs once more and Clal heard the same sounds of stone on stone and the locking of the iron door that kept the Great Crystal safe. They weaved back and forth again and finally ended up in the same hall that they had left. They gathered around Fendaln as he spoke to them. "I am Seeshalar, from the ancient world before the birth of Illia. Long have been the days that I have awaited your coming, Seldinolum." Clal looked at Ansa who too was staring at the stone. She looked at Clal and smiled. Was she not hearing the voice of the stone?

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"We thank you, Fendaln, for bringing us here." Rythe said, turning to Fendaln. "...

"We have, as of yet, not ventured above the surface of the valley floor. Now, we will do so." He turned, then with Lyluria and Leara at his side, Clal, Ansa and Rythe followed them down the hall and under a great archway.

As they traveled the light became less and less. Then Leara did something that surprised Clal. She waved her hand in a circular and gentle motion, then the flame of Kelvkoroth began to burn.

The flame was a lavender hue, starting small, it grew larger within her hands until it was the size of two of her hands cupped together around it. The hall glowed enough for them to see where they were going. Straight ahead a large, iron gate, stretched high to the stone ceiling of the castle, stretched high to the stone ceiling.

With a hand motion from Fendaln and four men bearing the task, the gate slowly withdrew and soon rested on the ground without the castle walls.

"This is our land, our valley." The Lord of Kelvkoroth proclaimed with his hand stretched out. "Please, see for yourself. Leara, will you show them." Leara nodded then walked further out. "When your short adventure is finished, come back to the castle. We will be waiting. Do take as long as you wish."

Clal had never experienced such a place. He looked out and could not see the end of the valley, for the darkness was too great. It was vast. There was no wind. Almost no sound. Almost like the death of a people hung in the air.

While Fendaln and Lyluria walked back into the castle and disappeared behind the raising gate, Leara led them into the great valley. It was like a city, with some windows bearing the light of the light that was in them, and others, were dark or altogether destroyed. Buildings and shops with elfin men and women and some where children played about. But when they saw the group

and looked at the visitors, who were clearly not the elfin folk they were used to, there was a scare that began to spread among them.

"We should have worn our hoods, Clal." Ansa said, digging inside of her pack. "Then they wouldn't know we weren't elves."

"Oh, they would know anyway." Leara said. "You're visitors. Why else would I be out of the castle walking around the valley?"

"Well, don't you come out here sometimes?" Ansa put back the hood that she had pulled out, since neither Leara nor anyone else seemed to care about their appearance.

"Oh no, Father, he keeps me inside most of the time. It's something I can't really explain at the moment." She turned in Clal's direction. "It is a lonely place to be here in Kelvkoroth. They almost curse the Crystal at times for the darkness it has brought upon us."

"They?" Rythe said. "Who are they?"

"Some of our people. My parents." She kept walking forward, "But as for me, I would not dare. I know that all things have their place, and this mountain above us," She looked up and pointed. "It has its place."

Clal nodded. "Yes, and I believe there are some things that we don't understand," Clal added. "And we should be that much more grateful when we do find the answers to our questions, I think." He smiled at Leara who smiled then looked down at her feet.

Rythe and Ansa were walking alongside each other. They walked past some more buildings then came to an open field where a dry grass had been trampled down. "Here is the edge of the city. And beyond, just the soil of the valley and the plants of days long dead and yesteryears."

Leara paused and looked out. She smiled. Clal wanted to know what she was thinking and why she was smiling. When she turned then headed back to the castle a different way, Clal was once more walking beside her. "Leara, I hope you don't mind if I ask, but, you

looked out into the darkness a bit ago." Clal smiled slightly, "A smile, I, I saw you smile."

"Yes, I did smile." She looked at Clal, "It was because I've lived here all of my life and like many of us, have never known the sun and the sky, the wind, nor the birds."

She looked behind her at Hittle who was bobbing up and down on Ansa's shoulder as she walked. Rythe was talking to her.

"And just then, I thought that by this time tomorrow, I may be venturing off beyond the realms of Kelvkoroth into the light of day, and into a world which I thought I would never know." She smiled at Clal. "And so, I smiled because it was a joyous thought...and I hope it will come true."

Clal smiled too. He could not imagine a life that she described, hidden from nature, from the world. Clal was happy for her. He himself was already growing weary of this place, the darkness was beginning to choke some of the life from him. He too desired to leave as soon as possible.

Then Clal remembered the Crystal and how it spoke to him. That feeling began to grow within him and he thought to follow what his heart was telling him. And so he turned to Leara.

"Leara," He said quietly. "Before we return to the castle, can you take us to a place where we can speak freely...perhaps, less obvious?"

She looked at Clal, then nodded. Leara led them for a short distance then turning to the right she led them away from the dense city toward the open darkness beyond, by the light of her lavender flame.

"Where are we going, Leara?" Ansa strode up behind Leara. "I thought the castle was that way," she pointed.

"It is," Leara said. "However, we will stop just ahead, before returning to the castle."

They continued to walk past a few buildings then on into the darkness. The silence was almost deafening, and the dead stillness of the air caused Clal to wonder how the people here ever got used to such an environment.

Clal watched Leara as she led them toward a direction that slowly began to be familiar to him. As they got closer he noticed that the same gray stone was approaching, and within the wall was a black opening, a cave. They entered the cave and strode deeper into the earth.

"Here," Leara stopped, "we can find seclusion here."

"Leara, why are we here?" Ansa said.

Leara turned to Clal, who spoke. "I asked Leara to lead us to a place where we can be sure no one can overhear us." Clal looked around, "I would like to hold a council here...now." Clal waited for a response. The others were quiet so he sat on the ground and waited till the others also sat down in a small circle. Ansa held the flame in her hand. She waved her hand and the flame grew as did the light that brightened the cave.

"Each of you, not just me, I realize, are part of this quest. Though I am the chosen one, you are also chosen, not necessarily by your choice alone, though you had a choice to accept or reject to join this great quest." Clal looked down at his hands and rubbed his thumb against his palm. Then he looked up. "I believe you will help me continue in the direction...on the path that we all must go. And so I wish to speak with you about something that occurred while in the castle."

Ansa, Leara, and Rythe were attentively looking at Clal and listening. Leara sat erect and still. Ansa sat with her back slightly hunched over as she habitually bit her lower lip. Clal searched Rythe's stone face and found no hint of emotion that he could detect.

Clal looked at his hands again and was silent.

"Clal, what's wrong?" Ansa finally said. "Something is troubling you. What is it?"

"I fear to tell you." Clal said.

"What do you fear?" Rythe said. "Is it what we will think or say?" He smiled. "We have trusted you this far, Clal."

"Clal, I am with you now." Leara leaned over to him and touched his hand with hers. "I believe your path is mine now. Trust us."

Clal looked long and hard at Leara. Then he looked at Ansa and Rythe. Clal took a deep breath and sighed a long exhale.

"Well, it was the Crystal." Clal looked up and fixed his gaze on the wall directly across from him. "Even before I entered the room, I felt something deep inside. It was new, never felt before." He looked at Ansa. "Did you not feel something?"

She looked at Clal and slowly shook her head. "But I watched you, Clal." She said softly, "You looked worried."

"It happened so fast, I didn't understand at the time. But when we went into the chamber where the stone was, the Great Crystal of Kelvkoroth," Clal swallowed. "When I came in and looked upon the jewel..."

"Go on." Leara coaxed him.

"I heard..." Clal shook his head. "No, I can't."

"What did you hear, Clal?" Rythe said. "I remember looking over at you and you looked as if you were being tormented. So, I tried to think of something quick because I could tell being there was not helping your mood."

"Thank you, Rythe." Clal said with a smile. "I don't know how, but you knew what to do."

Ansa reached over and clasped Clal's hand, "Clal, what did you hear? Tell us. Don't be afraid."

He squeezed her hand. "The Crystal, it spoke to me. It told me it's name, Seeshalar. It spoke these words to me, 'Take me now, for there

is no time that should be wasted here.' It was the words and that it could reach my thoughts."

Leara immediately stood after hearing what Clal had spoken. She looked in the direction of the exit to the cave then walked over to the stone wall and leaned upon it.

"We left that room shortly thereafter thanks to Rytte." Clal nodded in his direction. "And ever since I have not been able to get this out of my mind. The plan was to leave here tomorrow morning, to seek out the dragon, to figure out how and then move the mountain, then come back and retrieve the Crystal...or at least that's as far as I have worked things out." Clal stood up then began to pace back and forth.

"I know it was never the plan to retrieve the Crystal before leaving, but that's exactly what Seeshalar told me to do. I truly can't see Fendaln letting it go so easily." Clal then added. "Am I going mad like the others who could not bear the enchanting ways of the Great Crystal?"

Clal stopped and turned to face Ansa.

"Ansa, I know our plan. But should I not obey?" Clal's voice echoed through the cave.

"Clal, come and sit down." Ansa motioned. "I'm glad you told us."

Clal walked over and sat down. "Leara, won't you join us?" Ansa said softly.

Leara looked at Ansa then came and sat down. She was still holding her flame though its light was dim.

"Clal, I think we need to work out a plan to both bring the Crystal with us somehow and promise to remove the mountain and return it to where it belongs as quickly as we possibly can. Or, at least, if I'm understanding you right."

"Yes, but that doesn't seem possible and it sounds dangerous." Clal turned to Leara. "I don't want to disappoint your father, Leara. I

also do not want to make an enemy out of him either. That's why this has become so..."

"Complicated, but not impossible." Rytthe interrupted. He looked at all of them with his face half in shadow as the flame wavered now and again. "Remember Clal, it should be yours, though..."

"That's what the Crystal also said. Seeshalar told me that it was my right to obtain the Crystal and to carry it beyond the realm of Kelvkoroth. And that I was to take the Crystal to where it is supposed to rest." Clal rubbed the side of his cheek bone then rested his chin in his palm.

"To steal the Crystal away would be the greatest offense that has ever come upon the kingdom of Kelvkoroth. To even consider it reveals your lust. To attempt it would mean your death if you failed." Leara spoke articulating every word.

Her tone cut Clal to the core. Clal could feel the tips of his ears beginning to turn red, which happened when he angered. Clal turned to Leara, immediately regretting that he ever had. "I am not a thief, neither am I drunk with fever to obtain the Crystal." Clal spoke slowly, "I'm merely sharing what I heard and felt. I do not want to make a mistake, especially one that could prove to be as awful as I think this might be if I don't act in the right."

Clal's face softened. "I am sorry Leara if this comes as a shock. I am sorry. But, I know what I felt and it was not my own voice that I heard."

"Clal, come and sit down." Ansa motioned. "I'm glad you told us." Clal walked over and sat beside Ansa

"We never meant to come to take anything from you or to cause harm or to disrupt the way of life here in Kelvkoroth." Ansa faced Leara who was now looking at the flame she held in her hands. "But now it seems that our path has once again become clearer, though the way to proceed has yet to be decided."

"If it is truly our path to take the Crystal of Kelvkoroth, then there's much that needs to be decided," Rythe stared at Leara's flame. "And we may have to split up."

"A diversion by one of us," Clal said.

"And a plan if things go wrong." Ansa said.

"Wait!" Leara's hand had swiped through the air from right to left. "I can't do this? I can't be part of this?" Leara stood up again and began to walk toward the cave's opening. Her flame was altogether gone. "I can't let you do this?" She said the cave was dark and only her footsteps were heard.

Clal jumped up from his place. He touched the walls of the cave then felt his way toward Leara. He ran into her then grabbed her arm.

"Clal, let go of me!"

"Leara, please, we haven't come to any real conclusion on what it is we will be doing." Clal held her firm but loosened his grip. "Please, Leara, we are not here to do wrong, but only to do right. Sometimes the right path is the most difficult. You are one of us, we need you. I need you. Please, tell us your thoughts if we were to try this rescue of the Crystal. Won't you just consider that my course is to defeat the dark one lurking and restore Illia to its proper peace and existence. Retrieving this Crystal is part of that." He pulled her close to him then whispered. "You are part of that now, Leara."

He waited for a response but only felt her body begin to shake as he held her. Then he heard her soft crying.

"I didn't think," She said as she sniffled, "that making it out of KelvkorKelvkorothianoth would come at such a high price." She buried her face into Clal's chest and sobbed. It was a sad thing to witness, but he held her and she didn't move.

Then Ansa began to sing all of this transpiring in the darkness of a cave on the outskirts of the Kelvkoroth Valley. She sang the words:

"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."

By the time Ansa had finished singing, Leara had finished crying. She pulled away from Clal slightly then whispered, "Thank you, Clal."

Leara quickly reengaged her lavender flame and walked toward Rythe and Ansa then sat down as Clal sat down beside her.

"Forgive me, perhaps I don't understand." Leara said, wiping her tear streaked cheeks. She turned to Ansa, "That was beautiful, Ansa. Where did you learn that song?"

Ansa smiled then pulled the Book of Legends from her pack that she'd set on the floor of the cave. "From this book, an ancient record of Illia. One that was written and prepared for the chosen one. It has been hidden away in the central castle of Eldan Vyum. It only came into our hands one Clal's finding. That song is part of what is written here. This book was written by the hand of Gulnerye."

Hittle chirped and flapped his wings.

"Yes, and a very good friend of Hittle here," Ansa said, tapping his little brown head.

"It speaks of Kelvkoroth, too." Ansa added.

"And your song," Leara looked up at Ansa from the book. "It spoke of setting a people free. Is that speaking about my people?"

"Yes, yes," Clal answered. "Though, we have only just begun our journey. We are still learning what everything means and how to accomplish, not just one task but many."

"We were on our way to find the Dragon Summoning horn. Then we were to go to the island in the sky and to retrieve the Crystal of Edaphlas then take it..." Rythe turned to Clal. "Clal, where were we supposed to take it?"

"There, you see," Clal said smiling. "Yet another detail we overlooked." He turned to Rythe. "I have a feeling the dragon will know."

"Or it's in the book," Ansa hunched over the book and began to pour over its pages.

"But why not follow my father's plan?" Leara said, "Find the dragon. Learn the way to move the mountain. Free the Kelvkorothian people. Obtain the Crystal. And continue on your journey."

"I agreed to that course," Clal said to Leara. "But that was before I came to the Crystal and heard it's plea." Clal said with furrowed brow his voice becoming quieter. "It was as if it sensed that I was planning some other path that it did not want me to follow, which, I've discovered, would mean that leaving Kelvkoroth without the Crystal would be a grave mistake."

Leara looked at Clal then down at her flame and nodded. She looked at her lavender burning fire for a long while before she spoke, "If we are going to take the Crystal," Leara continued to stare into her flame, "then we have to do it tonight, then leave Kelvkoroth immediately after." She looked up at Clal, "I think I may have a plan."

Then she looked up, "But first, know, that going against my father's wishes is difficult." She looked at Clal, "But I believe that from what Clal has said, this must be..." she paused for a moment then continued, "our path."

"So what can we do then?" Clal said, "The Crystal, it's guarded by two guards."

"I watched them out of the corner of my eye." Rythe looked up from staring into the lavender flame. "I counted five stones from the

door to the left then fourteen stones down to the floor." He raised one hand, "I'm sure if I were to approach that place again I could figure out how to get that key from behind the stone wall."

Leara looked up at Rythe, "How did you manage that? Those guards have keen eyes."

Rythe smiled slightly, "I'm used to gathering information that might be useful later on. I thought it possible that we might need to know something about getting into the chamber, though I wasn't at all sure." He rubbed his neck with his hand as he spoke, "And I figured that they couldn't watch all of us at the same time so I thought I would chance it." He nodded. "It worked because I saw the guard lay hold of the key itself and open the door."

Leara turned to her flame once more searching its depths, "A diversion."

"A diversion?" Ansa looked up from the Book of Legends for the first time. "I love to play that game. Clal and I used to work together, being twins and all, to draw away our victim then..."

"Perhaps we could think of something," Clal said, smiling at Ansa. "What about up the stairs we yell fire or tell them the Lord of Kelvkoroth has ordered all the guards to a council."

"Leara, would they not listen to you, being the daughter of the King of this realm?" Rythe asked simply. "Could you not ask them to open the door?"

"Not even my mother has the...authority to command the guards that way."

"I am thinking that your father will be expecting us soon and that we'd better think up something quick. The diversion," Ansa stood up. "What if we at least draw them up the stairs. Could we not do that somehow?"

"No, they are sworn to stay their post no matter what happens. I know that they cannot move even three inches from where they

stand. If they do, their penalty could be death," Leara looked at Ansa. "No, we will not be obtaining the Crystal by way of diversion."

Clal stood up too and started pacing. "Is there another way in?" Clal stopped, "Above, around, or underneath." He walked over to Leara then crouched beside her. "What is beneath, on the other walls, or even above the room? Can you think of anything, Leara?"

She thought for several minutes then said, "Clal, if only there was a way but I know that when the construction of the castle was taking place, they layered the stone double and sometimes triple thick knowing this is where the Crystal of Kelvkoroth would be concealed."

Clal thought as he considered there being a way in that did not involve the main entrance. "After all these years I would almost wonder whether someone would have created a secret entrance, perhaps only for the Lord of Kelvkoroth." Clal sat down by Leara. "Have you ever heard your father talk about going to see the Crystal?"

Leara stood, then Clal stood. Now Leara paced back and forth while she thought. "I'm trying to remember..." her fingers caressed her cheek as she slowly walked back and forth as she held the flame in her other hand. Then, she raised her eyebrows, "Yes, I think that's it. I do remember my father talking about going to see the Crystal." She stopped and stood still. "It happened frequently after visiting with the commander of the army, Tavi."

"Could the secret passageway be in his quarters?" Rythe said.

Little chirped a few times then flew to Leara. He landed on her hand. "Oh, hello," she said, "you have something to say, don't you." She pet his small little head.

"We can't just go there on a hunch." Ansa said as she stood. "We have to be sure. If they discover what we're after, we're sure to be in a mess of trouble."

"Could he not simply go to the Crystal through the main entrance after visiting with his commander?" Rythe said.

"There has to be another way," Clal said. "There has to be." He came and sat down once again. Leara followed suit and soon they all were staring into Leara's flame again sitting in the circle on the floor of the cave.

After a while, Clal thought of another part of their plan, "So if we don't know how we will get the Crystal, we can at least plan our escape, right?"

"Yes," Leara nodded. "That's the easy part, though that too is a bit of a chancy situation." She looked up at them. "I know of the closest tunnel as well as many paths and tunnels that could be beyond. But the people of Kelvkoroth, we've never found a way out, though you found the way in. So we go as far as we can and hope that you, Clal, can bring us through somehow."

Clal shook his head, "I am sorry but, this has to be a sure plan. Leara, do you know of any other place you can think of, a place where you remember any secret passageway of some sort or another?" Clal had begun to pace again. Ansa continued to search the Book of Legends while Rythe just started into the lavender flame.

"Okay," Leara said, "let me think." She closed her eyes and bowed her head slightly, then was silent for a short while. When she opened her eyes she looked straight at Clal, "Clal, I think I know. I can't imagine how I know but I've remembered."

Ansa closed the book with her hand keeping the place, "Remember what?" She said.

"I remember," Leara stared into her flame, "when I was a little girl, my Father would bring me to the undercroft to play." She giggled. "I think it was because he would look for things to nibble on while we spent time together."

"Undercroft?" Ansa asked.

"It's the place where the castle stores its food." She looked at Ansa and smiled. "A good place to be when no one is watching."

Ansa put her hand to her mouth and giggled.

"I remember on one occasion when I was very little. We were playing in the undercroft when he beckoned me to come to him. He walked over to one of the corners and bent down. There was a small lever that he pulled. Part of the wall opened and we went through and walked into another room." She looked at Clal, "But I can't seem to remember much more than that."

"Could it be the way into the room where the Crystal is located?" Rythe asked. "What do you remember about the room?"

Leara shook her head, "Not much. Only that I remember it felt so different from any other room in the castle." Leara paused as she stood behind them. "Clal, the stones, I remember that they were orange. As a little girl I thought it was some kind of magical room." Her flame grew larger and brighter as she stood still in the middle of the cave. "That's it! It has to be the room."

"How do we get there?" Rythe stood and brushed the dirt off from his back side. "We can't enter from the main gate or else we'll be found out."

Leara shrugged. "I still think there needs to be some kind of diversion."

Hittle chirped twice.

"Yes, Hittle," Ansa smiled. "I agree." Ansa came to Leara's side, Hittle now sitting on Leara's shoulder. "Hittle is the master of diversions, aren't you boy." She rubbed the top of his head, Hittle closing his eyes for a moment. "Rogue bird, as I remember the guards calling him."

"Well, here's how we can use Hittle." Leara looked at the sparrow then brightened her flame a little to cast more light on him. "There is one other entrance to the castle, a small side door on the south of the castle wall. It is hidden by several stones and guarded by one

guard." Leara reached over and petted Hittle on the back by which he chirped, "Hittle can cause some sort of a diversion there and we can steal our way in while the guard is occupied."

Rythe was rubbing his chin when he spoke next. "Does anyone have anything of value that perhaps the bird could hold in its beak?"

They all thought and Ansa looked inside of her pack while Leara searched her belongings. "I do, this coin. Kelvkoroth currency." Leara held up a coin made of gold and silver. "This is the highest value in our monetary system."

"Hittle could carry that in his beak and fly around taunting the guard until he chases him as sport, winner takes or keeps the coin?"

"Rythe, that's brilliant," Clal clapped him on the back and laughed. Leara put the coin up to Hittle's beak. "Take it, Hittle." Leara told him, then Hittle took hold of the coin and held it there a few moments before Leara carefully took it out his beak and returned it to some pocket in her garment.

"Then once we're in we'll go straight to the undercroft." Clal said, "Though, are we all needed?" Clal scratched his head of blond hair.

"What do you mean?" Ansa looked puzzled with her lips sticking out and squinted eyes.

"Could Leara and I not accomplish the retrieving of the Crystal while you too wait for us near the cave where we are to meet?" Clal scratched his head again. "Ansa, Rythe, would it not be easier for you two to wait for us?"

"I don't know, Clal." Ansa looked away, "I would like to be with you."

"Even though we would be four, we can be quieter than even one. No, Clal, I think we should stay together through to the end of this." Rythe smiled slightly, "we may need each other."

"We should be leaving soon," Leara walked toward the cave's opening. Her light dimmed to a dull glow. "I know my father, and in the evenings, he is not always in his quarters."

Clal walked beside Leara, "Well, Leara, you lead the way and we will follow you. If anything goes wrong," Clal paused, "we must stay together."

At that moment Leara's light went out. "Are we ready, Clal?"

"Are we ready?" He repeated.

"Remember your weapons," Rythe said, "though, I hope it will not come to that."

"I'm ready." Ansa had grabbed Clal's arm in the darkness. "Leara, you will give Hittle the coin?"

"Yes," She whispered, "Just follow and I will bring you to the place where I intend to hide while Hittle works his rogue bird magic."

Leara stepped forward and the small band began their journey to abduct the Kelvkorothian Crystal. The city was in front of them as they walked toward it. The castle was to their right, a direction they would soon be traveling. "Put on your guise, your hoods." Leara spoke quietly.

Clal, Ansa, and Rythe obeyed, pulling out their dark clothing to disguise their identity within the shadows of their garb. They passed the outer city then came in sight of the main gate. Leara took them out of earshot of the guards and continued walking parallel to the castle walls and further to the south end of the castle. They soon arrived at the place where Leara motioned for them to stop. There was a torch that was lit along the wall which looked like only another part of the castle wall, if it weren't for the clump of stones that gave away where Leara had mentioned. "See here," she looked at Hittle. "The guard is just over those stones there. Get him to move away from the door." Leara coaxed Hittle to hold the coin in his beak who obediently did so.

Then Ansa came up beside Leara and whispered. "Rogue bird, Hittle. Go be a rogue bird. Draw him away so that we can enter the castle unencumbered."

"Go!" Leara lifted her hand into the sky and the sparrow flew toward the stones.

There was silence for a bit but then Hittle could be seen hopping on the ground and the guard was following.

Hittle flew right up to the guard on one occasion then dropped the coin in front of him.

"Oh no. Did he not understand?" Leara jumped up but Clal held her arm.

"Watch. Just watch." Clal smiled. "Hittle is no ordinary sparrow."

The guard looked down then jumped as he recognized what Hittle had brought to him."

"What is this?" The small band could barely hear the guard. He stepped forward. "Can it be?"

"A gnullium piece." The guard rubbed his eyes. "A gnullium, indeed."

"The guard stepped forward again and leaned over to pick it up. But, before he could pick it up, Hittle quickly hopped over, snacked it up into his beak and flew a few feet away then dropped it again.

"Wait, you." The guard pulled out his sword and waved it in Hittle's direction. "You have no right coming here and playing your trick. That coin is worth much and...wait...why am I talking to a bird?," The guard scratched his chin. "He won't know what I mean. Why bother?"

Then the guard waved his sword at Hittle again, "No...I can talk to a rock about the weather if I so wanted to. Now let's have that coin"

The guard inched closer to Hittle who was watching him closely.

He picked up the coin once again then flew another ten feet. The guard followed without hesitation.

"It's working," Ansa whispered. "She smiled and clapped her hands together.

"Everyone at the ready?" Leara announced here gazed fixed on the guard and Hittle.

They moved further and further away, though, soon they would be coming back, Clal sensed.

"Go!" Leara said, "Quick, then to the right once we're in."

They ran as fast as they could, all together toward the castle door. The opening was small and the door was closed. Leara pushed on the door which easily swung open. There were no guards on the inside that they could detect.

As they passed through the door Leara led them to the right. Hittle whizzed past Clal's ear and flapped alongside Ansa. Leara took them into a room where they rested and could talk freely in secret.

"All right...," Leara was breathing fast and heavy, "Hittle...that bird...is..."

"He's never...been an or...dinary sparrow." Ansa was struggling to string her sentence together.

The room they were in was dimly lit with two candles, small, dusty, and dark.

"This is the library. There are only a few books we still have here." Leara pointed at a few shelves.

"What kind of books?" Ansa said curiously walking over to one of the shelves. She brushed her finger across one of the spines of the books. She read it, "The Fire of Kelvkoroth? Oh, this one sounds interesting."

"Some things my father did not tell you about Kelvkoroth. You'll find those things in there. Take it, Ansa." Leara said smiling. "No one ever reads them, and I know father has had our scribes record the histories of our people. Take it."

Ansa pulled the red book off the shelf and slipped it into her pack.

"Now," Leara leaned in as they all stood in a circle, "we will have to walk down the halls like we are only exploring, like I'm giving you the tour of the castle. I think that will work."

"Did we not already have a tour?" Rythe spoke, he was looking at some of the books on the shelves. "Where is the undercroft from here? And I thought castles had their own secret passageways. It would seem to be safer to travel through way of secrecy, would it not?"

"Yes," Leara said looking at Rythe, "it would." Her voice trailed off and she was suddenly thrust into a silent bout of thinking.

Clal looked over at her and wondered if she could guide them through the castle in a safer, more sure way. He did not want to chance being found. "The entire castle would go up in an uproar like the great flames of Kelvkoroth if we were to be found out by even one guard."

Leara leaned against one of the walls and put her hand to her chin. She looked up, then around the room. She walked over to one of the books and pulled it out. "No, not that one," she said to herself. "Which one was it?" she said.

"Was what?" Ansa walked to her side.

Leara paid her no heed and continued to pull on the books until she had pulled on all of the remaining books. "Where was it?" She whispered again.

"Leara, what are you looking for?" Clal walked over to her.

"Ansa, Clal, forgive me," she said. "I faintly remember a passageway in this very room. I was reminded that there is one here, but how to get to it..." She tapped her lip then walked to another corner of the small, dimly lit room.

There, in the corner of the room was one of two torches that lit the room. Leara's hand slowly reached out toward it. But instead of taking it out of its holder, she turned it to the right slightly. Then, she turned it to the left more than a quarter turn. Then, she turned it to the right again three quarters turn. A soft but unmistakable click was heard, then the wall which held the shelves of books turned to reveal a space just wide enough for them to squeeze through. They

filed in, Leara in front and Rytthe in the rear. The wall slid shut behind them and Leara's lavender flame led their way once more.

They walked for a short while, then Clal spoke up. "Our plan, we need a new plan." They continued to walk forward.

"The plan..." Ansa said, her voice echoing throughout awkwardly patterned stones from each side of the tunnel. "...is to find the room, the place where the Crystal is."

"But behind these walls there's no telling where it is." Clal whispered, touching the stones as he passed them.

"There is a way out of this tunnel, if we got in, though I don't remember...wait." Leara spoke as she turned left into another tunnel. "This is strange, I don't remember this tunnel!"

They walked in silence for a while then came to a dead end. "This must be the entrance to another room in the castle." Rytthe said. He started feeling the walls for a way to coax a sleepy opening to reveal an entry.

"Rytthe," Clal came up next to him. "We don't know what's on the other side or who might..."

"Clal, Rytthe, I hear something." They all went silent and Leara put out her light. Clal came close to the wall and put his ear up to it. He searched around with his finger for some draft of air. Crouching down, he found a cool draft almost at the bottom of the floor then pressed his ear to the crevice.

"Fendaln, I don't think..." Clal could tell that it was Lyluria's voice, "...because if he was...he would have already...you can't..."

"It matters not. Once they return...and then we will deal with the boy..."

Leara gasped.

"But as for now..." Fendaln's voice was cut off.

"No...this is wrong...he is the chosen one...know that he's the hope and..."

"Mother," Leara said, beginning to weep.

"I hear it too and it seems as though the Lord of Kelvkoroth has changed his plans." Rythe spoke quietly. "Time is now of the essence."

"Leara, I think we should be going now." Clal spoke gently, her quiet weeping still evident.

"Why, Clal? Why is my father acting this way?"

"He is a good man." Clal said smiling. "And your mother, she will help us."

The darkness was chased away by Leara's bright flame and she returned to the front, leading them back the way they came.

They came to the intersection of the two passageways where Leara stopped. "Is it straight or to the left?" She whispered to herself.

"Where might the undercroft room be from where we entered?" Ansa asked. "Where do you think we might be now?"

"Oh, I'm not so sure but I..." Leara started to say.

"*I am here, Seldinolum.*" Clal heard a voice suddenly. It was ever faint but he knew now the origin.

"Where?" Clal said aloud.

"Where what?" Ansa called to Clal who was standing in front of her."

"Oh," he combed his hand through his hair half smiling, "uh, I just...well, heard the Crystal again."

"Clal, what did it say this time?" Rythe walked closer to him.

"It told me..." Clal's voice trailed off as the voice came again.

"*Come to me.*" Seeshalar spoke, her voice like the wind upon the ear.

"Go...straight." Clal spoke firmly.

Leara began to walk again, this time at a more rapid pace. They had only gone a few yards when Clal heard Seeshalar speak once more, this time as clear as the sound of a castle bell.

"*Come, Clal. I will be found.*" She said.

"Yes, I can hear her. Her voice is getting louder, clearer." Clal said excitedly.

"That's good news," Ansa said. They continued to walk the long passageway. At a few points it turned then turned again. They reached another intersection. "Which way, Clal? Do you know which way?"

He had not heard or felt anything for a few minutes. "I don't know." He replied. "Does this mean we went too far or..."

Just then there was a sound far away down the dark passageway. "What was that?" Leara said, turning out her flame. They waited and listened. There were footsteps and they were getting closer. "Quick, follow me." Leara whispered. She brought her fire back though very dim, then turned and walked briskly down the passageway. They walked for several minutes, all were quiet, carefully placing each footstep upon the stone floor of the tunnel.

"I wait for you." Clal paused for a moment, almost colliding into Ansa who was behind him. *"Come, Seldinolum."* Seeshalar said.

Clal started touching the walls with both hands as he continued down the passageway. "We are close." He whispered. "We are surely close. Feel along the walls."

They continued to walk at a rapid pace, Clal hoping they would not be caught by the phantom intruder possibly behind them. Clal began to feel the presence of the Crystal as they continued. This time, he succumbed to its pull, its power. He knew that they were one in purpose and would soon be one in hand.

His hand scraped against one particular section of the tunnel and he felt an inscription or some indentation into the wall. Before he realized it, Clal pulled his necklace from his pack and slipped it over his head. It began to glow immediately which gave just enough light to make out the symbols. "Rythe, Ansa, Leara," He whispered. "I found something."

They walked over and saw that the symbol Clal felt with his fingers was the exact same symbol they had seen at the castle and in the Book of Legends. "It's the symbol of light," Clal said quietly, "Sun. Moon. Stars."

While all four of them huddled over the marking in the wall, Hittle on Ansa's shoulder, Clal noticed that a thin line began to illuminate which traveled for a few feet to the right and down from the marking. It ended where a small stone was present, the stone itself beginning to glow.

"Strange," Clal whispered. "It's almost as if..." Clal moved his hand to the stone, then he pushed on it with his thumb. They waited but nothing happened.

Leara lifted up her violet flame to the symbol then to the stone to get a better look. Suddenly, another line, this time appearing in the opposite direction, slowly came into view. It was symmetrically exact to the pattern that Clal revealed and was like viewing a mirror image of the mysterious illuminated line. Leara's side also ended in a glowing stone.

"What is this?" Rythe moved closer touching the two stones. He looked up at Clal, then turned to Learn. "Each of you, push a stone."

Without hesitation, Clal up his hand with his finger outstretched. Leara placed her flame into one of her hands then lifted the other to the glowing stone. When they were both touching the stones, Clal looked at Leara, Leara was already looking at Clal, then they both pushed the stones, acting in the same moment.

There was an immediate scraping sound, then the start of a dim light entered the dark tunnel. They waited until the door they had caused to open was completely ajar. Leara entered first, then Clal, then Ansa. Rythe paused, listening down the hall. Not hearing anything, he turned around and entered.

They walked into the lit room. The stone walls were a light orange. A few steps into the room revealed that this was where the

Crystal resided. There before him was Seeshalar. But how to obtain her?

"Bare me away, Seldinolum. Do not delay." Seeshalar demanded.

Clal walked up to the Crystal and was about to touch it when Leara came running up to him. "Never touch it, Clal. I forgot to tell you." Leara's voice was quiet but firm. "It will cause your hand to wither away. You must wrap it in cloth, any kind of cloth."

Rythe was watching Clal from the corner of the room. He pulled out a garment from his pack and came to Clal's side to offer it to him. "Take this." Rythe whispered to Clal. "You need your clothing more than I do."

Clal looked Rythe in the eyes and smiled. He took the clothing then leaned over to try to wrap the stone around it. The stone wouldn't budge, however.

Clal studied the scene more closely. The stone was set in some kind of casing lodged between two stones that held it on the top and the bottom. From where he was he could not see how to dislodge the crystal. "Rythe," Clal whispered. "Come look at this."

Rythe came to Clal's side, standing there looking at the Crystal. Rythe was only there a moment when he said, "You are going to need a key. That's the only way I see that they've secured the Crystal."

Clal turned to Leara, "Do you know of a key that is keeping this Crystal still?"

Leara slowly shook her head.

Ansa came over to join the rest of them near the Crystal. She looked at the Crystal then turned to Rythe. "What about the key that the guards use to open the door?"

"Right." Rythe smiled walking toward the door they entered earlier that day. "Fourteen stones from the floor and five stones" Rythe pointed with his hand first left then right, "to the right of the door when you look at it from this way."

"Go ahead." Leara said. "But be careful."

"And quiet." Ansa added.

Rythe walked over to the wall and counted five stones from the door on the bottom level of stones then counted fourteen stones up. He felt the mortar around the four sides of the stone then slid out his dagger, which was hanging from his side. He pressed the tip into part of the mortar then pushed the dagger's handle like a level, the stone started to budge, protruding slightly from the wall.

Clal could see beads of sweat beginning to form on Rythe's forehead. Surely Rythe knew that one wrong jostle from his hand would signal that someone was in the room and the guards would surely come quickly. The stone continued to slide from its place as Rythe continued to work it back and forth.

Ansa was looking intently, her hands and arms were raised to her waist and a painful look was on her face as she watched Rythe work the stone. At one point she looked at Clal, worried for what might happen.

Clal looked at Hittle on her shoulder, still and quiet. Somehow Hittle knew that silence was his only priority. Truly a remarkable creature, Clal thought.

Clal looked back and watched Rythe slide his dagger back into its sheath. He held the stone in his hand. And there, he spied the key. They had done it. Rythe took the key, set the stone on the ground close to the wall, then walked over to Clal whipping his brow with his sleeve.

"Clal, here," speaking as if out of breath. "I do not know where it goes but I believe this is what we need."

"Leara?" Clal motioned for her to come over to him. She took a few steps and was at his side. "Where do you think this is supposed to be used to release the Crystal?" He whispered.

She took the key from Clal, then walked over to where the Crystal was. Leara surveyed every inch of its surroundings, then turned to Clal. "I don't see anywhere that we can use this."

"I don't know why I expected this to be easy." Clal shook his head, then rested his forehead on his hand.

"This will work" Ansa put her hand on Clal's shoulder, "We've only just arrived." She bit her lip then instinctively put her hand to her pack by her side. "We have to try to think about this in a different way. For instance, who do you suppose put the stone there and by what means did they do it?"

"What about the way in which we entered," Rythe spoke.

Clal had since put his necklace back in his pack and Leara had extinguished her light. But at this moment, it was their only option. Clal retrieved the stone from his pack once again while Leara's flame appeared in her cupped hands.

"Hold it up to the Crystal," Clal said as they walked closer to the stone. Both Clal and Leara came close to the stone. Leara pressed her flame to the surface of the Crystal while Clal lifted his necklace away from his chest and touched the Crystal with blue, glowing stone in the center of the circular hoop.

"Clal," Rythe whispered, coming closer to them, "Ready the garment. We don't know what's going to happen." Clal looked at Rythe confused. Then Ansa, knowing her brother's thoughts, pulled the garment from Clal's pack and held it up to the Crystal.

It was a sight for one to see, the three of them huddled around the Crystal as the orange glow began to change from dark yellow to the brightest of lights.

"Cover your eyes." Rythe whispered loudly. "The light will blind you."

Then, a loud crack sounded. Clal jumped and yelled. Ansa screamed. Rythe pulled out his sword immediately.

The stone fell into the garment which Ansa was holding. Being heavy, Ansa began to fall toward the floor. Clal let go of his necklace catching the stone before it surely would have shattered on the stone beneath them.

Clal heard the guards shouting.

"Clal," Rythe said, running to Clal, "I still have the key." Rythe ran and grabbed the stone that he had dislodged. He knelt down, returned it to its place, then ran to the other wall where the entrance to the passageway was still open. "In here," he waved. "Hurry!"

Leara leapt toward the tunnel with her flame still lit. Ansa followed then Clal. Rythe dove into the darkness. Once inside the passageway, Clal and Leara pressed the glowing stones and the stone wall slid, then shut completely.

"That was close," Clal said. "We could have been..."

"Caught!" said the voice behind them.

Chapter 14: The Trap

"Mother!" Leara shouted, partly from the surprise of the appearance of her mother, but mostly from being startled in the darkness of the tunnel.

"What are you...?" Leara began to say.

"Fate," Lyluria smiled and hugged Leara. She pulled away and held both of Leara's shoulders. "Now, there isn't much time." She turned to Clal. "I presume you hold the Crystal in that clothing, do you not?" She whispered calmly.

"I do." Clal stood straight. "Though it's beginning to feel quite heavy." Rythe came over to Clal and lifted the stone into Clal's pack. Though heavy still, it was much easier to carry and was now concealed.

Lyluria continued. "Clal, I know that you are no thief. I trust that you've followed your path."

She turned again to her daughter, "Leara, your father has set a trap. And though I tried to persuade him otherwise," her eyes began to tear up, "he means to capture Clal knowing that Clal will attempt to dislodge the Crystal. He wants the Crystal for himself. He will not tell me why, though I fear the worst."

"Imforo?" Leara spoke plainly. "But he was banished."

"I suspect that your father is intent on being the steward that frees the people from this curse, once and for all." Lyluria spoke, and looking down, Clal realized that she also was holding a ball of flame, hers being golden yellow.

"Do you suppose that Imforo claims that he can remove the mountain by the powers of this Crystal?"

At that moment noises were coming from the room they had just. They could hear the guards yelling and the shuffling of feet. "I want every inch of this castle..."

Leara gasped. "Father!"

"Come," Lyluria rushed past them. They ran down the passageway as quickly as their whits would allow amid such dim light. Lyluria took them around a few turns and Clal noticed that they were no longer alone in the tunnels. There were sounds behind them and sounds in front of them. Clal was unable to decipher the distance or how many but it seemed as if they would soon be surrounded.

Just as Clal thought they were going to be found by their invisible assailants, they all stopped and Lyluria guided them out of the passageway into one of the many rooms of the castle.

Once all were in the large room, Lyluria turned around, closed the opening, then motioned for them to follow her once more.

The room was more than just a room, with a vaulted ceiling and polished floors, Clal knew this must be a room for guests, the great room. It too was dimly lit by torches though there were several more than needed since visitors were rarely, if ever, entertained Clal imagined.

Lyluria led them to the double door opening of the room. She opened one of the doors and it squeaked loudly as it swung on its hinges. She paused and Clal could see her eyes shifting back and forth as she watched for castle folk. She then leaned back, then turned to Leara.

"We are going to attempt to exit by way of the royal tunnel. It is the only way by which you can escape safely." Lyluria looked out of the crack from the opening of the door then said. "We must go down this hall then turn right. The second door on the left is where the tunnel is hidden. Its opening resides behind a wall. Only your father and I know its whereabouts."

She looked once more through the doorway, "Now!" She flung the door open then darted out of the room and down the hall, her long cloak and sashes swaying furiously as she ran.

The others followed her into the hall. Clal could see no guards, no people, no Fendaln. They were safe.

When they turned the corner, however, the scene was completely different than Clal would have ever expected. It seemed as though he had been suddenly thrust into a nightmarish scene.

Lyluria, Leara, and Ansa, were each firmly in the custody and firm grip of several castle guards. Fendaln was standing at the head of the army of guards and Clal and Rythe quickly unsheathed their swords. Clal heard running behind them and saw several archers come up at their rear, arrows knocked to the string.

Leara turned to Lyluria who was being held captive by the guard beside her, "Mother!" She said sobbing.

"Leara, I didn't know." Her mother said.

"I knew." Fendaln said quietly. He walked over to Lyluria. "I forgive you." He said simply. "We all try to follow what we think is the proper path for us." He paused, then said to the guard holding Lyluria, "Release her."

He then walked to stand beside Leara. He slipped the Dragon Summoner off of her head and slipped it over his own. "You won't be needing this now, Leara. I am sorry, but plans have changed."

"Father," she shrieked, "why are you doing this?" She tried to struggle free of the guard's grip, "You don't understand...the Crystal...it has to leave with Clal...tonight!"

"No!" he turned to face Leara. "It is mine. Mine alone!" The flames of Kelvkoroth burned within his eyes. "It is you who does not understand, and I do not have the time to inform you."

Fendaln turned to his guards, "Release Leara and the other girl."

The guard holding Ansa let go of his grip and Ansa fell upon the floor before Fendaln weeping.

"It might seem like ill fate that you are caught in my trap. Though, 'tis good fortune for me that you are here. For, I presume that you,

Clal, have the Crystal, a feat only the chosen one could have hoped to have managed. Of which I now require of you to relinquish."

Clal looked at Rythe who slightly shook his head. Clal looked back at Fendaln, "The stone, this Crystal, it's not yours. You are only a steward."

"Clal," Rythe whispered. "Careful."

Clal looked over at Rythe who was also holding a sword. He knew that this was the right path, to keep the stone somehow, but everything seemed to be closing in on them. Clal's head turned back to Fendaln. "Let us pass, Fendaln, please." Clal lowered his sword to his waist.

Fendaln laughed, not a cruel laugh but a laugh that made Clal think that he had truly not considered the option whatsoever.

"Clal, forgive me, but I do not think that I can grant such a request." He took a step closer as he slowly shook his head. "Only, give me my Crystal and I will grant your wish."

Clal studied Fendaln as he continued to creep closer. He raised his hand in the air, undoubtedly signaling to his armed men to be at the ready. Clal looked around searching for anything that would lend itself to the reckoning of their original plan. There had to be some way out of this. There was and Clal was going to find it.

He thought about the Crystal and about what had happened inside of the chamber. Then, he had an idea that could very well work.

"I thought that the chosen one would indeed look the part," Fendaln said, "would look as if he measured up to his grand task. But see here, a mere lad, destined to save Illia from the dark one lurking." Fendaln laughed again.

Clal touched his necklace that he was still wearing, the glow within the stone had all but gone out except for a small, blue section in the center that Clal could still discern. He slowly tapped his finger to it then to his pack where the Crystal was. He looked straight at

Leara once Fendaln had looked away then repeated the pattern, pointing to the necklace then to the Crystal. He then made a gesture of cupping his hands.

Leara looked confused for a moment then their eyes met and Clal knew that she understood.

"Your coming here was only a confirmation that I must act to bring my people to freedom's gate. I believed once that you could be the chosen one. But now I'm not so certain." Fendaln spoke as Clal tried to get Ansa's attention. Her head was down and she was still sobbing. Clal had to do something to get her attention. Leara must have been thinking the same thing because she turned in Ansa's direction.

"Ansa, are you okay," she whispered.

Ansa looked up then Leara immediately tilted her head in Clal's direction. Ansa looked at Clal who repeated the pattern again, necklace, Crystal, cupped hands.

Ansa looked back at Leara and Leara pointed to the guard who was still holding her tightly.

"Now, I have the means to free us." He stepped forward a few paces, much closer than Clal wanted. "And it is to the banished, the RISHK that I've turned for aid." Lyluria gasped then put her hand to her mouth, tears springing from her eyes.

Fendaln stepped closer then raised his hand higher, "Men!"

"Now!" Clal shouted.

Ansa jumped from her place, ran to Leara then jabbed her heel into the guard's foot.

"Ahhhhhh!" the guard yelled, releasing Leara.

Leara dashed to Clal's side who had the Crystal halfway unsheathed already. She thrust her flame into the Crystal's side while Clal pulled his necklace from his chest and touched the stone to the Crystal.

The Fendaln, the guards and archers were already moving, but the Crystal was lighting up even faster than before, as if it too was using all its power to battle for their escape.

Clal began to step forward. Only the others knew the secret and were already shielding their eyes from the light. Men began to scream, the guards began to flee. Only a few were still there, including Fendaln, struggling to find their way to the Crystal hoping to apprehend Clal. But to no avail. Clal had moved past the guards, grabbed Ansa and was halfway to the second door that Lyluria mentioned would be their escape route.

Clal, Leara and Ansa entered the room, the light still brilliant. Rythe ran in behind them. He shut the door and bared it with his body.

"Hurry!" Lyluria spoke in a weepy tone. "You must hurry!"

"Open! By order of the Lord of Kelvkoroth!" The guards were banging on the door and soon they would strike it down into splinters of wood.

"Mother, I fear for you." Leara said tears streaming down her cheeks. She inched toward the opening in the wall that Lyluria had just opened. "Come with us."

"Do not fear for me." She touched her daughter's face. "I fear for your father more than anything."

"Lyluria!" Fendaln yelled. "You betray me."

Lyluria looked at the door then back at Leara and the others. "Go!" she said through gritted teeth.

Leara hugged her mother. "Be well," she said.

"Be well, my daughter." She kissed her forehead. "Until we meet again my daughter."

Leara looked up then turned and approached the tunnel. The opening was thin and tall, barely opened wide enough for her to struggle then slip through disappearing into the darkness.

Clal ran to Lyluria and grabbed her hands, "Thank you. I will watch over her."

"I know you will, Clal." Lyluria smiled. Then Clal turned, ran to the crevice, then squeezed through entering the tunnel.

Ansa smiled at Lyluria then followed Clal through the narrow opening.

Last of all, Rythe jumped from the door over to the opening. He struggled but couldn't squeeze through. Lyluria ran to the door, baring herself against it.

"It's not working!" he said. "How do I...?" Rythe moved back and forth, wedging himself further and further in.

"It's no use!" another voice said, "You are trapped! Surrender!"

"I am trapped!" Rythe said. He paused, looked at the opening, bent down slightly then fell into the darkness.

The opening shut and they were sealed within another dark passageway.

"Run!" Clal said.

They ran by the light of a lavender flame as the floor drew them up toward the Illian world above.

Chapter 15: The Dragon Summoner

For a long while all that was heard was the pounding of footsteps and the belabored breathing of four fortunate crusaders. Leara kept a steady pace and her light was even brighter than before as it bobbed up and down casting a moving light upon the passageway that sometimes fooled Clal's eyes.

The burden of the Crystal was beginning to become overbearing as Clal tried to steady his pack while he ran. Rythe noticed Clal struggling and said, in between gasps. "Clal I...can take...the Crystal."

Without hesitating, Clal pulled his pack from his back then, handing it over to Rythe, started to pull the necklace from his neck.

"I'll...put that...in...my..." Rythe started, then Clal nodded.

"Yes," Clal said.

With the burden now on Rythe who was much taller and stronger than he, Clal could easily keep up with Ansa, who seemed as if she was running on air hardly making an effort to stay close to Leara.

The tunnel widened into more of what Clal imagined a cave would be like and the air became less heavy.

Leara's voice was suddenly saying something. "Do you feel that?" Clal thought he heard her say. "The air," Leara said again. "It feels wonderful!"

They slowed down and Leara stopped running. Clal didn't press them to continue since he did not doubt that the guards could not pursue them. The light, Clal guessed, may have blinded them for hours.

"The air," Leara placed the ball of flame in one hand, then she stretched her other arm out and waved it around. "The air is so light."

Hittle launched himself into the air from Ansa's shoulder then flew in circles above Leara chattering away.

"I've never felt anything like it." She moved around walking from one side of the cave to the other.

Clal turned to Rythe and whispered, "Can you imagine what she's going to do when we are above ground?" Clal smiled. What an incredible feeling it must be to have once lived beneath the ground, then to begin to experience the wonders of the world above. Clal looked at Leara who was smiling from pointed ear to pointed ear.

She grabbed her clothing on her side then looked down suddenly, "It's gone! The Dragon Summoner!" She looked at Clal her face full of horror.

"Your father, remember?" Clal said softly.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Oh, no," she covered her mouth with both hands.

"Wait," Rythe walked forward. "I...retrieved it."

Leara gasped.

"How?" Ansa said as Hittle rested on her outstretched hand.

"During the light, your father was stunned, Leara." He said, trying to carefully choose his words. "As I ran past him to the door I took my sword and cut the cord that held it to his neck." He then said, "he did not flinch and neither of us received harm."

Rythe handed the white horn to Leara. "I have no pack to carry it."

Rythe looked at Leara for a moment, pulled the horn from her, tied the cord together then pushed it back into her hand. "Good as new," he smiled slightly then turned and resumed his place at the rear.

Satisfied, Leara cupped both hands with the flame once more then turning to the others said, "We have more to travel before we're out of this dark tunnel." Then she turned, trotted, then her trot turned into a run, this time, at a more bearable pace.

As the cave grew wider the air grew sweeter. A familiar feeling and smell began to return to Clal a feeling is seemed as though he had not felt in ages.

Clal, realizing that no guard could fit through the crevice that served as the entrance from the castle room, he suggested that they walk for a while. "I'm certain we are safe now," he told them.

There was an occasional turn now and then, but Clal detected no off shoots from the cave's walls. They continued to walk, the cave now wide enough to walk two by two.

Clal walked next to Leara. He stole a glance at the flame that she was holding. He'd never noticed it before but at the base and in the center was a white flame that fed the rest of the flame that made up the ball.

"How old were you when you made your first flame," Clal asked as they walked.

Leara giggled, then started to laugh. "I don't know exactly," she could hardly speak. Clal was intrigued.

"What is it?" he approached her.

"It's just that," she smiled and chuckled, "my Mother told me that, when it happened, the first time, it was such a surprise that my father nearly toppled over. And she just laughed. Can you imagine?" She started laughing again.

"Well," Clal smiled, "that would be a surprise!" He leaned over looking at the flame. "How...do you do it? What does it feel like?"

Clal looked into the flame, it's purple light swirled and flickered as if it was a real fire, but with more fluid motion.

Leara's eyes turned to the flame then out in front of her. She paused then turned to Clal. "During my training, fire wielding, I was taught to bring all within me to the rear, behind me," she flipped her head, her long brown hair sweeping the air, "to hold in my heart the one thing that brings me the greatest joy." She turned toward the flame again then said, "Then, to grow that joy, focusing on the

smallest point possible." She smiled, laughed nervously then said. "It's difficult to describe."

Clal smiled, "That's...fascinating."

"It took a long time for me to work up to producing a ball of flame this size, and I chose the color." She smiled wider, "This isn't the only flame I can produce." She looked at Clal.

Clal's jaw dropped.

"There's a flame that I've only used once, that I wasn't taught." They continued to walk through the cave and Clal noticed a light far in front of them. They were almost out of the cave.

"It was in a moment when I was in a dire need, and it protected me." She looked ahead, and Clal wondered whether she was imagining that moment again.

"And your thought," Clal looked at her, heaving his pack tighter against himself, "the one that brings you the greatest joy." He smiled. "What is it?"

She looked away for a moment, "I've never told anyone before." She looked back at Clal. "It's silly, really."

They continued to walk in silence, Clal deciding not to press the issue. He wondered if it could be a memory with her mother or a dream she once had.

"It's my ears," Leara finally said. "My elf ears, I've always loved them."

Clal looked at Leara. She was looking at Clal. "Your ears are beautiful." Clal spoke honestly. "Can I touch your ear?" He surprised himself having just spoken his secret thoughts.

"Yes, you may." She said smiling.

Before he knew it he extended his arm and gently touched the tip of her right ear, then down the back.

Leara looked up at him, then looked away.

"Remarkable," was all that Clal could think to say.

They were silent for a while when Ansa came up behind them. "Clal," she said, "I was thinking. When we get out of this cave and above ground, perhaps we should open up The Book of Legends again. Maybe it will help us."

Clal nodded. "I think that is a good idea." He smiled, "I don't know what I'd do without you, Ansa." He grabbed her and held her close as they walked beside each other.

"You'd be lost without me, I just know it!" She laughed and wrapped her arm around Clal's neck.

Clal turned to look behind at Rytne who was stone faced as he rubbed his chin. Clal slowed down then came up to Rytne. "There's something bothering you, isn't there." Clal said.

"Not really," he said plainly. "It's just that as long as you have that Crystal, there will be nothing but trouble that comes with it. Do you know what to do with it?"

Clal thought back to what they've learned and read thus far about the Crystal. He thought of what Gulnerye had spoken about, how the RISHK were seeking it. He knew that Felsawn had sensed its change when it was found. But, he could not remember what they were to do once the Crystal was obtained. "I do not know, Rytne." he looked at Leara walking in front of him. He spied the horn that hung just below her right arm and was jostling back and forth. "Perhaps the dragon will know."

"Perhaps the dragon *will* know." Rytne nodded. "He must know."

They continued to walk as the cave drew them upward and the opening was fast approaching. Clal looked at Ansa as he walked and noticed that Hittle had tucked his head under one wing. Leara's lavender light glowed against the cave walls and the earthen floor. He thought about her flame and what it meant to her. Then, he stole a glance at her elf ear, her brown hair tucked behind it, and cherished the thought of it.

They soon approached the opening where Leara stopped and looked out. They were silent, Clal, Ansa, and Rythe watching Leara as she slowly stepped from the opening onto the first patch of grass her foot had ever pressed upon. The moon was full and cast its bright light over the hillside and forest to their right. The wind was blowing softly and the stars were innumerable, shimmering in the endless sky above them.

"And to think, all of this was there..." She sat down on the ground as her flame diminished to nothing.

Ansa sat beside her, "It is beautiful."

"It's more than beautiful." Leara smiled looking at the moon then to the horizon. "It's real magic. The only true magic that means anything." She looked at Ansa, "And you live here under and around all this...every day?"

"Most of the time," Ansa giggled, "unless we're galavanting around in tunnels or traveling through secret kingdoms which we've been doing quite a lot of as of late."

"I'll never forget this moment, as long as I live." Leara said, touching the grass beside her. She stood up, then offered her hand to Ansa. Ansa took Leara's hand and Leara lifted her up from sitting. "I fear for my mother, and for my father." She said, her gaze spanning all of them. "Though, I am happy that we made it, considering how I thought we were done for."

"It was the Crystal..." Clal started to say.

"It was you, Clal." Rythe said. They were now beginning to walk slowly through the grass up a small hill. "To think that what happened inside of the Crystal's chamber could be repeated to our great advantage. That was brilliant." He turned and smiled at Ansa. "And Ansa..."

"My foot still throbs, but I'm glad the guard...well...I'm just glad it worked." She winked at Rythe.

"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."

Leara 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?" Leara 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."

They settled down on the floor of the forest. Clal used his pack to elevate his head above the ground as did the others. Then he saw that Leara had no pack, only the dragon summoner. "Leara," Clal said, handing his pack to her. "Rest your head on it," He said then smiled.

She took it, smiled back, then laid down and closed her eyes.

"Sleep well," Ansa said giggling. She looked at Leara then back at Clal then laid down and closed her eyes.

Rythe then Clal settled in, and they all were still in moments.

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. Leara was stirring. He watched her shield her eyes with her arm. "Clal it's bright."

"It's the sunrise, Leara." 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 Leara 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 Leara as she took off the white horn. The white dragon carved so delicately seemed almost to come to life. Leara 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 Leara 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?" Leara 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. Leara 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."

Leara 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, its 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 Leara 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 Leara 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.

"Leara 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 Leara 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.

"Leara," 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." Leara 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 Leara's entire hand. Then suddenly it jumped from Leara 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.

"Leara, 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." Rytthe 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 Leara 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 Leara, "Should we try it?"

Leara 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 Leara 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.

Leara and Clal were silent as from their hands an almost identical light appeared. Leara'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 Leara had stepped back once the flame and blue glow began to function independent of Clal and Leara'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 Leara. "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 Leara 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. Leara 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 Leara set theirs beside the other two, then Ansa stepped back and Leara crossed over to kneel beside Clal again.

"Again," Clal said, looking at Leara. 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, Leara picked up one, then Rythe grabbed an oar, tried bending it, then satisfied, brought the other oar to the boat and set it inside. Leara 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 Leara 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?" Leara 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 Leara, "If only there was a way *through* the waves and not over them."

Leara looked at him for a moment.

"Clal?" Ansa said from behind Leara. "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.

Leara 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," Leara 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.

Leara stood up then walked back to her position as the others were at the ready to pull again. Leara 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, Leara, 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, Leara 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." Rythe 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 Leara. 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." Rythe 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.

Leara 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. Rythe 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 Leara, 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. Leara 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 Leara 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 Leara 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 Leara. 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," Leara 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 Leara 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 yesterage. 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 Neiolus, was brought into the king's 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 Leara 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, Clal felt something crash into his side sending him off Sedrak's back, unconscious and plummeting fast toward the open jaws of the deep that awaited him below.

Chapter 18: Taken

As Clal was sent toward the sea a great wave swelled then swallowed Clal into the raging deep. Sedrak had followed him downward then plunged into the waters. For a moment, they had disappeared from sight, completely submerged and engulfed as the blackness of night engulfed them and no light would be found below the surface.

A rumbling, booming sound was rising from within the ocean. Then, an explosion of water and mist protruded from the surface, Sedrak held a dangling Clal in the talons of his leathery hands as the dragon's great wings pushed them higher, away from the clutches of the sea.

"Clal," Sedrak said, shaking him, "You must awake. Clal!" Sedrak swung his great head to the left then to the right. He looked below, then above. The darkness veiled whatever threat had sent Clal falling from off his shoulders.

"Uh, Sedrak?" Clal slowly opened his eyes. "Ah! Please don't drop me."

Clal looked around him. He was no longer on Sedrak's back but surprised to be in the clutches of Sedrak's claws.

"What happened, Sedrak?"

Before Sedrak could answer, a voice from above sounded. A man had appeared and was now standing where Clal had sat moments ago on Sedrak's back.

"The chosen one. The defeated. Clal Winden, son of Dalbus from the valley of Lyrune." The man spat.

"Sedrak, who is the voice?" Clal said.

"Krothwing!"

"The RISHK!" Clal announced.

Sedrak shrieked, then pulled Clal to his chest spinning downward through the sky.

Krothwing jumped from Sedrak's back, hovering in the air for a moment, then dove after them.

Sedrak was flying toward the lights on the shore when suddenly, Krothwing appeared in front of them, low and near Clal.

"Tonight, you will meet your death, Seldinolum."

Clal could only see by the bright moon that hung in the sky, but he knew that Krothwing wore a wry smile by the sound of his voice.

"We fly!" Sedrak thrust his wings downward, lifted them up then made the rest of the journey to the shore a short stint to escape Krothwing and his empty threats.

There on the shore Clal was set down on his back by Sedrak. Call stood on his feet and surveyed the carnage.

Tall flames rose from the pile that must have once been the boat and oars. The flickering flames revealed a tall man circling three figures that appeared to be Ansa, Leara, and Rythe, who were tied to a post. Then Krothwing flew in from the darkness and walked upon the shore to the other man. He leaned in and spoke something in his ear, then pointed in Clal's direction.

Immediately, Ansa turned toward Clal and yelled his name. The others looked toward them. It was a sorrowful scene to witness and Clal felt helpless to help them. Though, Clal was certain that among the RISHK there could be no match, no equal to Sedrak. The circumstances seemed dire, nonetheless.

With no sword and no way to defend himself, Clal settled on the fact that with a little wit and a lot of dragon, they could devise a plan to gain their advantage by degrees.

"Sedrak!" Clal said, walking over to his large head. "Should we not free the others first? We will need their help."

Sedrak nodded then crouched down, readying himself for Clal to mount again. This time, however, Clal was a bit timid. He rubbed his ribs while he climbed onto Sedrak's shoulders.

Sedrak rapidly rose into the sky as he flapped his wings. Then, directing his sight toward the others on the shore, Sedrak dove, sending Clal almost off his back again.

They sailed toward Ansa, Leara, and Rytthe who were tied up. Leara wore a hooded cloak which covered her head and Ansa and Rytthe appeared as they had when he last saw them, only dryer.

Sedrak was reeling toward the three, stretched out his arm then snatched the post from the sand which turned out to be one of the oars. Clal heard Sedrak screech as a warm air passed over his exposed neck.

"Imforo!" Sedrak exclaimed. "Banished from Kelvkoroth." Sedrak swung back around for another assault. "He carries the flame."

Swooping in again, Sedrak dove low, skimming the water then curving to attack Imforo. Sedrak opened his mouth and sent a shower of razor sharp ice toward Imforo. As quick as lightning, Imforo produced a large ball of flames which sent the ice away from him as water hissed and spread in all directions.

"Hahahaha!" Imforo laughed as he looked up into the sky. "Strong is fire. Weak is ice." Imforo sent another ball of flames toward Sedrak and Clal. Sedrak dodged it then Clal heard something behind him.

He jumped up, caught his balance. First he saw nothing, then, Krothwing walked toward him as he walked atop Sedrak's spiny back.

"Your weapons," Krothwing said pointing into the ocean's dark waves, "are down there. The clothes Gwen gave you and the scrolls from your mother" He pointed at the flames on the shore, "have perished." Krothwing smiled, then his face went as still as a statue. "The book...it neither burned nor succumbed to the ocean's touch." He folded his arms and leaned on an imaginary surface. "And so, we shall keep it, until we find our own method to employ for its destruction."

Clal smiled back, "You cannot destroy that which is indestructible." Clal stepped toward Krothwing trying to think of something to say that would cause the greatest pain to Krothwing. "Wherever you go and whatever you do, you will never escape the person you could have been."

"We will bring you down." Krothwing said as he leapt toward Clal with such swiftness that Clal was struck off balance. Sedrak was eyeing the two of them and turned slightly, helping Clal get back on two feet.

"Hold on, Clal!" Sedrak called out, "I am bringing you down to the shore."

Clal jumped toward a few of Sedrak's spiny and wrapped his arms around one of them just before Sedrak dove once more toward the sandy shore.

The moon was at the horizon and would soon veil her light from them. At least Lear's flame could keep enough light for them to ward off the RISHK, but what was to be done with these two renegades. Clal did not want to inflict the wounds of death upon them. And his sword, was it truly submerged beneath the surface of water again, hidden, never to be found?

Clal watched as the shore rapidly approached. Sedrak landed on the shore. Clal jumped off, then Sedrak took to flight again. The flames of the boat had been reduced to coals and Ansa, Leara, and Rythe were still tied up. Sedrak had flown to the other side of the shore where Imforo's attention was being drawn away by Sedrak's taunting.

Krothwing had followed Sedrak, for reasons that Clal did not understand. However, he knew that time was of the essence and that he must act quickly.

Clal crawled close to where the others were and then whispered. "Tell me everything."

Immediately Ansa yelled, "Clal, they've set a trap...we are the trap. You must..." But it was too late. In front of Clal, a tall, thin man materialized. He reached for Clal but Clal dodged him.

But as Clal turned he saw a giant of a man rush toward him from the cover of the trees off the shore. He rammed into Clal and pinned him to the ground. The other man tied Clal's arms and legs then threw Clal over by the others. Clal could barely breath and his head felt like a swarm of bees were spinning inside of it. He looked at Leara who faded away then closed his eyes and succumbed to the blackness that overshadowed him.

"Clal, Clal," a voice was whispering. "Clal, you have to wake up. Clal, do you hear my words?"

Clal opened his eyes, the world around him blurry and indistinguishable at first. He was lying on the sand, the darkness of night had overshadowed the scene. There was no light but the stars above and the golden glow of the coals nearby.

"They are here...well...over there somewhere at the moment." Ansa said. "The RISHK, they are all here."

"No," Rythe's voice came from the darkness, "all but one has come. Hanone Thane, their master, has left his dirty work for his minions. He is not here, though I'm sure he would like to see you Clal." Rythe paused, "He thinks you're weak and that the other four can snuff you out. The Clal I know cannot so easily be defeated..."

"Besides, he has the very best companions by his side." Ansa whispered.

"That is what has made all the difference." Clal said smiling.

"We are together again," Leara said, finding Clal's hand in the darkness. She was trembling.

"I know it seems impossible now, but there is a way, we just have to work together to find out what we all are capable of." Clal said, now sitting up.

"I think he broke my rib." Clal let out a slow exhale then he moaned.

"So...ouch" Clal leaned over toward them, "I think they underestimate us. But while they are scheming over there, we can come up with a better plan over here."

"Clal, they took everything. Our weapons, our extra clothes, the book, and now, your signaling horn and your stone." Ansa said.

Clal reached up to his chest. All he felt was the coarse material of his shirt. He balled his hand into a fist and pounded the sand. "No!" he whispered to himself. "How could I let this happen?"

"But Clal, there is one thing that they did not get?" Leara said, "The Crystal. Rythe insisted that we hide it once we returned to shore. When you didn't return for a long while we knew you had found and gotten through the secret door so we trusted you to your own path and we returned from the raging winds and waves."

"Once we arrived at the shore I jumped out of the boat and quickly buried the Crystal in the sand. Then Krothwing came followed by Imforo and we were caught." Rythe's voice became but a whisper, "They know we have the Crystal. That is the only reason why I believe we are still alive. This is our anchor, if you will."

"We must never let them find it." Clal shook his head. "We have to find a way to salvage whatever we can that is ours, retrieve the crystal, then for all four of us mount Sedrak and ride to the place where the Crystal must be placed."

"Sedrak?" Ansa said, "Is that the white dragon?"

"Yes," Clal smiled, "Sedrak showed me Hanone, the place where we used to live before our people populated Illia. And he spoke to me of my path and my destiny, *our* destiny." Clal paused then sighed. "For I cannot do this alone." Then Clal remembered. "And Hittle?"

Ansa burst into tears. "Clal..." she said as she sobbed, "It was awful." She sniffled, "He had no chance. Once Imforo saw him he

threw a ball of flames in his direction and we haven't seen him since."

"He's alive, Ansa" Clal whispered, "We will not leave this place until he is with us."

"Okay." Ansa sniffled again. "Thank you, Clal."

Clal winced again from the pain at his side. He couldn't breathe very deeply. He didn't know what to do next but he knew they had to work out some way to find an advantage over their foes. Then Clal had an idea.

"Leara?" He said, "Do they know you are from Kelvkoroth and that you wield the flame?"

"No." she said in a soft tone, "At least, I don't think they do. But Clal..."

"Then we can use that to our advantage and..."

"Clal, I..." Leara started to tell him.

"...find some way..."

"Clal," Leara said harshly, "my powers are gone."

"Gone?" Clal turned to where he heard her voice come from in the dark. "For good?"

"I don't know. I...don't know why but I can't produce a flame." Leara sighed. "When we need it most, I've failed you."

Clal leaned forward then sat up again. He shook his head back and forth and grit his teeth.

"I think..." Rythe began, "I think I may have the beginnings of a plan. Whatever we have with us to get ourselves out of the trap we've found ourselves in, we have one thing that these servants of evil do not, and that is a noble cause that we are fighting for."

Rythe's words rang in Clal's ears. If ever the lot of them needed those words, this was the time for them to hear them.

"With Sedrak as our guide, a massive beast who can launch an assault on the RISHK merely on his own, surely, if we can make contact with him again, we can work together to ward off these men

so that we can get the Crystal," Rythe paused, "and Hittle, and our belongings and rid ourselves of the RISHK...at least for now."

"What is your plan then, Rythe?" Ansa whispered.

"There is but one plan," a voice hissed from the darkness. "You will give us the Crystal and we may spare your lives." Imforo lit up his face with his flame, "Where is it?"

"What Crystal?" Clal said.

"Leara," he paused, "Fendaln told me of your treachery, that you were with this, so called, chosen one, and that the Crystal of Fire was among you."

Leara cupped her hand over her mouth and Clal watched tears begin to stream down her cheeks.

"So I ask again, where...is the Crystal?" Imforo broadened the ball of fire and the heat began to rise.

Rentharr, Krothwing, and Skeldruc stepped from the darkness and formed a circle around them.

Clal looked into the sky wondering where Sedrak was. Their plight seemed to be getting more desperate and Clal still did not have the means to move to a point of advantage over the RISHK. He wondered what Rythe's plan might have been.

"You are correct, Imforo, we do have the Crystal." Leara spoke slowly. "But it is not mine to give, not any of us can give it to you. It chooses its master."

As soon as Leara spoke the words, Clal had an idea.

"Leara, I think Imforo is right." Clal spoke. "We have no other choice but to surrender the Crystal over."

By the light of the flame Clal could see the reactions of the others. It was painful but he knew that this was their own way out of the clutches of the RISHK.

"Rythe, will you show them where the Crystal is now?" Clal said. Rythe looked over at Clal with a stone face. Clal nodded and winked.

Clal looked around him at the faces of the RISHK. "Please spare us. Will you not spare our lives for the price of giving to you the Crystal of Fire?"

"Show us the Crystal." Renthar stepped toward Rythe and thrust his large hand into Rythe's side. Rythe flinched from the pain of Renthar's harsh treatment as he lifted Rythe up from the ground. Still tied up, Rythe hobbled over to the place where he he'd hidden the Crystal. "I need more light," he said, having moved beyond the light of Imforo's flame.

Imforo rolled his eyes then marched over to Rythe's side and bore his light in front of his footsteps. "It's up the shore a ways." Rythe said.

"Get on, lad!" Imforo growled. "The Crystal, where did you hide it?"

Rythe pointed then Imforo grabbed Rythe's arm and shoved him along. Imforo turned his head and shouted, "Skeldruc, bring the sack." Imforo waved for him to join them.

"The sack?" Clal whispered to himself. This could ruin the plan.

Clal watched as Rythe led Imforo and now Skeldruc through the sand further down the shore. They stopped, then Rythe began to dig with his hands. He soon held the Crystal in his hands then looked at Clal.

Clal nodded to Rythe and their eyes met. Clal sensed that Rythe understood what he was about to do which gave Clal some level of comfort.

"All right Rythe," Clal called, still sitting tied up beside Ansa and Leara, "Give the Crystal to Imforo."

Rythe stood up with the Crystal in his hands, still bound by the wrists with the crude rope of the RISHK. Skeldruc inched toward Rythe as he opened the sack. Just as he was about to slide the sack over the Crystal, Rythe lifted the Crystal high above his head then thrust the great stone directly toward Imforo's chest.

By instinct, Imforo reached out his hands to catch it. Imforo stumbled backwards. Hissing sounds and a black smoke erupted from Imforo's hands the moment his skin touched the stone. He shrieked and fell to the sand.

Rythe leapt toward the stunned Imforo grabbing the dagger at his side and cutting the bands at his feet. Skeldruc tried to retrieve the Crystal but Rythe grabbed it first. "Sedrak!" Rythe yelled into the sky as Skeldruc chased him further down the shore.

Clal jumped up, "Follow me!" He said to Ansa and Leara.

"You're staying right here!" Renthar growled, reaching for Clal with his large hand. But, Clal dodged him, then grabbed Renthar's arm and pulled him further downward. Renthar, who was caught off balance, toppled over in front of Clal.

Rythe, having given Clal an idea, looked for Renthar's dagger. Before Renthar could regain his stance, Clal had pulled out his dagger, escaping as fast as his tied up ankles could carry him.

Krothwing jumped into the air toward Clal. But, Sedrak's timely return as he swooped down surprised Krothwing. Sedrak sunk his talons into Krothwing's back and drove him deep into the sand.

"Sedrak! Rythe!" Clal yelled. Then, as if Sedrak was already on his way he turned in the air and flew to rescue Rythe.

Clal bent down and cut the ropes at his ankles. He threw down the dagger on the sand then rubbed it against the ropes until they fell from his wrists.

By this time, Renthar had recovered and was running through the shallow ocean water toward him. Krothwing, airborne once again, was flying at Renthar's side. Clal glanced over at Ansa and Leara who were now alone but still bound. Clal cocked his head and mouthed the words, "Go," motioning for them to hide in the thick of the trees beyond the gray sands. But, Ansa slowly shook her head signally that they too were there to fight.

Clal's lips tightened, he squinted then threw the dagger toward where Ansa and Leara were tied up. It landed on the ground in an explosion of sand and Ansa immediately lurched toward it.

Clal turned and ran away from the onslaught of Rentharr and Krothwing. But, Krothwing was upon him in moments. He barreled into Clal sending him into the ground, sand filling his eyes and mouth. He heard Krothwing unsheathe a weapon which gave Clal the motivation to leap up and run once more.

This time he ran toward the ocean knowing that he needed to clean out the sand and regain his sight. But, once again Krothwing attacked and sent Clal downward.

Sedrakk had sped toward Rythe and threw down Skeldrur before swooping to pick up Rythe with one of his hands.

"Sedrakk!" Rythe said, holding the Crystal close to his chest. "The RISHK are no match for the lot of us."

Sedrakk looked down at Rythe and smiled. "Sometimes..." Sedrakk said as he turned and flapped his wings, "...the truth is what we make it, and this is a battle we were meant to win."

Sedrakk held Rythe up against his shoulder. Rythe climbed on and sat holding on as Sedrakk dove toward Rentharr and Krothwing who were tying up Clal further up the shore.

The sky was beginning to lighten and the sunrise now would soon be imminent. Rythe was surprised to see Ansa and Leara unbound and standing on their feet running toward Clal. Imforo wasn't far behind them. He thrust another ball of flame toward Sedrakk which missed and hissed as it sank into the ocean.

Sedrakk, instead of coming to Clal's aid, swooped down and grabbed Ansa and Leara with each of his massive hands.

"We have to get you to a safe place." Sedrakk told them.

"What of Clal?" Leara said.

Sedrak responded by diving toward Rentharr and Krothwing then swinging his great dragon tail around, sending both flying through the air and into the sand several feet away.

Sedrak landed next to Clal then Ansa, Rythe, and Leara all pulled Clal up onto Sedrak while the rest of them climbed on Sedrak. Sedrak leapt into the air just before Krothwing dove in below him.

Imforo and Skeldruc had joined each other and were now running toward Rentharr. Krothwing continued to follow Sedrak through the air like an angry hornet.

Rythe cut the half tied ropes once again around Clal's ankles which allowed Clal to saddle Sedrak along with the others. He nodded at Rythe then looked back at Ansa and Leara.

"Are you all right you two?" Clal called back.

"I'm all right, Clal." Ansa spoke softly. "I don't want to see those men anymore. However, we must get the Book of Legends back..."

"And your sword, and the dragon summoner," Leara said.

"We could leave, now." Rythe looked around toward the East. "We have the Crystal. And we're together."

"Hittle!" Ansa said pointing out into the endless azure sky.

They turned, and there, flapping toward them, was Hittle, though, it wasn't quite him. His flight pattern was irregular. He flew closer then landed in front of where Ansa was sitting upon Sedrak's back.

"Clal, look," Ansa reached out her hand and touched Hittle. "His wing...he's hurt."

"Gulnerye," Sedrak spoke, "is a bird tamer, but is also a healer. He will take care of him till mended."

Ansa looked at Hittle. He too had suffered from their encounter with the RISHK.

Krothwing was still behind them and Sedrak continued to fly further and further from him.

"Sedrak," Clal called out, "do you think we can return to retrieve some of our belongings that were taken from us?"

"The Book of Legends that Gulnerye wrote." Ansa said loudly over the wind.

"The dragon summoner..." Leara shouted, "...and Clal, what about your sword and necklace?"

By this time Krothwing had joined the others on the shore. Clal knew they needed the three items that they had decided to go back for but was it folly. Should they not leave? They were safe. They were unscathed, for the most part. But how could they leave the very things that had brought them so far and would surely need?

"Sedrak," Clal leaned over his shoulders. "Can you bring me close to that small pile and somehow distract the RISHK? I am going to get what's ours."

Sedrak nodded then hurled through the air at the RISHK who were standing in the morning sunrise light upon the shore.

As Sedrak approached Krothwing took to flight again. Imforo sent another ball of fire into the air which passed over Sedrak's tale. Sedrak groaned then rammed into the remaining three sending them sliding in a shower of sand.

Clal jumped off of Sedrak's back. He ran to them, scooped up the dragon summoner, the necklace and the Book of Legends. Only Renthar and Imforo had run to assault Clal, Skeldruc lay motionless in the sand.

Imforo sent another ball of fire, this time directed at Clal. But, before it reached him another ball, brighter and larger, intercepted and decapitated Imforo's fiery weapon.

Clal looked behind him then up into the air. Sedrak was hovering over the ocean. Leara stood on Sedrak's back and Clal watched as she threw another ball of fire toward the RISHK.

Clal smiled then turned and ran as Sedrak swooped down, Clal leaping on his back. He slipped then slid down from Sedrak's shoulders but Leara reached out and caught Clal before he met further danger.

"Your flame..." Clal started.

"...I found it again." Leara smiled.

"Where was it?" Clal inched closer to her.

"It had gone away..." Leara leaned toward Clal, "...then came back."

"And my sword?" Clal asked her, "Where did they drop our weapons?"

Leara looked out at the sea then to the shore. "It must have been somewhere..." She rubbed her finger across her ear. "Oh, Clal, I don't think I can remember." She turned to look behind her.

"Ansa! Rythe! Where do you think Clal's sword could be?"

Sedrak circled in the air as the others were discussing what they remembered about where they thought the weapons might have been deposited.

"I remember Krothwing using one of our sacks to put the weapons into. I don't know that I ever saw Clal's sword in there, however."

This was strange. Perhaps the RISHK couldn't part with it. Indeed it was a rare treasure. Clal was determined to find it.

"I have to find it. My sword must be with the RISHK on the shore." He climbed up and once again sat upon Sedrak's shoulders.

"Sedrak, we must return." Clal announced.

Clal turned to Rythe, "Rythe, give the Crystal to Sedrak? We have some unfinished business with these RISHK."

Rythe cocked his head for a moment then blinked several times. "But, Clal, your sword..."

"My sword...I am the steward and it was for me and me alone that it was forged." Clal looked down at the ocean then to the shore where the RISHK were assembled. "Rythe, I don't know what to do. I can't bare the thought of never seeing it again and the RISHK...they are right here and it must be here." Clal looked down and shook his head. "If we don't find it now, I'm sure I'll never see it again."

Rythe looked long and hard at Clal, then he squinted and searched the shoreline.

"For the sword..." Rythe smiled. "We fight for the sword because without it, we cannot fulfill what we were sent to do. Is that it Clal?"

"Yes," Clal took comfort in knowing that Rythe trusted his judgement.

Clal turned, "Ansa, Leara, we are going back for the sword. It is part of how we will be able to fulfill our quest. Thus, we can go no further until we find and obtain that sword. I know it might be dangerous and the peril may seem beyond us. However, if it is to be done, then we must do it."

"I am with you, Clal," Ansa exclaimed.

"And so am I," Leara shouted.

"Sedrak," Clal said as Sedrak turned his head to listen. They had been hovering over the ocean for a brief stint. "Will you set us down a little further up the shore, then wait for my signal?"

"Is this truly what you wish?" Sedrak spoke.

"Yes," Clal looked toward the RISHK as Krothwing descended slowly from the sky. He was glaring in Clal's direction and soon stood by the side of his rogue companions on the shore.

"Wait for my signal." Clal said. "Take us to the shore!" He shouted.

Sedrak flew over the RISHK as Imforo sent another ball of flames. It missed but Clal could feel the distinct heat that came from it. If ever he was hit by one of those he feared what might happen to him.

As they arrived at the shore Sedrak crouched down each one sliding off his back in turn. Clal, having been given the Crystal by Rythe, walked up to Sedrak's head and put his hand on his nose.

"Thank you, Sedrak." Clal smiled.

"You will find your sword." Sedrak smiled back. Then, with a great downward thrust, he lifted off of the shore and was sent skyward.

"The Crystal," Clal raised it up. "Will you watch over this for us?" He looked at the others then noticed Ansa holding the Book of Legends. He talked over to Ansa, retrieved it, then walked back to Sedrak. "And the Book of Legends?"

"I will." Sedrak replied, nodding his head. He held both in one hand then lifted off and returned to the sky.

They began to walk through the sand, wind blowing and the waves crashing upon the shore. The sun was reaching further into the sky, having peaked over the horizon not too long ago.

Clal looked as the ocean sparkled from the sun's yellow glow.

"Stay together," he said. "Take care of each other, and use all of the strength, wits, and power you possess. We will need it." Clal told them marching faster down the shore. "We must get that sword..."

"But first, we must get them to tell us where it is," Ansa interrupted. "How do we do that?"

"A negotiation," Rytke said.

"No," Clal said, "I know where it is."

Clal thought back to when he grabbed the dagger from Rentharr's side. He hadn't realized it then, but in his mind's eyes he could remember seeing another weapon at his side. And though he could only see part of it, he knew his sword and the hilt.

"Rentharr, the ring leader, the large one, he wears it at his side." Clal stated as they continued to close the gap between them and the RISHK.

"Here comes Imforo's flames!" Leara cried.

The girls jumped out of the way, Ansa running several feet in a short distance. Rytke barely managed to grab Clal and pull him down before the flames hit him.

Clal had noticed Ansa and shouted, "How...did you do that, Ansa?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I was always a fast runner."

Clal thought then shook his head. "No, never that fast."

"Well," She half smiled, "since leaving Gwynn's I've felt lighter on my feet and when we..."

"Your shoes," Clal shouted, "Gwynn's shoes. They must have some kind of power that..."

"...makes me run faster." Ansa finished his sentence as she sometimes does. "Perhaps you're right." She winked.

"We must each take one of the RISHK and keep them at bay until Rythe or I retrieve my sword. Then, when it's time, I'll signal Sedrak." Clal said to them. Then he leapt out, running through the sand, toward the ones they called The Banished.

The others followed running after Clal and Leara sent a ball fire to meet Imforo's blast of fire that he sent toward Clal. Ansa passed Clal and reached the RISHK first. Unsure of what to do and in a brief fit of confusion she bit her lip then ran toward Rentharr and pushed him from behind. The great man tipped over forward having not expected such an assault.

Ansa winced, grabbing her wrist which was now smarting. Rentharr stood up, growled, then ran in Ansa's direction.

Clal watched as Ansa ran, drawing Rentharr away from his companions. "Yes," he whispered to himself then turned to Rythe. "Look," he pointed.

Rythe looked over at Rentharr, then back at the other three. "That's brilliant," he said. "I'll follow her."

"I'll stay with Leara," Rythe nodded then ran toward Rentharr who was foolishly chasing Ansa who he'd never catch considering her new found ability.

Clal turned then ran to Leara's side. Imforo was sending his flames almost at an unmanageable rate. Krothwing launched from the shore, going after Rythe. Skeldruc had once been present but had altogether vanished, a fact that made Clal uneasy.

"Leara," Clal said, running up to her pulling out his dagger. "We must keep them occupied." Clal looked up into the sky as Krothwing was hurling himself toward Rythe ever faster.

"Rythe!" Clal yelled then he felt a heavy fist hit his face, then toppled backwards. He dropped the dagger and watched as it levitated in the air sliced at his arm.

"What?" Clal said, jumping back as his eyes began to water, blood running from his nose.

"Surrender. Now," a voice came from in front of him. "We knew you would come back," the voice hissed.

How could he fight what he couldn't see? Then, he had an idea. Clal took out the necklace from his pocket and put it on. The stone began to glow as before. As it's illuminating light intensified, Clal began to see the figure of a man, Skeldruc in front of him. Skeldruc leaned forward and swiped the dagger at Clal's neck, but Clal jumped back again, then turned and ran.

Rythe had heard Clal's call and turned right before Krothwing dove. Rythe crouched low to the ground as Krothwing missed him then swooped up into the air for another aerial assault. He looked for Ansa and found her running much further than he had anticipated, a distance that he himself was not keen on traveling.

Renthlar gave up chasing Ansa and was now running toward Rythe. Now, with two of the RISHK upon him, he pulled out his dagger and watched for Clal's sword.

As Renthlar approached, Rythe could hear some ruckus behind him. He turned and to his amazement saw Hittle flying around Krothwing who had been closer than Rythe had noticed. Hittle was playing his part as the rogue bird in a nasty assault on Krothwing. He whizzed here and there and pecked at Krothwing's face. Krothwing was waving his arm in the sky and could hardly keep flying let alone focused on one direction.

Rythe smiled and shouted up at them, "Thank you, Hittle." Rythe turned just in time to avoid Renthar's sword sweeping down through the air.

The sun glinted off the hilt and Rythe looked down at Renthar's hands. There, before him was Clal's sword, gripped tightly by both of Renthar's leathern hands.

"We meet again, boy." Renthar spat. "I know now that I should have killed you when I had the chance."

"You leave things up to chance and you'll never get what you want!" Rythe shouted, then thrust his dagger at Renthar's arm.

Though large in stature, Renthar was swift. In one movement he turned then disarmed Rythe picking up the dagger from the sand.

"And my dagger, thief!" Renthar snarled.

"I'll only ask you once, Renthar." Rythe inched toward him, "Hand over the sword."

Renthar cocked his head back and laughed a low and booming laugh.

"Do you know what we did with the blacksmith who made this sword?" Renthar smiled. "I've heard you were looking for him, and since I'll inflict the mortal wounds you deserve before you ride away on your dragon, I will tell you now."

Rythe leapt forward grabbing Renthar's arm. Renthar threw Rythe down then swung the sword. The tip caught Rythe's shin.

"Ahhhhh!" Rythe fell to the ground.

Renthar raised the sword high in the air as Rythe tried to crawl away. "We took him to the southern kingdom. There, we are building our army and he is our principal blacksmith in the forgery."

Right before Renthar swung the sword downward, Ansa came from behind and knocked it out of his hand. The sword sailed to the ground, stuck into the sand, then was picked up by Ansa who ran as fast as she could to avoid any pursuit.

Rythe leapt up and ran after her, limping as he went.

Clal had been battling Skeldruc who was still invisible, though just left him, Clal watching his footsteps upon the sand. Clal watched in horror as Ansa ran toward him, Skeldruc now between him and Ansa. Clal immediately saw Skeldruc's plan. One moment Ansa was looking at Clal and smiling, then the next, she fell, and in the process, the sword was sent airborne. Krothwing, dove through the air and caught the weapon, then flew upward. Leara immediately threw a mess of flames into the sky toward him. The ball of fire encircled Krothwing who screamed and dropped the sword. He flew toward the ocean like an arrow let loose from the string of a bow and disappeared beneath the surface.

Ansa had quickly recovered, then sped over to the sword and snatched it up from the sand. Clal marveled at how she was merely a blur then was at his side delivering his sword to him.

"Clal," she looked into his eyes. "Your sword."

Immediately, Clal pulled the dragon summoner to his mouth and blew.

"Clal," Ansa said looking confused, "did you see what tripped me?"

"It was Skeldruc." Clal said, looking at Ansa then back to his sword. "He can disappear and reappear at will."

"How rude!" She said, folding her arms then squinting her eyes as she searched the area around her.

Sedrak swooped above them then rested upon the shore behind Clal and his companions.

"Sedrak," Clal said, turning to face him. "Be ready."

Sedrak smiled then nodded and crouched low in preparation.

Rythe ran to Clal's side holding his leg which was bleeding profusely.

"Rythe," Clal looked down at the blood stained clothing on Rythe's leg. "what happened?"

"Renthar got the better of me...this time." He said, rubbing his leg. "But next time..."

"There's four of us and three of them." Leara interjected. "Can't we do something?"

Just then, Krothwing descended from the air, dripping wet, "So, you have the sword," he snarled with his arms folded, his black clothing even darker, "and you think that holding it makes you Illia's hero?"

"Illia doesn't need a hero," Clal said, "Illia needs a purging."

Skeldruc appeared and stood beside Krothwing. "Things aren't always as they seem." He laughed, "Maybe the foundling truly will save Illia and is the chosen one?"

"Chosen one, or not," Renthar spat, "we crush those who oppose us." Then he leaned forward, eyeing Rythe, "and you are no match for our strength."

"Where is strength..." Rythe smiled at Renthar, "...when it prey's on the weak and innocent?"

"There are none here who are innocent," Imforo said looking at Leara. "You are all worthy of death, for your crimes, and we intend to take this matter into our own hands."

"The blacksmith," Rythe looked at Renthar, "you didn't kill him..."

"He gave us an oath to serve us," Renthar replied, "so that we'd spare his life. Besides, he told us where to find..."

"Renthar!" Krothwing shouted, "Enough!"

Krothwing stepped toward Clal, "There is no hiding in Illia." He smiled with wide eyes. "Not for you. Not for your friends. Not for your family."

Skeldruc took a step forward then said, "We will find you," then disappeared once again.

Krothwing leapt toward Clal as Renthar juttet forward toward Rythe. Imforo swung around to the right then sent another ball of fire

toward Leara. Ansa sped toward a higher point beyond the sand, stood, then watched for footsteps.

Clal swung his sword at Krothwing but missed. They seemed to be losing their advantage over them quickly. He'd intended to draw from the RISHK more about their intentions and information they could use, but realized that they had only managed to allow their enemies to cast more empty threats at them. Was it a mistake to stay on the shore and not mount Sedrak?

Clal watched as Rythe fell backwards in pain as Renthar pressed upon him. Leara, in her exhaustion, was beginning to appear slow to react as Imforo assailed her with an endless onslaught of flames through the air. And Ansa, who was now searching the shore and having no knowledge of where Skeldruc had escaped to, would soon be ensnared and outsmarted. Clal himself was no match for the flying nuisance that Krothwing continued to be for him.

"Retreat!" Clal yelled, once again blowing his signal horn. "To the dragon!" He shouted.

Ansa turned then sped toward Sedrak, arriving by his side, meeting no unseen danger this time. Rythe too turned then ran as fast as possible, considering his injured leg. Leara slowly backed up, continuing to monitor the flames that were coming her way. She turned and ran, jumping to the side then ran to the opposite way to dodge the flames that she had anticipated. And Clal watched for Krothwing as he joined the others. But, could not see him.

Rythe hefted the Crystal and Book of Legends from Sedrak's claws.

Each of them climbed upon Sedrak's back then Clal tapped Sedrak's side, "Away with us!" Clal yelled looking around for Krothwing again.

The dragon leapt from the shore then rode inland. Renthar raised his fists and Skeldruc reappeared frowning. Imforo continued to throw his fire, though soon Sedrak was out of reach. Clal searched

the sky only to find the sunlight of the day bursting through wisps of clouds.

Just then, Hittle circled around Sedrak as Krothwing dove toward them. He rammed into Krothwing's face sending Krothwing flailing downward.

Hittle flew to Ansa and hovered in front of Ansa's face chirping. "Hittle! Do be careful!" Ansa said, starting to cry.

Krothwing swerved and Clal watched as he charged through the air right toward Leara. Hittle darted through the air and dug his claws into the side of Krothwing's temples. Around and around Hittle circled as the four others rode Sedrak who was sailing low above the forest tree tops. Krothwing was no match for the rogue bird. Pecking and scratching, Krothwing's face had seen much of Hittle's anger.

Then, to Clal's surprise, Hittle retreated and flew high into the air out of sight. With a horror filled face, Krothwing looked around him. He felt his face and looked at his blood covered hand.

"Filthy bird!" Krothwing said. He looked at Clal. "We are the RISHK. No man..."

Then, Hittle dove in, heading right for Krothwing's eyes. He dug his claws deep immediately sending Krothwing into the air. Down, Krothwing fell holding his hands to his eyes, crashing into the trees below.

"Hittle," Ansa said, "I never knew how brave you could really be." She said, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I never doubted..." She smiled, "Just worried."

Hittle flew to Ansa and stood before her on Sedrak's large scales.

Clal looked around them, down toward the land below. "Sedrak," Clal called to him, "where are you taking us?"

"To the Cliffs of the Dawning of Time," Sedrak said, flapping his great, white wings, taking them further and further up into the sky.

Chapter 19: 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!" Rythe 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," Rythe shouted, "did we not?! Think of it," Rythe laughed, "we were strong and together we fought for what was right."

"I don't regret leaving Kelvkoroth," Leara said, "though our path has been difficult." She looked toward Clal, then to Ansa and Rythe. "You are true friends."

"I...we are glad you are with us, Leara." Clal looked at Leara 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 Rythe 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." Leara 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 Leara 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," Leara 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. Leara 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 then 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.

Leara gasped then leapt forward running to see more. Clal ran after her, "Leara!" he called. "Could this be?"

When Clal reached Leara'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.

Leara 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."

Leara 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 Leara 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?" Leara 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.

Leara 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 Leara'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."

THE END