

FORGE
OF THE
GODS
THE LAST KNIGHT

By

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The first book of the *Forge of the Gods* series is dedicated to my wife Kristy who sparked my desire to pick up a pen, helped in every part of the process, and gave me the resolve to never accept the word “no.”

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I have found the experience of writing a novel both exhilarating and mentally exhausting. In fact, writing with whatever talent I may or may not have has been one of the hardest things I have ever done—I compare it to playing collegiate baseball and football.

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Finally, I would like to offer my thanks to the readers. You are the ones giving this small-time author a chance. I hope that this epic tale both enchants and challenges you.

EXTRAS

The world of Aryth, like all good fantasy worlds, is as vast as its characters are rich. To aid the reader in keeping track of this world and those who dwell within it, the author has created a website that both enhances the reading experience and provides wonderful detail beyond the scope of the first book in the *Forge of the Gods* series. At the website you'll find maps, journals, character charts, video and images that enrich the *Forge of the Gods* experience. Vist the author's website at: www.ericfogle.com.

PART I: DEATH OF A KING

~ PROLOGUE ~

20th Eternity (Eternal Timeline)

WHEN DISCUSSING reality, we can only describe it as experienced by humanity, and more importantly, as it is known to Heaven. Bound by its own laws, reality is based upon the perception that any given thing that is—is real. However, perception is multi-faceted, since mortals are flawed creatures who are limited by their fragile existence. Thus when we break down reality, a distinction must be made between those things that are known to be real (Heaven) and those that are assumed to exist (Material Plane).

Let us examine Heaven in its entirety, then. It can be argued that the gods are pure existence. They are the functional equation that cannot be denied, a focal point that binds everything else—a circular algorithm of order and chaos, destruction and creation.

Assuming the gods are reality, it is only logical that Heaven is where all things begin and end. If Heaven is the center of creation for the rest of the multi-verse, it is also the destroying agent that governs realism, bound by its own certainties: what is created must be destroyed.

In Heaven, there is a single rule of reality, a certainty that binds both immortal and mortal beings alike: time shall always move forward. Though this law is experienced most keenly by humanity, it still must be realized throughout eternal existence. In essence, even the gods age. This is a limitation; a flaw that goes against the certainty that the gods are the only beings that completely experience reality, for aging is a fact of reality that they cannot recognize.

From here we descend to the Material Plane (The Mortal Plane) of existence. Here time flows as mortals know it, an unpredictable equation of plausible possibilities that only the gods may view at any time in the sequence. From a heavenly perspective, the Divine Plane passes these events off as a flutter of realized potential probability—those events that unfold dynamically on the Material Plane—only to be viewed by the gods as a truth of unreality. This is why on the Material Plane, change is permitted, evolution may happen, and the future corresponds directly to the present and to the past. For it is only

there, on the Mortal Plane, that the gods are recognized and cherished by lesser minds that cannot comprehend the laws that bind them.

An angel, Gabriel Truthbringer, contemplated these things as he strolled down a path made of pure order, reflecting his existence and that of the gods. In his infinite wisdom, he could see how eternity rolled on—a metropolis of souls, angels, archons, and demons—all bound by that which he knew to be real, and all very static.

Stasis isn't necessarily a bad thing, Gabriel thought. For he knew that on the Divine Plane death was impossible: a being either existed in a corporeal sense or was winked out completely.

“Not a bad thing...” he murmured again, this time to nothing in particular. He could not deny that he felt restless, as did most who resided in Heaven.

Gabriel looked up to see a maelstrom of cosmic energies swirling, bright blue flares scorching reality. He contemplated the difficulty one had telling time in this repository of the gods; he guessed that he had resided here since creation, or twenty eternities. He wondered how mortals perceived the Divine Plane, considering their unreal existence changed so drastically in such short spans of time.

Why am I complaining about complacency? Gabriel looked thoughtfully at the energy, seeing both order and chaos at work. *In my lifetime I have seen change. I have gone to war and destroyed entire sects of my race for Him. I have watched millennia go by and collected souls for Him. I have even seen the creation and destruction of another divine race...in His name. So why am I so restless?*

In that moment, Gabriel noticed that even the souls of the faithful looked stagnant and restless. Not for the first time, he wished that he was not the High Seraphim of Starsgalt, or as mortals knew him, the Angel of Mercy. He wished that he could visit the Material Plane and become less than real for just a moment—to see the universe in all of its unpredictable glory.

Gabriel sighed and lowered his gaze. He had been so deep in thought that he had hardly noticed a colossal white building, supported by pillars of law, justice, and war, standing in front of him. To anyone in Heaven it was an awe-inspiring sight, even after so many eternities without change. And even though Gabriel had seen the magnificent residence of the All-Father, Starsgalt—the Halls of Law and Order—nearly every day since his coming into being, he admitted that the grand structure still awed him as well.

Gabriel let the power of the moment sink in and walked by a glowing statue of the All-Father before he strode with purpose up steps made of pure creation. He had come to the Halls for his daily routine of weeding existence, as it was his eternal duty to check in on the All-Father's followers and maintain the faith pool which kept all of Heaven in motion.

Just before the Angel of Mercy entered the great hall of the All-Father, he looked again to the cosmos and irritably muttered, “Why can’t I appreciate this? I am the most powerful Seraphim in the entire Divine Plane, a demi-god, what more can I ask for?”

Gabriel silently cursed his blasphemous words. He couldn’t argue with the fact that his faith and devotion had been rewarded by the All-Father several times over. In fact, time had been on his side. The Angel of Mercy had slowly climbed the ranks as a servant to God, using his ability to think beyond his immortal race’s infallible limitations. Of course, such infinite wisdom had also propelled him to his current situation—monotony defined.

As Gabriel considered Heaven and his place within its hierarchy, a thunderous *crack!* split the heavens. Though Heaven did not truly consist of “ground,” Gabriel watched in horror as the thunderous sound caused order to become organic—which then began quaking.

Boom! Another wave of thunder rocked the heavens, this one undoing the reality of one of the All-Father’s pillars.

The effect was so impossible that time...began to warp.

For the first time, the Angel of Mercy looked around and did not understand reality. Rules he knew to be true were altered and absolutes became uncertain. Though he could see the limitless plausibility of time, at least fifty million *new* infinite probabilities erupted forth. It seemed to Gabriel that Heaven was being ripped asunder.

Another piercing *boom* tore through Heaven. The force of the shock-wave again shook the ground and distorted the basic principles of law and order. Gabriel did his best to stay on his feet as the sky turned from flaring blue to deep crimson. He was sure that both the ground and the sky would soon erupt in blood.

In that moment, before reality was indeed realized, a miracle beyond the power of the gods occurred: time stood still.

Gabriel recognized it as a single thought conceived in his mind. In this brief moment, a mortal generation was created and destroyed (or approximately the amount of time it took to draw a single breath on the Divine Plane).

Gabriel shivered violently and fell to his knees. The unbreakable law of Heaven was being violated! He could only gape as the sky turned purple and red, and black lighting forked out in countless directions, annulling whatever it touched. He tried to tell himself that the variation in time was insignificant, that many in Heaven wouldn’t even notice that the first rule of reality had been desecrated. Yet it had.

Can it be that this will actually change Heaven? Gabriel thought as he tried to remain conscious, trying to convince himself that the impossible was not really occurring.

He tried to stand but another *boom* erupted. This one ripped at the angel's being. He could feel it tearing him apart.

Gabriel clung to his infallible nature, trying to hold himself together. He could not comprehend an event that was not even plausible on the Material Plane. In his infinite wisdom, he knew the rules of existence almost better than Starsgalt himself. Not even on the Plane of Mortals could one of the gods alter time and perform a miracle such as this!

For a moment the Angel of Mercy thought reality ceased to exist. The moment of uncertainty caused his essence to unravel. His mind lost focus...his hands and feet begin to warp out of existence...that which was real distorted to the point of losing its base as reality.

Then, as suddenly as it had stopped, time exploded around Gabriel in normalcy. A rush of cosmic wind picked him up and threw him backwards into the All-Father's home. He thought that if an angel had bones, they would surely have all exploded.

In panic, Gabriel pushed himself to his feet and stumbled inside the Hall of Law. The sight that greeted him would haunt him for the rest of eternity—the All-Father was sitting with a look of disbelief etched on his perfect face. The expression marred the god's perfection, another impossibility of infinite proportions. Gabriel could only conclude that the All-Father was confused.

Thoughts of fear and disbelief rushed through Gabriel's mind. It was obvious that Starsgalt had felt the miracle and was too stunned to react.

"What is it?" a golden baritone of perfection poured into Gabriel's mind. It sounded...afraid.

He doesn't understand, Gabriel thought, awestruck into silence.

With a single thought, the All-Father sent out the call for a Great Convergence, where all the gods would be represented. In the time it had taken to send the thought, the All-Father was gone and the meeting had begun.

The aftermath left the angel speechless. The implications were preposterous. Another shiver ran through Gabriel's mind as a single thought lodged like an arrow in his heart: *is it possible we have just witnessed the birth of something greater than the gods...?*

1

1999 A.D. (After Devoid), Year of the Crescent Moon (Mortal Timeline)

20th Eternity (Eternal Timeline)

AN OLTHARI walked past a twisted stump, one that had been sitting for countless years under a red sun—a sort of proof that life continues on even under extreme circumstances. The creature, a male version of its divinely immortal race, had traversed so many worlds that it had lost track of the countless probabilities it had seen. Now the creature was growing weary of such travels, and of his search. It seemed as though each new world was a blurry map in his mind, a mere silhouette of life's existence, ever-changing and ever moving forward.

The creature, called Thurm Stormrage by mortals, told himself that all of his inter-planar traveling was a necessary evil to track down the life-essence of his mate, a pursuit that had taken the better part of the past three eternities.

That he had been so close annoyed the immortal. An olthari's infinite knowledge was supposed to be near infallible—almost perfection—especially in comparison to beings that existed on the Material Plane. There was no reason why his divinity should prove less than perfect! Yet, his opponent had always been one step ahead of him, leaving only hints for him to follow through the mist, to each new world.

This time, though, the mists held little interest for Thurm. He was growing exhausted with the pursuit and more important, of his existence. Even now he questioned the purpose of living when the life-wave emitted by the olthari race was weakening to the point of extinction. In fact, the longer his crusade lasted, the more uncertain he became as to whether or not his mate was still alive—her waning life-force ranged from a slow pulsing buzz to a

dull beat; and finally, to the nothingness to which his entire race had succumbed.

Such thoughts made him wonder if he truly was the last of a dying race. And if extinction was truly upon them, how long could he go on being last of his kind? The olthari gazed to Heaven. The punishment of the gods would soon fulfill itself, since he and possibly his mate were the last of a race created by divine hands—now banished, hunted down, and exterminated by their creators. He still felt the divine call, which pained him worse than even the thought of death. That his race was cursed until the end of eternity made the longing for Heaven that much worse. They would never be allowed to return home. It was a certainty he had accepted long ago.

Thurm, why do you torture your mind with such thoughts? The immortal wondered as he looked up at the sky. I don't need to rush the inevitable, do I?

In fact, Thurm knew exactly why he sullenly continued his being—some part of him was still not ready to succumb to the nothingness. He told himself that it was still in his power to end his race's suffering, that there might still be a way to stave off annihilation, even a chance at redemption. Most of all, he wanted to believe that maybe one day he could go home. The thought nearly made him cry.

For that reason alone Thurm tried to never gaze homeward. By looking towards the red sky, he saw the life-essence of his entire race trapped by the gods on a plane of non-existence. It was a dark reminder of the olthari race's betrayal of their masters. It had been a swift punishment for their crime, carried out the moment it was conceived. After eight eternities wandering the Material Plane, Thurm could still remember the exact terms of the curse....

His race had been sentenced to die a horribly slow death—damned to walk the multi-verse (outside Heaven) until their lineage had completely wasted away. At first, the gods had united in this curse by banishing them from Heaven and decreeing that all olthari should wander as immortal mortals, unable to die except by unnatural death and unable to voluntarily kill themselves.

When the olthari race had adapted and resumed somewhat normal, albeit shattered, lives, Heaven again came together and decreed that the wretched race suffer another, more diabolical curse—they destroyed the olthari's ability to reproduce, sterilizing and killing most of the females. Additionally, the god Starsgalt demanded that the soul of a dead olthari could neither ascend to Heaven nor be winked out of existence; all olthari souls were forever condemned to an infinite eternity in painful limbo.

And simply becoming extinct was not enough. The final sentence was issued by the god Illuviel, who had demanded that no matter how far the olthari race traveled, and even in death, they would always long for Heaven.

The finality of this curse weighed on the Thurm's soul. Not a day passed that he did not consider his unhappy fate. It brought a dull ache to his heart, crushing any passing happiness.

Closing his eyes, he brushed aside his dark thoughts and focused inward, concentrating on the faint buzzing sound in his mind. He let the idea of multiple realities wash over him, a concept that allowed him to bend reality between the different levels of existence. After a long pause, the immortal drew his body into a godlike position and pictured reality how he wanted it to be. He then began to weave his own divine flows—an ability that had once been his race's greatest gift from the gods—the ability to walk through the various planes of existence by opening portals to any world imaginable.

Those days were long gone. Now, Thurm used his gift for a single purpose: to keep moving. The fact that he was cursed and dying meant that he could never get too close to anything. By staying uncommitted, he considered himself still truly immortal in one sense; he was powerful enough not to have a need for lesser beings. By remaining unattached and constantly moving, one of the last of the olthari felt alive.

Not that it matters anymore, Thurm thought, considering the foolishness of his pursuit. The notion of an emotional attachment fluttered through his mind and offered his soul a quick reprieve. Maybe it was a good idea to meet members of other races. It was possible he could even make an attempt at friendship, a bond far more important than an olthari would ever admit. The idea of friendship allowed his mind to focus on the divine weave, intensifying his power.

With his will now wholly focused on a single thought, actuality faltered just before it tore wide open. Where there had been nothingness, a gaping ten-foot rip in the fabric of reality opened and a shimmering, luminescent blue light poured forth. Thurm frowned and peered through. The light was all wrong.

This was not the world he had summoned.

Nor was it a world he recognized; a faint aura of evil permeated the air. In the distance he saw a dull, lifeless sky, red as the planet on which he currently stood. However, unlike the burned-out nature of this planet (one of his favorites), a blurred swath of desolate wasteland greeted him. It looked like true chaos ate away at life.

Thurm contemplated the landscape with a grimace. This was not his portal...yet he was certain this was where Elissandera and her captor waited. Squinting into the gloomy distance, he decided to venture where his heart guided him. He assured himself that this was his only choice. If this was to be his last moment of life, then it would be on his terms, searching for the one he loved.

With long even strides he unhooked the great hammer strapped to his back by a giant harness, a massive weapon which stood two hands below his nine foot frame, and stepped through the portal.

Cosmic power swirled around the olthari as he moved through a pocket of nonexistence, the space in which inter-planar travel was possible. In a fraction of a second he stepped through a thin film of divinity and into the new world. The sickening feeling of winking out of existence then back wracked his body. He tried to look around but was blinded by white tracers that blurred his vision.

When his vision finally cleared, he was greeted with a horrific sight: this place was not a mortal probability. In a dark recess of his mind, Thurm realized that this world must be directly connected to the Divine Plane. He felt godly power exuding from everything. Though he tried to rationalize it, nothing could ever describe such an abomination of life; dark swirls of chaos tore at a shattered sky, giving off a deep purplish hue. His immortal eyes viewed a world devoid of any ordered thing; misshapen trees dotted the desolate landscape, doing their best to eke out an existence. Aside from this mockery, the scorched land was free of anything that even roughly resembled life.

The sight of true chaos made his skin crawl. Here the equation of the universe did not apply, time did not flow in mortal years, and balance was not achieved. By looking at the mottled husks of the trees, he knew that the equation was trying to right itself; however, only a travesty of creation prevailed.

A distant sound caught his attention.

Thurm gripped the shaft of his giant hammer as the wind blew the faint scream past him. The full power of the place came rushing upon him, intensifying his soul-bond with Elissandera. He was sure that she was located less than five miles to the east. It might be too late to save this world, but he knew she still lived...at least for the moment.

He cleared his mind and set out with resolve, shaking off his uneasiness. He told himself that he needed to be steady. His goal was in sight; he was here to find Elissandera and save her if he could or release her into eternity if he couldn't. He had decided long ago that if she needed to die, then he did too—that if this was his fate, he would face the *thing* that had eluded him for so long. His resolve demanded that he die trying; for her he could not turn back.

Another faint scream swept across the desolate wasteland.

Thurm's hair rose. He felt Elissandera's soul-bond call out to him; this place seemed to magnify the essence of his people. For a moment he thought that he wasn't alone, an oddly satisfying feeling. An impossible thought tore through his defenses—could this be a parallel plane of existence to that of the divine?

A pocket plane for one of the gods, he thought sourly. If that was true then he had been summoned here for a reason, and whatever resided in this place would be unassailable by his powers. He could not win.

It is a fitting punishment that the same gods who created my race will also be the ones to end our existence, he thought sadly. It was likely that if this was a divine pocket, then there was a god was toying with him, which was why his quest had lingered on so long. *I shall die proud*, he thought, standing straight and tall. *If one of the gods has summoned me here to end my life, then I will fight to the end.*

Thurm shook his head and banished such thoughts; he was thinking too far ahead. Whatever he faced was beyond his limited comprehension. His mind had been used against him, reminding him of old times and things long forgotten. He rubbed his perfect features and again set off towards the sound.

As Thurm prepared to take a step, his vision blurred and his skin started to crawl. The feeling was followed by a distortion of his physical features, which made him stumble forward in disorientation. He was about to succumb and fall to the ground when something called out and beckoned him, blinking him out of existence and back.

The summons nearly made him retch as he came crashing through the portal and staggered to the ground.

“So the destroyer has finally come!” boomed a sinister voice, its mocking tone filled with unpredictability and evil.

The olthari shook away the sparkling lights of his instantaneous transportation from his vision and looked around. It took him a moment to get his bearings, but was sure that he was standing in front of a circular structure with random spires of ebony jutting up into the sky. Furthermore, he was greeted by an angel leaning against one of the columns, its features twisted into a perfect mask of chaos.

It took Thurm only a moment to realize his mistake. It had been so long...such a distant memory of what *was*...that he could not have fathomed what stood before him.

The olthari stepped back and dropped to his knees in reverence and fear, recognizing not an angel but Illenthuul, the Dark God, and God of Chaos. What the greater god wanted with him was unimaginable. Thurm knew this god could do many things worse than kill him.

“I have come in search of my mate,” Thurm said cautiously.

“So you have.” Illenthuul warped behind him. *“However, the female is beyond your assistance, I’m afraid.”*

“What have you *done* to her...?” Thurm screamed. With swift determination he leapt into the air and raised his great hammer, ready to strike down the god. He knew this would be his only chance.

With blinding speed Illenthuul nonchalantly reached out and grasped the olthari’s wrist, stopping the immortal in place before shattering every bone.

The Dark God waited until Thurm was on the verge of unconsciousness before he let go.

“Do not test my patience, little one,” said Illenthuul, warping back to stand in front of a great dais that appeared. The god yawned and sat down, stretching out his legs.

“What...do you...want, my lord?” gasped Thurm, clutching his ruined arm.

“That is better,” Illenthuul said. *“What I want, is you, little one.”* Illenthuul grinned slyly, his eyes glowing crimson. *“My want is so great that I have hunted down your race, waging divine genocide on your entire species, until only you and your female remain.”*

“But...why?” Thurm croaked, crumpling to the ground.

“I highly doubt you wish to hear all the nasty details.” Illenthuul looked to the sky. *“The short version is that I had planned to use you as the great destroyer of Heaven.”*

“Never!” sobbed the miserable creature. “I will...never...!”

“You already have,” said Illenthuul. *“You have served me in the past and you will serve me now. In fact, your service is responsible for your race’s extinction...and that I am here now and not in Heaven. But that is another story for another time. As I was saying, I require your presence in a very personal matter. I have a task for you.”*

“I will never serve you!” Thurm pushed himself up defiantly.

“I had supposed not,” said Illenthuul. *“The choice is yours; however, your female is now trapped between an eternity in my presence or a freedom that only I can offer.”*

Thurm’s resolve faltered. “What do you mean? What freedom you could possibly offer her besides a quick death?”

The Dark God laughed. *“I have found a way to reopen the gates of Heaven, little one. And more important, I can restore the balance that has been missing for fifteen eternities.”*

“You are a liar!” Thurm erupted. How could he fall for such sinister trickery? “Your claim is impossible! You are the betrayer!”

“Like I said, young one, I want only to restore Heaven to its full glory,” Illenthuul responded. *“If you do this for me, I will save your entire species.”*

“You...do not have...the power.” Thurm was too aghast to even consider this possibility.

“Let me worry about my power,” Illenthuul said. *“Here is your choice: You will serve me until the end of time, searching for the source of order that will allow me to conquer Heaven, or your race will face annihilation.”*

Illenthuul paused so his words sunk in. *“I will even offer you a chance to save whole mortal worlds—allowing you one year on every planet you visit to find the source. If you cannot find what I am looking for, Thurm, you will open portals into each world so that my armies can invade.”*

“And if your armies invade a world?”

“Then I will scour the world clean of any life.” Illenthuul smiled.

“What am I looking for?” the olthari asked in resignation.

“*Not a single god knows.*” Illenthul started to dissolve. Just before he desolved, he added one more thing. “*But should you find it, little one, your job will be to protect it all costs.*”



Moonlight streamed through the rusted bars of Lawlian Fortress’s lowest dungeon cell. The stench of unwashed bodies, urine, and feces mixed with the moans of several inmates gave the dungeon a menacing presence. The high lord commanding the building had made sure that the populace could hear the cries of the criminals—a warning to all that law and justice would be served.

The strategy had been an effective one, for the Bre’Dmorian High Lord had been able to curb crime in the city of Brenly for over twenty years. That was, until a new sort of criminal had surfaced: a traitorous noble who slaughtered innocents in the name of Balzabuth, whom the Bre’Dmorian called the Angel of Murder.

Lord Edelin Hanson waved his hands into the dim moonlight and tried to figure out how he’d fallen so far. He knew that if the High Lightbringer had not forbidden capital punishment in Aresleighan courts, the High Lord would have killed him on principle. It all started with the fact that he had been beaten senseless several times in the last few nights. Though he had only been in the dungeon twelve days, his once fine clothes were torn, hanging in shreds from his fit body. The murderer looked wistfully to the ceiling of his cell and tried to picture the moon. He wondered what he would be doing now...if he was still free. He imagined that he would be dressed in the rich colors of Tares silk—the finest cloth in the world, which he had imported from the Far East—and once again relish in the screams of his victims.

It is a travesty that I will no longer be able to act upon God’s will, Edelin thought sadly, hearing the soft creak of the nearby gallows. Death by hanging was a pittance compared to the utter chaos he had caused. He realized that this was the price he willingly paid to torture, mutilate, and finally murder such succulent specimens.

A smile crept across his tanned face. Not for the first time in his life, Edelin savored what a great time it had all been. In his twenty-three seasons of life, he had accumulated over one hundred murders, a small amount of death in comparison to what other servants of God had accumulated in the past decade, but not bad for a human. He could still see all the shallow graves that posterity would one would one day credit to him. A shiver of delight coursed through his body.

A whimpering sound brought Edelin out of his reverie, and he looked around with disdain. He knew he was better than this. He wondered why those wretched heretics in the service of the Angel of Order, Starsgalt, stuffed him into this reeking hole. It was dark, and the stench was overpowering.

I deserve more than this for being such a devout follower of the One God, Balzabuth, Edelin thought, calculating a response to such moronic whining.

“Shut your damn mouth, filthy peasant!” He spat into the far corner of an adjacent cell that contained a young thief missing his right hand. The fallen noble assumed the young man had been caught filching, had his hand removed in gory fashion, and was then thrown into jail. Smugly, he made a mental note that the thief deserved such a fate, possibly even the gallows.

Standing up, the murderer moved towards the shadows of his cell. He hoped a guardsman was near. He needed to explain that he was still a noble in the small city of Brenly. Sure, he was awaiting trial and subsequent execution, but he hadn’t truly committed a real crime! Each of his so-called transgressions had been in the service of Balzabuth, the One True God. He wanted to explain that he was simply a servant, an innocent.

Not seeing anyone nearby, the fallen noble kicked against the bars and yelled. However, only incessant whimpering greeted him. He wished that young thief would just shut up. He swore that if he met the young man in the afterlife, he would cut out the wretch’s tongue and take the other hand as well. The thought calmed his murderous soul.

How can any mere human understand my artistry? Edelin wondered, falling back against the wall and gazing at the moonlight. Murder *was* artistry after all, a masterpiece that no one understood. To the ignorant heretic, it was a demented weave of gruesome pain and suffering. He, however, could see more—the depth, life, and cruelty that defined the divine attributes of God.

His eyelids fluttered as he inhaled the intoxicating power of fear. Why could no one understand his innocence? He deserved respect, something he could not expect from the Bre’Dmorian. One day, Balzabuth would come for their kind, and Edelin wondered how the King of Darkness would judge *them*. He realized they worshipped one of His servants, the Angel Starsgalt, who also followed the virtues of war. The Bre’Dmorian took life for the cause of justice. Edelin figured they were not so different than he, both honoring the murderous nature of God.

Edelin chuckled to himself. After a fair trial, a Bre’Dmorian lord would be his executioner. The murderer would be murdered.

The ironies of life never end. I will be murdered by an unbeliever to satiate God’s hunger. The thought brought another wry smile to Edelin’s face. It seemed only fitting that Balzabuth would murder him for his servitude. It would be a great honor, a position of elite standing among the One God’s believers.

The sound of chewing—rats gnawing on the rotting corpse of a long-time inmate—interrupted Edelin’s thoughts of grandeur. He despised rats. In a sudden fit of rage, he picked up a small stone and threw it at the unmoving mass of human flesh. Though he could not see his target, squeaks and scurries led him to believe he’d found it.

Trying to calm his mind, Edelin closed his eyes and tried to recall a happier period in his life. The first thought that came to mind was the sheer amount of resources the town had poured into his capture. Brenly was a poor town, modest by all standards, but Count Gustafson had spared no expense tracking him down. Edelin had even been part of the search party, leading Bre’Dmorian Templars in all directions, extending the manhunt for several months. For sure, a pleasurable thought.

Yet, it lacked a certain...*something*. Another memory surfaced; this one a conquest. He had manipulated the count’s wife and daughters, seducing them into the service of the Dark King by poisoning their minds with pain and constant pleasures. He eventually had murdered all three, but not before the once-fervent followers of Starsgalt had committed their souls to Balzabuth. He mused at this happy thought. It had been a shame to kill Count Gustafson’s eldest daughter, Mara, for she had almost matched Edelin’s own cruelty after her remarkable transformation.

The slight regret in the conquest memory urged the prisoner’s mind on to a more recent endeavor—possibly his favorite—a murder done without the use of his hands. It involved the rotting corpse in the next cell who had been another simple thief, harshly punished for stabbing the local magistrate. He could tell from their conversations that the man had not deserved to be in the bowels of this hellhole.

It was unfortunate for the young man that he had been placed next to Edelin, and even worse that Edelin had been so frustrated by his improper confinement. He suppressed a smile at the artistry used to poison the thief’s mind, driving the man to insanity. In truth, it had not taken much, as the fear of death was already strong in the man. Still, Edelin savored the corruption, drinking it like a fine wine, especially when the thief found a stick, ground it against the hard walls to make it sharp, and slit his own throat. It was the perfect murder.

Edelin again looked to a false sky and murmured a quick prayer. With such pleasant thoughts he could finally sleep.

Then a miracle occurred.

The dungeon became silence incarnate and darkness seeped from the walls, coalescing into a demonic mist. He could only stare in awe as it swirled around him, moving slowly up his body in a dark embrace.

Edelin dropped to his knees as tears of recognition streamed down his face. The Dark King had come to murder him in the night and take him to

Heaven. He began to chant a recitation from the Dark Tome to expedite the process.

Within moments the darkness spread across the entire space of the cell; no light penetrated it. In less than two breaths, Edelin looked up into a pair of glowing purple eyes; a frighteningly beautiful head of obsidian was silhouetted against utter darkness.

"*Balzabuth*," he whispered in awe, barely able to control his bodily functions in the presence of God.

"*I am not I AM*," the voice resounded, perfection personified. It was almost too much for Edelin's mind to grasp. "*I am the messenger of His word!*"

"The messenger...?" Edelin tried to recall the Dark Tome's hierarchy of Heaven. He knew the holy artifact mentioned this messenger.

"*Come, mortal, and recognize Gadul, Angel of Hatred, First Demon Prince, and servant of I AM!*" Gadul announced.

"Have you come to...?" Edelin whispered reverently, his body still trembling.

"*I have not come to end your life*," replied Gadul. "*I AM has dictated that His need for you has grown in this world. Moreover, He wishes to reward your servitude.*"

"Reward me for my service?" Edelin shivered. "What does God ask of me?"

"He demands your subservience, mortal, and your devotion to His cause!"

"I would do anything for Him," Edelin's voice broke with emotion.

Gadul devoured the essence of the faithful mortal soul in a moment of complete silence. "*Then He charges you with a holy crusade*," he said. "*You are to seek out the source of good that plagues this world. Once found, it is your holy duty to destroy it! In return for your obedience, He will wipe away any memory of your name and face from those who would hunt you down or tell your tale. He will also grant you freedom and unimaginable power in the mortal world! There shall be murder on a scale never before heard of on Ayrth.*"

"What is the source of good I seek?" cried Edelin fervently.

"*Seek miracles!*" Gadul replied, "*And, mortal, do whatever it takes...*"

The darkness became absolute and Gadul's form disappeared. Edelin swore he could feel the nothingness of such a destructive force caving in his will to survive. His mind wavered on insanity. Then the cell melted away and there was only the shining moon.

Edelin the Murderer was free.



The Bre'Dmorian Academy was arguably the greatest achievement in the last two thousand years. Unlike the rest of the City of Aresleigh, it had been constructed with divine magic, polished marble and human architecture. It

truly embodied the magnificence that was Starsgalt, God of Order. The building's central dome, a massive mural depicting Starsgalt's divinity, crowned at nearly one hundred and fifty feet in the air, a massive beacon to the world of the One True God's existence.

Lord Bowon Silvershield, a knight wearing a snow-white cape emblazoned with the golden crown of Arsgoth, walked between massive columns of gilded marble and stared intently at the mural. He was young, maybe twenty-one seasons, and his tall muscular frame carried a youthful face. By his insignia, he belonged to the lowest order of Bre'Dmorian Knighthood, a knight of the crown, referred to as a basic knight.

Those who knew Bowon understood that he was often deep in thought, his hazel eyes distant. Then again, he had always been a quiet man. Though most outsiders thought him dour, his quietude had nothing to do with his stern nature, the latter attributed to his upbringing as a peasant.

In fact, his life as a peasant had taught him many things—primarily that in a life of professional servitude, working in exchange for food and shelter, one quickly learned to speak only when asked a direct question. It was not uncommon that laborers turned to personal thought for comfort. Survival on the streets of Aresleigh required a silent compliance with orders, a vicious cycle of basic slavery.

As Bowon paused at the great Dome of Anduin, his thoughts took an unpleasant turn as he considered what had brought him down this path.

He remembered vividly how plague had gripped the poorest quarter of the city, Temapard Row. It had taken the lives of over seven hundred people before the duke had in the name of Starsgalt ordered whole neighborhoods showing signs of plague, including their inhabitants, to be burned until nothing was left but ash.

At one time the knight himself had been scheduled to burn with the rest of his people. It was in the last stages of the weeping sickness that God had miraculously intervened and purged the sickness from his body, and Bowon had truly been saved. The event had left him with pockmarks covering his torso, a reminder that God had saved him.

A tear trickled down his face.

He recalled looking out the window of the Bre'Dmorian Academy's hospital to see dark smoke rising into the afternoon sky. Even now there were moments when he secretly wished for death, as a part of him wanted to join his family that God had not seen fit to spare. He still heard his parents' screams as soldiers barricaded a section of city and flames licked at the plague victims.

Bowon knew that somewhere deep inside, he was still furious with God. However, he now realized that the duke and Starsgalt had done what was needed to save countless others—a difficult decision, but undeniably the correct choice.

The knight wiped his tears, acknowledging a moment of weakness.

That tragedy led me here, he thought grudgingly. On his tenth birthday he had come back to the Halls of the Hand, seeking resolution. At the time he had sought knowledge from an uncaring God, trying to understand why He allowed such a thing to happen. Mostly, Bowon wondered why only *he* had been spared, while the rest of the plague victims had been burned to death.

He'd asked an elderly cardinal that same question: "Why would a compassionate God of Law, Order, and Justice allow such tragedy, when He has the power to stop it?"

"Young man, what is your name?" the cardinal had inquired.

The young version of the knight bit on his lip before he finally answered, "Bowon of Foxworth Street, sir."

"Bowon, did your family own anything?" Cardinal Del Urelson had asked.

"We once owned a pig."

"Can you recognize that your father could make a decision about that pig, whether right or wrong, that the pig could not understand?"

"My papa would only kill the pigs if they were meant to eat!" the child Bowon had squeaked defiantly.

"That he did," the cardinal chuckled. "Your father knew the consequences of the matter at hand. With no food, you would have starved. He knew that it was necessary for the pig to be eaten, sacrificed to feed your family." The man paused thoughtfully. "It is like that with God. We are but pigs to Him, and what He does is far beyond our comprehension. He makes choices that we may view as wrong, but perhaps it is *we* who are limited in our view."

The lesson stuck with him. And, when he was ready, Cardinal Urelson had recruited Bowon into the Bre'Dmorian Academy and trained him in theology, history, and military matters. Though the young knight's role in God's grand scheme was as a military man, Bowon never forgot where he came from.

The horrific memory secured his faith in something greater, significantly beyond his limited understanding.

My limited understanding. Bowon mouthed the word "limited" as he strode with purpose toward a large antechamber. As he neared the chamber, a pair of young squires snapped to attention and barred his way.

"My lord," said the first squire respectfully, "what business do you have with Archbishop Urelson?"

Bowon announced himself and his need for spiritual guidance.

The second squire followed protocol and bowed his head to Bowon before he went through the ancient oak doors. The squire soon reappeared and invited the knight into another chamber.

Bowon smiled inwardly. He had hoped his relationship with the fragile holy man would gain him admittance, and so it had. Not many men, especially one so freshly inducted into the knighthood, could beg guidance from one of the most powerful priests in the Bre'Dmorian Order.

As Bowon walked through the doors and over to a large wooden table piled high with ancient texts, an old man looked up. The knight dropped to one knee and bowed his head, but not before seeing fondness in the old man's eyes. He knew his decision to talk to the Archbishop was a good one. In fact, he was about to impart some very startling news, news that would require the faith and service of the entire Bre'Dmorian Academy.

"Stand, Bowon. What guidance can this old man give you?" Archbishop Urelson asked in an informal tone, neatly stacking several ancient tomes.

The knight considered his words. "God has chosen me for a task of great magnitude, Your Holiness."

The Archbishop's eyes widened in surprise, then sparkled merrily, almost knowingly. The robed elder closed his eyes and began to hum with power, trying to divine the nature of Starsgalt's desire. "God works in mysterious ways, child. I could feel His blessing on you so long ago; I feel it more so now."

Bowon's breath caught in his chest. If Archbishop Urelson, his friend and mentor, could feel the presence of God, then he was not going mad after all.

"What is it that The One asks of you, my son?" Archbishop Urelson asked and opened his eyes with a concerned expression.

"A servant of The One came to me during the last communion, Your Holiness," Bowon said slowly. "He told me that a spring of great chaos has entered the land and that I must seek it out at all costs. He said that this should take precedence over all other things."

"He has given you a holy crusade! That is why I cannot divine Him. What are you to seek?" the Archbishop asked.

"God did not specify, Your Holiness. He simply said 'find the source of corruption and look for miracles,'" Bowon responded. "Most important, I am to destroy the source at any cost."

The Archbishop looked up with understanding in his eyes. "You are one of the few champions of God since Anduin of Arlock," the words came out in reverence. "In His name, my son, you *must* find the source."



The hierarchy of creation breaks down into gods, angels, olthari, and finally, dragons. This is not so much a pattern of power distribution but the timeline of when each race was created by the gods, assuming the gods have no creator. Though each god is the only 'real' thing, each is chosen by lesser

servants to be viewed as the One True God. This delegates all other gods, in the view of the faithful, false deities or mere angels.

Considering this hierarchy, the first divine race, angels, are not considered to be truly “created” at any one point in time. It is known only that they came to consciousness in the likeness of the gods and though they are a limited version of their respective deities, they are bound by a multitude of rules which do not affect their creators.

The first real creation of the gods, the olthari, were to reside in Heaven as servants to the angelical race, partially-sentient beings bound by eternity’s immortal rules of ascendance, time, and omniscience. It is guessed by the olthari that they were created to serve as slaves to Heaven’s denizens.

The final divine race created by the gods was the dragons—the only divine race created by Heaven to reside outside of Heaven—whose sole divine purpose was to collect information. Thus, their race was created to serve on the Mortal Plane of existence, and due to their dual lineage (divine and mortal) remain bound by the mortal timeline. Dragons age in mortal years.

That is not to say that dragons pass quickly away into nothingness; rather, they have an exceptionally long lifespan, not reaching senility until their ten thousandth year, or three and one half eternities. However, there are those among dragonkind whom the gods choose to transcend age, becoming *Sinafthisar*, or Ancient Ones. These dragons are not fully divine but rise above the effects of age and are stripped of all the color they once displayed in mortal life. In terms of dragon longevity, *Sinafthisar* exceed fifteen thousand years old, are pure white, and are mostly divine.

The price a dragon pays for transforming into a state of *Sinafthisar* is a god-induced slumber of five hundred mortal years. This hibernation, the “Divine Purge,” renders a dragon unable to care for itself and therefore open to all kinds of malicious predators. Additionally, being connected to the Divine Plane of existence had its drawbacks: dragons were no longer at the top of the food chain.

One night, when howling winds preceded a dark storm readying to release its fury upon the Dragonspine Mountains, a divinely inspired message stirred a slumbering silver dragon in its lair. The dragon, a female known by humans as Silverwing, looked up briefly before shifting her position and laying her head back down on her forelegs. In only moments she was back asleep.

Though the dragon had not initially heeded the call of Illuviel, a second, more powerful message assailed her senses. She raised her gigantic head, her golden serpentine eyes opened, and two long ivory horns grazed the granite wall. She regarded the room quietly as her sight readjusted after several centuries of slumber. Not that she needed to be worried. If there was

an intruder in her chamber, she did not need to see it; her peripheral senses would quickly locate the trespasser.

After several minutes of concentration and sensing nothing threatening in her chamber, she stretched her stiffened body out and moved back into a more comfortable position. She wondered how uncommon it was for a transcending dragon to awake spontaneously during a great purge.

The dragon yawned, guessing that she was one of the unlucky ones. Her biological clock told her that it had only been two centuries since she had last flown the skies of Aryth, over the kingdoms of man, elf, and dwarf. It should be easy enough to fall back asleep.

As she repositioned herself comfortably, she closed her eyes and thought of the greatest joy known to dragonkind: collecting information. It was the job of her mighty species to watch events and provide information to Illuviel, the All-Knowing One, and the One True God of Heaven. As she saw it, there was no greater pleasure than watching events coalesce and deteriorate beyond the control of the unbelieving lesser races.

Not that she looked down on the lesser beings for being unbelievers. It was the purpose of each mortal being to follow his or her particular faith, however misguided it might be. Though most followed Illuviel's servants—Starsgalt, Illenthuul, Balzabuth, or even a direct subsidiary of God's faith, Raphael, better known as the Wizeded One—subservience was subservience.

Such peaceful thoughts made the dragon slow her breathing. She was almost relaxed enough to cross back into slumber when another powerful wave of divinity crashed into her. This time it was full force and she recognized its source: for whatever reason, God was calling her. More intriguing, the situation was urgent enough for Him to bombard her with powerful divinely inspired calls.

Silverwing stretched again, pushed herself up to her full height of twenty-six feet—several feet shy of the ceiling of the cavern—and unfurled her great wings. Though her lair was huge, the ancient wyrm was not able to fully stretch. She looked in disgruntlement around the cavern and noticed all the cobwebs that had settled on her hoarded stacks of neatly piled manuscripts.

Satisfied that everything was still in place, she turned to regard herself, noticing that she was not yet *Sinafthisar*, each wing still shone metallic silver. She quickly assessed the rest of her body, raising her forelegs and turning to check her spine. The rest of her body was pure white. She wondered what could make God interrupt her Divine Purge.

She made a snorting noise that resembled a sigh.

Obviously great events are about to take place in the world, important enough for the Unsleeping One to wake me, and here I am worried about becoming Sinafthisar! The dragon chided herself sleepily. She was His most trusted servant in the

whole Material Plane; why shouldn't He wake her if something significant was happening?

Silverwing decided that her reward for service could wait; by way of mortals, she still had plenty of time. She decided that, however inconvenient, at least God believed massive change was about to happen...and He needed her.

Maybe I will finally see something new! she thought.

With a deft movement, the dragon retracted her wings and moved towards the entrance of the ancient hall. As she exited the massive cave and looked out over a two hundred foot precipice, she unfurled her wings and sprang into the air with a great *whoosh*. Though not quite as agile as her twelve thousand two hundred year old frame had once been, her ancient silver wings remembered how to fly and beat furiously in the air.

Silverwing looked around as gusts of wind and sheets of rain pelted her. *It has been a long time*, she mused.

She chuckled—half snort, half gurgle—and soared on, considering all of the possibilities. *Maybe the humans have finally reproduced so much that the world is overrun with them! Maybe the rest of the races have ceased to exist, as I predicted....*

The silver dragon mulled over the countless probabilities she imagined would happen during her slumber. She was so deep in thought that she hardly noticed three hours pass as she flew from her home to Caer Crimmthan, the largest peak of the Dragonspine Mountains.

Having been to this place many times, Silverwing recognized the landscape and found the jutting mouth of a colossal cavern, in to which she glided. As her eyes adjusted to a dim orb of blue light, she noticed four other dragons perched in a semi-circle around a celestial form.

It looked almost like an angel.

She landed and was about to speak, when a silvery voice resonated in her mind. *Trusted servants of the One, I am here to instruct you in a great crusade.* There was a short pause as all the dragons glanced amongst each other. *God, in His infinite wisdom, has felt an unbalancing source of divinity unleashed upon the mortal world.*

What is it that we seek, my lord? The silver dragon thought. She was about to continue but the angel cut her thought off.

The One wishes to test the wits of His faithful servants, Silverwing, the angel explained. *He wishes to see how well you can gather the information He seeks without a true definition of what you are looking for.*

Silverwing heard her brethren silently questioning the angel. It seemed to her that each question only led to more cryptic answers.

In frustration, Silverwing let out a resounding roar meant to draw silence. *And if we find this source, my lord?*

Then you will destroy it! the angel answered.

With that, the presence was gone

2

Variel 32nd, 2020 A.D., Year of the Sword (Mortal Timeline)

THE SOARING crystal spires of the Arcane Institute, the graceful ancient architecture of the Bre'Dmorian Citadel of the Hand, and the prosperity of a city accustomed to high mercantile traffic had made the Dukedom of Aresleigh the second-greatest city in Arsgoth. Over the past decade, the city had grown exponentially, rivaling Natalinople, the ancient capitol of the kingdom, in sheer size and grandeur.

All of Aresleigh breathlessly hoped that King Roderick II would take note of the grand city's large port and defensive positioning by announcing his new residence there. Fed by this hope, rumors spread throughout the region that it was only a matter of time before the king announced his move and named Aresleigh the new Arsgothian capitol. Beneath the whispers, the people of Aresleigh didn't expect much; however, it didn't hurt to prolong the rumor and remain in the speculative spotlight of the entire kingdom.

Aresleigh was split into two districts that skirted the Bay of Dawn, spanning outward from the coastline two miles to the east, and three miles from north to south. Though the port metropolis was six square miles, its seventy-five thousand inhabitants were spread throughout the inner and outer cities. The expansive population required countless miles of thick, mortared walls to protect it and was separated by three massive gatehouses, one for each direction in which a paved road left the illustrious city.

Aresleigh was truly the Jewel of the West.



The crisp morning air began to warm and beams of light pierced the clouds on the first day of fall. To an observer watching the eastern gatehouse—an

imposing stone structure housing a pair of knights, four squires, and sixteen guardsmen to deal with incoming merchants—it was a normal day. And so it began as a normal day for a squire of the Bre'Dmorian Knighthood; the air became warm, the sun beat down as a long line of merchants filed down the King's Road, and the gate's custom officers processed incoming goods.

Areck of Brenly groaned as he watched an argument between three merchants become a heated discussion. It was a frequent early morning occurrence as people inched into the great city, a seamless mass of unwashed bodies all seeking mercantile business. Drawing his brows together in a tight frown, he slowly moved toward the trio thinking of better uses for his time.

Though he was in his ninth year of service to the Bre'Dmorian Academy, Areck spent each morning immersed in guard duty as a sub officer at the eastern gatehouse. The position granted him a measure of pride and respect. He wondered for a moment *why* he was proud of this duty as a customs officer, which was an honor among ninth-year students and highly sought after position within his class.

It isn't that guard duty is glorious, he thought. In fact, it wasn't glorious at all. All day long he watched merchants come through the gates from the outlying hamlets and thorps, trying to sell their wares and make a living.

Maybe the fact that this gate gets the most traffic makes it so desired by the others, he mused silently. Of the three outer gates, the eastern gate amassed the most people. Due to the high volume of passersby, Areck assumed that people who lived in the outlying areas of Aresleigh must accrue great wealth with all their trade.

The daily routine always made him think of an ever-rippling river of randomness. Then his more pragmatic side would point out that his days at the gatehouse tended to be lawful and orderly, except for the rare occasion when a capsized wagon or broken wheel slowed the steadily moving throng.

As Areck passed by several guardsmen confiscating contraband from a seedy-looking trader, the argument between the three merchants grew to shouting. It frustrated him, having to deal with arguments, since most broke out over trivial matters.

Deciding that patience was a virtue, Areck stood for a moment and watched the merchants argue. Satisfied that he understood what was going on, he began to assess the situation, which involved a bucking mule and a pair of carts. He could see from the ripped bags of flour what had transpired: the mule had kicked the flour cart and tipped it into a second cart carrying a load of sweet cakes. Not only had both carts tipped, but several bags of flour had exploded, ruining both merchants' inventory.

No wonder they aren't pleased, he thought grimly, sweeping his finger across some of the gooey remains.

A colorful expletive taking the One's name in vain, aimed at the lineage of one of the merchants brought Areck's head up. Quickly, he stepped between the men and raised his hand. It was one thing to be angry; it was another to curse in God's name. He was greeted with silence.

Areck looked at his commanding officer, a rotund knight-captain of middle years, for reassurance. To his surprise, Lord Bowon Silvershield extended his arm in Areck's direction, nodded, and held Areck's would-be reinforcement back. He guessed that his commander must have been hoping to see a good fight erupt and now that his hope was dashed, was leaving him to rectify the situation.

The young squire groaned as one of the merchants broke the silence with another curse. He knew he had to act before the bad situation turned ugly.

"Gentlemen!" Areck said.

"If ye *fed* that dern beastie, then it wouldn'a been buckin' in the first place!" said a beady-eyed man Areck recognized as the miller Sanderson.

"Bah! Ye no good cheat!" screamed a peasant, his fist shaking righteously in the air. "If ye hadn'a been crowding the streets so bleedin' much, ye wouldn'a spooked my poor Betsy! 'Tis yer broken cart wheels 'ere that done all this damage!"

"Why, I'm the finest miller in these parts!" Sanderson retorted. "I'm thinkin' ye don' understand who yer speakin' to!"

"You blathering idiots," the baker said in frustration, "I don't care about *your* malnourished mule or *your* ruined flour. *My* concern is that these sweet cakes were meant for Lord and Lady Ebony!"

Areck studied the three men, trying to decide a course of action.

"Now if you will both stop your arguing for five minutes," the baker said shrilly, "you can each explain how you plan to pay for my wares, which are ruined."

The others looked at the baker incredulously then simultaneously turned to the squire to mete out justice.

"Milord, me flour was ruined by *'dis* man," the miller pointed to the peasant. "'Tis no fault o' mine, and I expect to be paid!"

"Milord, you's a sensible man," the peasant said. "You's a witness. Dis 'ere man be followin' my poor Betsy too dern close. 'Tis 'is own fault 'is flour was destroyed! Just look at me cart!" The man was near tears.

"Squire, these men are obviously drunkards. He," said the more eloquent merchant, who spit a wad of tobacco to the ground and pointed at the miller, "might have been following too closely." The baker then pointed at the peasant. "And, this man's cart may be ruined. However, what *I* am delivering is of the utmost importance to Lord Ebony. I demand compensation!"

Areck raised his hand for silence. "Do the three of you respect the laws of the merchants' guild?" he asked.

Each man bobbed his head quickly; to refuse the guild's laws was to drop a noose around one's neck.

"Good," Areck looked each man in the eye. "I happened to be watching when the three of you entered the city, and will offer an objective opinion." Areck paused and looked at both the peasant and the miller. "You, sir, know the etiquette when bringing your animals into such a crowded city. Our laws firmly state that all loss pertaining to livestock are the responsibility of the owner."

The miller smiled until Areck continued. "However, Miller Sanderson, you were following much too closely and you're lucky this mule didn't aim for...more *precious* cargo."

The miller opened his mouth, but Areck held up his hand for silence. He turned to face the baker. "You were also traveling too close, sir. If you follow the by-laws of our city, you know that it is your duty to both cover your wares and keep your own cart more than one full length behind another. Thus I determine that the fault in this matter belongs to each of you."

"But, my lord, you cannot...!" The baker and miller began to argue, disgruntled scowls on their aged faces.

"As I have already said, it is the law to keep your livestock under control, to keep a proper distance, and to keep all fresh wares covered. As an officer of this gate, I *could* charge all three of you the clean-up cost, a ten-silver penalty for following too close, and another penalty for not following proper etiquette when entering the city," Areck said, letting the threat hang.

Mouths snapped shut.

"Each of you has lost valuable supplies this morning," Areck said. "And I *know* none of you want to argue my decision, am I correct?"

Areck could tell the baker had misjudged the situation and was wishing that he had never asked for a knightly sentence. There was an uncertain look on the peasant's dirt-stained face. It was well known that by asking for a customs officer's aid the men were bound by whatever decision was made, even if that decision was profitable for no one.

"Since the greatest faith comes from loss," Areck began confidently, "and since there seems to be loss on all sides, I wish to offer a benefit to each of you."

All three men were practical merchants and dropped their gaze to the ground, knowing well that the day's loss would be less than compounded gate penalties.

"Sir," Areck said, nodding towards the baker, "I am of the opinion that to produce your goods you need a reliable supplier of flour?" The baker nodded solemnly. "Would I also be correct in assuming that you come to

Aresleigh each morning to deliver your goods to more than just Lord Ebony? If so, is it possible that you seek a means of transportation both to and from your place of business?"

"Yes, my lord," replied the baker. "Miller White died last summer and I have no constant supplier. And, as you can see by my being here, my search for a good laborer to haul the product has been *less* than fruitful."

"You, sir," Areck pointed to the peasant who owned the mule. "When you come through these gates each dawn your cart is barren. There isn't an abundance of work for laborers this time of year, am I correct?" The peasant bobbed his head excitedly. "This man needs a man with a strong back, able to pick up resources each dawn, bring them to his bakery, and then deliver fresh wares back into the market."

Miller Sanderson began to protest then gave the idea some thought. The squire had managed to keep the baker supplied with flour, possibly give the contract to the miller, while ensuring that it was logistically possible to get supplies to and from the market each day.

"Milord, I see where ye's goin' with dis fine suggestion," the miller piped in. "I would definitely be willin' to assist 'dis fine gentleman 'ere by supplyin' him 'igh quality flour at the lowest possible prices. Not to mention, I also need me a laborer to 'aul flour into the city."

"I dunno what ta say! Me Betsy be da finest pack animal in 'ere Aresleigh!" The peasant was overcome with emotion, his skinny frame bobbing with excitement. "I had come ta sell 'er off today, times bein' so rough 'dese last months. If dese 'ere gentlemen will 'ave me, I can haul deir supplies for 'em!"

And people say that suffering has no part in the eyes of God. Areck chuckled to himself, remembering the old adage. *Only in suffering can we see the greatest miracles....*

The insistent drumming of words broke him out of his reverie. "My lord?"

"My lord, are you all right?" The three merchants looked concerned.

Areck nodded his head in embarrassment. He silently scolded himself for daydreaming on the job.

"My lord," the baker began, "We have been speaking, while you were...uh...locked in thought. With your permission, your words are agreeable and we wish to clean up so that we may discuss the matter fully."

"I wish you a good afternoon, gentlemen," Areck said, saluting. "May Starsgalt's blessing continue to shine on each of you."

With a curt nod, Areck bowed and returned to the gatehouse. When he looked back, the merchants had cleaned what mess there was, moved their carts to the side, and were walking toward the Twisted Oak Inn.

Areck smiled at a job well done. It was just one of the many small miracles he saw each day.

Lord Silvershield was still sitting when Areck approached him. Areck guessed that his commander wanted to see how he dealt with the situation. Though he could not be sure, Areck thought his elder knight had an uncommon smile of pride—a thought he quickly shook away. A squire's superior did not encourage unnecessary actions or manipulation to appease peasants. Areck remembered his professors lecturing on how to keep strict order at a gatehouse, especially during the morning, so traffic could flow along efficiently.

Lord Silvershield stood and approached his squire. He slapped Areck on the back and laughed. "I cannot think of a young man more deserving than you, lad. You have an ingenious mind!"

Areck frowned uncertainly. He didn't understand what his superior found so funny about the situation.

"You have served under my badge for five years now and you continue to amaze me," Lord Silvershield said, still chuckling. The knight-captain had been with Areck long enough to understand his squire's modest nature.

Areck nodded, not knowing if this was a reprimand or a critique of his decision-making.

"Stop looking so dour, Areck," the knight-captain said. "Every day I watch you sort through issues such as this. I am continually astounded that a man with the tongue of a noble remains in the service of the Academy, as you do."

Areck gawked at his commanding officer. What would the other squires think if they heard such talk? The thought made his face redden in a fit of embarrassment. Lord Silvershield chuckled again.

"The point is, you will make a fine knight, lad," Lord Silvershield said with a beaming smile. "It is to your credit that you do not always turn to steel to mete out justice. Compassion will one day make you a great leader. It is because of your sense of justice and honor that I will be proud to sponsor you next year."

Areck tried to contain his excitement. A sponsorship into the knight-hood! The young squire knew many who did not think he belonged in the Bre'Dmorian ranks, and Areck was comforted by the support of his mentor.

He was jarred from his excitement by an avuncular blow to his right shoulder. "Well, lad, enough of this old man's ramblings; it's time to get back to work. Those three set us back quite a bit this morning," Lord Silvershield said as he strode away.

Areck looked out the gates, saw the milling throng of people trying to enter the city, and knew Knight-Captain Silvershield was right. His interference with the merchants had held up the entire line. Areck frowned in concentration as he followed the commander through the gates and began issuing commands.

As the eldest squire assigned to the eastern gates, Areck was responsible for the small force of squires and guardsmen that manned the colossal entryway. Lords Silvershield and Umberton determined the daily routine and let their sub officers run the show. It was beneath a knight of the crown to directly partake in such affairs. Therefore it was no surprise that Lord Silvershield walked past several more arguing merchants into the gatehouse, and sat down to play chess with his counterpart.

“Derrick! Choal!” Areck shouted towards a pair of guardsmen surrounded by a group of people pushing their way to the front of the line. “Calm those people down! We’ll be accommodating their needs within the hour.

“Squires Wolfer and Krys, get out there and reform those lines!” Areck called, pointing to a second group of unruly peasants. “The rest of you, help me sort through the people who have been waiting patiently; it’s time we get these masses moving again!”

The squires and guardsmen snapped to attention and waded into the frenzy of people. Upon seeing Bre’Dmorian colors, the crowd eased a bit.

Areck guessed that it would take the rest of the day to reform the throng of peasants into proper lines. Putting his head down, Areck of Brenly went to work.



It was mid-afternoon when Areck first noticed the plume of dust approaching from the east. Though he could not see the source, he guessed it was a fast approaching rider.

They must be traveling at a full gallop to create such a cloud, Areck thought, his eyes following the King’s Road, which connected Aresleigh to Natalinople.

Areck guessed that the rider was still several minutes away. He pulled a man-at-arms aside and asked that he alert Lord Silvershield to the situation. Whoever was in such a hurry would require a commander’s approval for quick process. The guardsman bolted inside the gatehouse where the two knights sat at their game of chess. In the meantime, Areck turned back to a woman bent with age, bearing mugroot—a vile component consistently used by the Arcane Institute.

As Areck pulled the soft leather cover from the cart, a sulfurous smell wafted out so strong it made his eyes water. Areck flung the cover back over the product without further investigation. He had heard the rumors, that the herb’s oily residue wouldn’t come off the body for days, making the unlucky victim smell like rotten eggs. Deciding that there were no illegal wares in the cart, Areck hurried the old woman through the gates and into the city, hoping never to smell that noxious scent again.

He turned to find Lord Silvershield and Lord Umberton exiting the officer's quarters, looking to the east.

The rider drew close enough to exhibit the royal colors: dark blue livery trimmed with silver, a golden dragon emblazoned on both tunic and cape. The royal courier reigned in an exhausted black thoroughbred and maneuvered quickly through the throng of people. The man's cloak was heavy with dust, his once elegant clothing bedraggled and dirty.

The crowd parted to allow the rider free passage to the gatehouse. The courier nodded curtly in appreciation and spurred his mount forward with graceful haste. It seemed to the squire that the man's haggard face held an unhappy story. Areck recognized the noble bearing of the courier's origin: his dark brown hair, chiseled features, and hawkish nose indicated that the man was Almassian.

The courier's steed bore King Roderick's personal mark. There could be no doubt about whence he came.

The rider brought his horse to a halt and scanned the faces at the gate, locking eyes with Lord Silvershield. "My lord, I apologize for my abruptness, but I come with urgent news for Duke Hawkwind."

"What news is that?" asked Lord Silvershield.

"I have a message of extreme urgency," answered the man, pulling a small parchment from his tunic and handing it to Bowon. "Please, my lord, I cannot reveal the nature of my visit, but that writ is marked with the royal seal."

Lord Silvershield studied the seal for a moment and gestured to Areck. "Allow me to quicken your journey, then, by offering the service of my personal squire, Areck of Brenly. He will guide you swiftly through the city and to the ducal palace."

Areck understood the order, nodded to his commander, and strode off toward the small stables near the gatehouse. He grabbed a bridled stallion, pulled his leg up, and prepared to maneuver the crowded streets of Aresleigh.

He silently vowed to see this man to the palace with all possible haste. He did not question the critical news that had prompted the man's rush across Arsgoth, though he couldn't help but speculate.



As Areck led the courier along the King's Road, gilded with marble and gold, traffic began to thicken. He groaned inwardly, realizing that going west had been a poor decision. It was a common misconception among newcomers entering the city, that the larger road was more accessible during the day. In truth, the King's Road veered west than north into a large

open plaza of vendors, laborers, and other mercantile businesses, often filled with several hundred people.

Seeing no alternative, Areck decided to try a side alley, a shortcut that would increase the distance of their ride but would reduce the amount of time it took to reach the inner city. He just hoped that it would be better than maneuvering through a throng of commoners. The courier rode behind him, eyes alight with wonder.

"This city is a grand sight!" the messenger said in awe. "Natalinople doesn't hold such magic as this!"

Areck nodded as he led them down several other side streets—letting the courier take it all in and ask questions about the city—before he turned down another alley that put the riders in plain view of the inner city walls. Within moments the pair exited the alley and entered a large square adjacent to the inner gatehouse.

Areck felt a slight tickle as arcane magic surrounded them. Though he could not see the magical flow, he sensed the aura of creation that exuded from the inner city. The feeling always made him shudder.

"I still get shivers when I gaze upon the inner city," Areck said when he saw his companion's mouth agape. A brief speculation of Heaven's grandeur passed through Areck's mind. He wondered how much greater God's Halls of Law and Order must be compared to the inner city, which was one of the greatest things he had ever seen. "Have you never visited Aresleigh, sir?"

"My name is Arawnn," replied the messenger, "and, yes, this is my first trip inside the duchy. Too bad it is under such dire circumstances. This looks like a city unaccustomed to tragedy."

Areck pondered the cryptic message as the courier's smile faded into grimness. He tried to place himself in the man's position and decided that maybe the look was not so much from bad news as from sleep deprivation. He decided to show a gesture of honor by offering the man a chance for some small talk.

"You look tired, Messenger Arawnn, and ready for conversation," Areck said thoughtfully. "When you have conducted your business with the duke, come find me; I have never been to Natalinople and would be happy to possibly show you around and barter some stories."

"I just might take you up on that, Squire, if I'm not forced back out on the road," the courier replied with a slight nod.

As the riders neared the inner gatehouse, a knight-captain greeted them. Areck watched the messenger offer the royal seal. The knight-captain took the seal and examined it, studied the squire, and then waved them in with a dismissive gesture.

The pair passed through the grand gatehouse and into an open area that looked like another market. The marble-tiled road became marble slabs, inlaid with the golden lion of the ducal house.

Areck gave the courier a moment to soak it all in; the crystal spires of the Arcane Institute soared to the southwest and the massive marble domes of the Bre'Dmorian Academy were barely visible to the northeast. Before the messenger could speak, Areck spurred his mount down a street lined with inns and temples. When they reached the palace, he heard the courier gasp.

Though he always noticed the ducal palace when entering and exiting the city each day, it had never really impressed him, lacking the arcane possibility or divine majesty of other sights. Yet Areck had to respect a man-made achievement when it was due. What had once been Aresleigh Keep, a small coastal fortress, was now a fortified palace, reconstructed with modern architecture and finished with rare dwarven craftsmanship and stone.

The achievement spoke volumes about the nobleman who ruled the city; Duke Edelin Hawkwind was a boisterous man who had inherited his uncle's title due to the old duke's sudden death. In only nine years, the new duke had changed the port into a thriving metropolis, brought economic power into the region, and quintupled the population. With so much change and prosperity, the duke had become exceedingly popular with the locals who poured into the grand city. The sudden population explosion had forced the duke to expand the original city walls by reducing the old city to rubble and rebuilding a rich inner city, a working class outer city, and a new, better version of Aresleigh.

Areck had tried to find fault in the noble's strategy but finally conceded that Duke Hawkwind had to be a remarkable man to achieve so much. The sheer effort that went into the rebuilding of the city, and Hawkwind Palace, must have been tremendous. It made him wonder if there was magic bound into the stone. According to rumors, the duke had specifically instructed that his palace be erected *without* priestly aid from the Bre'Dmorian or wizardly aid from the Arcane Institute. But one had to wonder.

Perhaps it is pride, Areck thought, wondering why a man would try to produce something perfect without assistance from a higher power.

Areck dismounted and stroked his stallion's muzzle before passing the reins over to a young stable boy. The squire led the goggling courier up a flight of marble stairs to stand before a pair of elite guardsmen whose polished armor gleaming in the sun.

The guardsmen, looking straight ahead, dropped their halberds to block the duo's path. Areck snapped to attention, embarrassed that he had just broken protocol. The courier followed suit.

After a moment the doors opened and an elderly man dressed in brocaded green silk with a dark blue sash across his chest stepped out to greet

them. Areck recognized the nobleman as Lord Faldorn Caldey, a frontier baron who now served as the lord chamberlain of the duke's household. The chamberlain was a polite man with little patience for either the faith-driven Bre'Dmorians or political scheming of upper nobility. Areck assumed that Lord Caldey didn't believe in the One God, yet despite this major shortcoming the man had a reputation of being honorable, stern, and precise in his job.

A sudden thought struck Areck: the lord chamberlain had been awaiting their arrival. This meant that Lord Silvershield had sent Areck not to ensure the messenger received a quick passage but to buy time to send runners to the palace. The realization made Areck's skin crawl, as though his honor had been sullied. He decided that, though it was quite un-knightly, he would ask his lord about this.

Why must I assess everything? Areck reprimanded himself, trying to keep his expression blank. These are blasphemous thoughts. Lord Silvershield has his reasons and it's not my job to question them.

Areck watched as the messenger introduced them and explained their purpose. It looked like the chamberlain would ask Areck to leave when the nobleman touched his ear momentarily, seemed to talk to himself, then nodded his head in what could only be understanding.

"This way, gentlemen," Lord Caldey said, turning on his heel as he walked into the palace. The guards raised their halberds to allow the men to pass.

Areck had never been inside the palace before and its majestic splendor overwhelmed him. When he realized he was gaping at the thick marble columns, rich tapestries, and the polished floor that mapped all of Aresleigh, he attempted to close his mouth. He turned to see the messenger caught up in the same wonderment.

A small cough interrupted Areck's awe. "Gentlemen, I was under the impression that you were in a *hurry?*" the chamberlain emphasized the last word. "If you will follow me, I will lead you to the duke."

The pair followed the chamberlain down a corridor that ended abruptly at a gigantic, elaborate door. With a small gesture, the chamberlain held up his hand for them to wait and entered by himself.

Most likely dwarven, Areck thought, ascertaining that the intricate designs on the door couldn't have been made by man. The squire made a quick mental note: once he arrived back in the Citadel of the Hand, he would do some research on dwarven craftsmanship.

Areck was so deep in thought that he didn't notice the chamberlain open the door. Nor did he see the man beckon them both forward. It wasn't until another discreet cough was put forth that the wide-eyed squire looked up.

“Young man,” said Lord Caldey, looking at Areck, “it is not my place to discipline you, but if you do not consider a meeting with Duke Hawkwind an important enough honor, I will be forced to speak to your knight-commander.”

Areck’s face reddened at the reprimand. *I am embarrassing myself*, he thought furiously, apologizing to the elder noble. He should be honored to meet a man who worked so well in The One’s name, a man who had redefined how a truly dignified nobleman should act.

“Your Grace, per your request, may I present the messenger, Arawnn of Almassia, and his escort, Squire Areck of Brenly,” the lord chamberlain bowed deeply to the duke.

Duke Edelin Hawkwind was a middle-aged man with a hawk nose, black hair, and the sharpest eyes Areck had ever seen. He looked up from his desk and rolled a pair of scattered maps and placed them in round containers before carefully placing his quill into an inkwell. With a powerful air of authority the duke pushed himself away from his desk and strode toward the three men.

“Thank you, Lord Caldey, I think I can handle these two,” the duke smiled. “Please give the guardsman a break; let them take the rest of the afternoon off.”

“Your grace?” Caldey asked, his bushy eyebrows rising in alarm.

“Whatever Messenger Arawnn brings is for my ears only,” replied the duke. “Besides, there is a Squire of the Hand in my room, should any mishaps occur.” Lord Hawkwind turned his dark eyes upon Areck. “You are trained in the arts of war, are you not?”

As the duke’s gaze penetrated Areck, the squire felt a sweeping aura of divinity emanating from the man. It was strong enough to incite Areck’s unfortunate reaction of nausea in the presence of the divine. For a moment Areck was speechless. He had been prepared to deliver the messenger to the duke and go back to his duties. However, Duke Hawkwind was asking him to stay—and if he could wield a weapon. He almost didn’t know what to say.

“Yes...er, yes, your grace, I am a master with both the long sword and stave,” Areck responded. He regarded the duke with a new respect building in his heart, realizing that God had entered this noble’s life. Areck figured that he would never again meet a non-knight of such greatness, one that left him so breathless and nervous.

“As you wish, your grace,” Lord Caldey sighed, eyeing Areck with skepticism. “If you should need my assistance, do not hesitate to call out.” The lord chamberlain left the room and barked orders at the guards.

“Such a good man,” the duke remarked. “Baron Caldey has been like a father to me since Duke Eleran passed away.” There was a fleeting sadness in the duke’s expression. “Look at me...going on forty-four seasons and

still affected by such memories.” Hawkwind wandered over to a table holding several bottles of liquor. With a slow hand, the duke studied several flasks of wine before settling on a pungent apple brandy, and poured himself a cup. He then turned to face the pair of waiting men.

“Messenger Arawnn, you look parched,” the duke said, filling a second glass for the courier. “Take this and collect your thoughts, sir; when you’re ready, I wish to hear your story.”

Areck again wondered why the duke had not dismissed him. It was not his place to stand before royalty like this, and certainly not to hear private information. Areck lowered his gaze, moved silently toward the exit, and stood just to the right of the door.

Though he had no idea why the duke had not released him, as a senior member of royalty Duke Hawkwind was to be treated like a knight-commander. The same rules applied: it was not Areck’s place to question. His own speculation about the duke’s motives made Areck’s face glow with shame. He was here for a reason and would remain silent until the duke called upon him, doing his best to ignore the conversation.

The messenger accepted the cup of brandy and downed the fiery liquor in one gulp. He knelt uneasily before the duke and spoke the words that would forever change the face of the Arsgoth: “Your grace, I regret to inform you that King Roderick II has been killed on a hunting expedition in the Moonwood Forest.”

Areck nearly bit through his tongue. A chilling wave of nausea coursed through his bones.

The king was dead.