

A TALE BASED ON THE LIGHTBRINGER LORE



RISE OF THE FIRST BEARER

WRITTEN BY NOAH FIELDS

COVER ARTWORK BY AURAEON

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CHAPTER 1

THE SEPTENTRIONAL TOWER

THE MAN'S FOOTSTEPS ECHOED ON THE ICE. ONE STEP AT A TIME, ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER, ON AND ON AND ON. HIS BROWN CLOAK, ONCE SEEMING LIKE A POWERFUL WARD AGAINST THE COLD, DID LITTLE TO HELP HIM HERE.

HOW LONG HAD HE BEEN WALKING THIS PATH, ALONG THE ANCIENT RIVERS? WEEKS? MONTHS? HE COULDN'T TELL. THE ZENITH SUN HUNG HIGH IN THE SKY, BUT IT GAVE OFF LITTLE LIGHT AND EVEN LESS HEAT. DAYS WERE LONG HERE, FAR LONGER EVEN THAN AT THE WORLD OF UNIVERSALITY. IT WAS AS THOUGH THE ZENITH SUN NEVER MOVED IN THE SKY, AND IT WAS HARDLY COLDER AND DARKER ON THE RARE OCCASIONS IT DID SET.

THE MAN COULD BARELY MOVE. HE WAS EXHAUSTED. YET ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER HE PROCEEDED ON, THROUGH THE COLDNESS AND THE BLEAKNESS. TEMPTING AS IT WAS TO THROW HIS SWORD TO THE

SIDE, JUST A BIT LESS WEIGHT TO CARRY, HE YET KEPT IT, KNOWING ITS POWER WAS FAR GREATER THAN ITS MERE WEIGHT. HE COULD NOT GIVE UP NOW, FOR IN THE DISTANCE HE SAW HIS GOAL AT LAST.

THE SEPTENTRIONAL TOWER AROSE IN THE DISTANCE, BENEATH THE ZENITH SUN. A MASSIVE STRUCTURE. OTHERWORLDLY, SOMETHING THAT COULD ONLY HAVE BEEN CREATED BY THE SIX GODS WORKING IN HARMONY. THE TOWER AROSE COUNTLESS KILOMETERS, TALL ENOUGH THAT THE MAN COULD NOT TRULY FATHOM ITS MAJESTY WITH HIS MORTAL EYES. TO THINK THAT IN TRUTH IT WAS YET TALLER, STILL RISING FROM THE RIVER NEXUS... HOW FAR WOULD IT BE AT THIS POINT? FOR A STRUCTURE SO INCREDIBLY LARGE, IT WOULD BE VISIBLE PERHAPS THOUSANDS OF KILOMETERS AWAY, MAYBE TENS OF THOUSANDS. MANY DAYS OF TRAVEL MIGHT STILL BE NECESSARY.

THE MAN BLINKED. HE HAD STOPPED WALKING... WHEN? HE SAT, STARING AT THE TOWER, DEEP IN THOUGHT. HE SHOOK HIMSELF OFF.

NOW RISE, HEAD FOR THE TOWER, WHERE
SKIES ARE CLOSER. THIS WAS HIS PURPOSE.
THIS WAS HIS QUEST.

TO ASCEND THE SEPTENTRIONAL TOWER.
TO UNLEASH THE POWER, SMALL AS IT
WAS, HE HELD WITHIN HIM, TO FORCE
THE GODS THEMSELVES TO INTERVENE.

TO DO WHAT MUST BE DONE.

COULD THE INNER FLAME WARM YOUR
HEART? HE RECALLED WONDERING THE
QUESTION, WHEN FIRST THE POWER WAS
BESTOWED UPON HIM. PERHAPS IT DID,
MUSED THE MAN, AS HE TOOK ONE MORE
STEP FORWARD THROUGH THE FROZEN
WASTES.

“HALT.”

THE VOICE ECHOED, LOUD AND FIRM,
AS IF COMING FROM EVERY DIRECTION.
THE MAN STUMBLED, IN SHEER SURPRISE
AT THE SOUND OF ANOTHER. HE FOUND
HIS VOICE AFTER A MOMENT’S PAUSE,

REALIZING HE'D NOT SPOKEN IN MANY MONTHS.

“WHO IS THIS?”

THE VOICE THAT RANG BACK SOUNDED AS IF COMING FROM A WOMAN FORGED FROM ROCK. INDEED, TWO GREAT FOREPAWS SEEMED TO REACH OUT OF THE ICE, WHILE YET LEAVING NO HOLE. THE BEING, WHATEVER IT WAS, PULLED ITSELF UP OUT OF THE GROUND, INTO EXISTENCE.

A GREAT BEAST OF DIRT, OF ROCK, ON A GRAND PILLAR OF ICE. PERHAPS FIVE METERS TALL, THE CREATURE TOWERED OVER THE MAN. TWO HIND LEGS, A POWERFUL AND MUSCULAR TAIL, AND THE BODY OF A GREAT LION, IF MADE OF ROCK AND STONE. WITH EACH MOVEMENT, BITS OF DIRT AND ROCK FELL FROM THE FIGURE. AND THIS BEAST HAD THE FACE OF...A HUMAN FEMALE, WEARING A NECKLACE OF THE HEPTANITY? THE MAN MUSED AT THE STRANGENESS OF THIS, MADE ONLY MORE IMPOSING AS SHE UNFURLED A PAIR OF WINGS THAT SEEMED MADE OF THE

ICE. IN THE ILLUMINATION, THE MAN SAW THAT TWO SKELETONS SURROUNDED HER, THOSE THAT LOOKED LIKE SERVANTS OF THE OPHIDIAN DEMON.

THE MAN SHUDDERED.

“I AM A SCION OF THE ARMORED COLOSSUS. MY NAME IS THEMENS.” SHE AFFIXED THE MAN WITH A COLD STARE, EYES OF BLACK MARBLE PIERCING HIS SOUL. “TELL ME, MORTAL, WHY DO YOU WISH TO PASS?”

THE MAN’S REASON WAS FORGOTTEN FOR AN INSTANT AS HE LOOKED UP AT THE FIGURE BEFORE HIM. “I WISH TO ASCEND THE TOWER, TO REACH THE GATE OF GODS. I WISH TO PLEAD WITH THE SIX ON MY BEHALF, AND THE BEHALF OF OTHERS.” HE DID NOT SPEAK OF THE POWER HE HELD. THAT, HE SUSPECTED, WOULD BE A TRULY TERRIBLE IDEA.

“ONE DAY THE GUIDING STAR WILL SHINE ON, MORTAL. ON THAT DAY THE JOURNEY WILL BE FAR EASIER. YOUR CAUSE CANNOT WAIT?” A ROCK FELL OFF THEMENS’

BODY.

THE MAN SHOOK HIS HEAD. IN A SINGLE ABSURD MOMENT, THE IDENTITY OF THEMENS BECAME CLEAR TO HIM. A SPHINX. HE'D HEARD TALES LONG AGO, OF THOSE WHO TEST MORTALS BEFORE THEY MAY PROCEED TO THE RIVER NEXUS. "I DO NOT FEAR THE COLD. THIS CAUSE IS OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE. THE GODS MUST LISTEN. I CANNOT WAIT FOR THE GUIDING STAR TO ARISE. I MUST GO NOW, WHILE THE TOWER IS AT ITS PEAK."

THEMENS TOOK A STEP FORWARD. THE MAN NEARLY COLLAPSED AS THE EARTH SHOOK AROUND HIM. SOMEHOW, THE ICE REMAINED SOLID BENEATH THEIR FEET. THEMENS LEANED IN, WINGS FLAPPING, LOOKING AT HIM CURIOUSLY, BEFORE SITTING BACK ON HER HAUNCHES. "THIS FORM IS TEMPORARY," SHE SAID. "I CAN REMAIN HERE FOR NOT MUCH LONGER BEFORE THIS BODY CRUMBLES TO PIECES. IS THAT TIME ENOUGH FOR YOU TO EXPLAIN YOUR TALE...AND HOW YOU CAME TO POSSESS THE STRANGE POWER WITHIN YOU?"

SHE KNEW. DAMN IT ALL, SOMEHOW,
SHE KNEW!

“REMEMBER A TIME IN THE GARDEN
OF FORSAKEN SOULS,” SAID THEMENS. “
UNDER THE BLEEDING MOON, YOU WOULD
REMAIN MOTIONLESS.”

THE MAN TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND
SAT. “IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU ALREADY KNOW
MUCH. I WILL BEGIN THERE. IN THE GARDEN.”

CHAPTER 2

THE GARDEN OF FORSAKEN SOULS

“THE PLACE WAS NOT ALWAYS THE GARDEN OF FORSAKEN SOULS.” THE MAN SHUDDERED. “ONCE, IT WAS BEAUTIFUL. ALIGHT WITH THE POWER OF UNIVERSALITY. UNFORMED, UNTETHERED, UNLIKE THE OTHER WORLDS BEYOND.”

THEMENS WATCHED THE MAN, A CURIOUS EXPRESSION IN HER FACE. “TELL ME, MORTAL. WHAT HAPPENED TO IT?”

“YOU ALREADY KNOW, DON’T YOU? WE CAN’T HAVE BEEN THE ONLY ONES AFFECTED. THE OPHIDIAN DEMON SENT HIS FORCES TO US. THE SPIRIT OF THE ESSENCE BROKE THE HEPTANITY, DISRUPTED EXISTENCE.”

THEMENS BLINKED, BITS OF DUST FLAKING DOWN FROM THE SPHINX’S BODY. “YOUR ASSUMPTION IS RATHER BOLD, MORTAL. THERE IS MUCH YOU DO NOT KNOW. I WOULD ADVISE YOU NOT SPEAK SO ILL OF ESSENCE IN MY PRESENCE. BUT GO ON.”

THE MAN'S VOICE BROKE FOR A MOMENT. "I CAN STILL HEAR THEIR CRIES, I STILL SEE DEATH IN THEIR EYES... DEMONS OF GREAT POWER INVADED US. WE COULDN'T FIGHT AGAINST THEM, NOT AGAINST POWER LIKE THAT. WE HAVE NO SCORCHING DRAGON TO HELP US, NO ARMORED COLOSSUS. UNIVERSALITY WAS SUPPOSED TO BE THAT WHICH BOUND US ALL TOGETHER, OF ALL AND OF NONE. BUT THAT MADE US WEAK. OUR POWER WAS DRAINED TO FEED THE HUNGER OF THE OPHIDIAN DEMON, AND THE WORLD OF UNIVERSALITY BECAME DESOLATE. MY PEOPLE, MY FRIENDS... MYSELF."

THE MAN COULDN'T STOP THE TEARS RUNNING DOWN HIS FACE. HE SAW IN HIS MIND'S EYE THE DARK CRYSTALS, THE OVERPOWERING DECAY AND FLESH OF THE DEMON THEY'D CREATED. "WE WERE TRICKED INTO A RITUAL TO SAVE US, A PLOY BY THE OPHIDIAN DEMON TO BREAK THE CURSE, BUT INSTEAD WE STRENGTHENED IT, AT THE COST OF OUR OWN SOULS." HE TOOK IN A SHUDDERING BREATH. "THEY ENDED THEIR JOURNEY, SAW THEIR DREAMS

JUST FADE AWAY, UNABLE TO BREAK THE SPELL.”

THEMENS SHOOK HER HEAD. “I DID NOT KNOW OF THIS. I KNEW OF THE OPHIDIAN DEMON’S RECENT ACTIONS. YOU WERE RIGHT TO SAY THAT YOUR WORLD WAS NOT THE ONLY ONE AFFECTED. WE ARE ALL IN THE MIDST OF A CRISIS, MORTAL. I’D HEARD ABOUT THOSE TRAPPED IN THE GARDEN, SUFFERING FROM THE CURSE INFLICTED ON THEMSELVES, AND HOW ONE MORTAL ESCAPED FROM IT, BUT I DID NOT YET RECOGNIZE THE TRUE NATURE OF THE PLACE. I AM SORRY TO FORCE YOU TO RECALL THESE MEMORIES, BUT YOU MUST GO ON.”

“WE WERE THERE,” WHISPERED THE MAN. “I WAS THERE. I WAS ONE OF THEM. TRAPPED IN THE HUSK OF A HIDEOUS DEFORMED FOREST, THE SAP OUR TEARS AS WE SUFFERED, THE TWISTING BRANCHES REACHING UP TO THE SKY FOR DELIVERANCE. YET NONE CAME, AND SOON WE HAD ALL GIVEN UP OUR LAST VESTIGE OF HOPE. UNTIL SHE ARRIVED.”

“SHE?” THEMENS COCKED HER HEAD.

THE MAN NODDED. HE NOTICED, DIMLY, THAT THEMENS’ BODY WAS SMALLER THAN BEFORE, MORE AND MORE OF IT FLAKING AWAY OVER TIME. SHE SAID SHE HAD LITTLE TIME BEFORE THIS FORM CRUMBLED. HOW MUCH WAS LEFT? “I COULDN’T SEE AT THAT TIME. NONE OF US COULD, TRAPPED FOR SO LONG IN THE HUSK OF THE HUMAN-SHAPED TREES AS OUR SORROW WAS CONSUMED BY THE OPHIDIAN DEMON. YET WE COULD SENSE HER, FEEL HER PRESENCE, AND SOMEHOW WE KNEW AS SHE FOUGHT. A WOMAN, IN ANGELIC GARB, WITH IMMENSE POWER. IN ONE HAND SHE HELD A GRAND WHITE STAFF, AND IN THE OTHER, A BLADE OF SUCH MIGHT THAT AS SHE SWUNG IT THE DEMONS WERE SLAUGHTERED WITH EASE.”

THEMENS RECOILED, EYES WIDE WITH SURPRISE. “SHE WAS THERE IN PERSON? AND SHE CARRIES THE SWORD OF CRYSTALLINE LIGHT?”

THE MAN RAISED HIS SWORD AND PULLED

IT FROM ITS SHEATH. A HOLY GLOW SHONE FROM IT. THE AREA WAS BATHED IN A PURE GOLDEN LIGHT FOR METERS AROUND. “NOT ANYMORE. SHE LEFT IT FOR ME.” HE RETURNED IT, THE GLOW VANISHING IN AN INSTANT. “ITS LIGHT ATTRACTS THE ATTENTION OF DEMONS, SO I TRY TO KEEP IT SHEATHED UNLESS I MUST FIGHT.”

“CELESTHEIA COMES FROM THE WORLD OF WISDOM. I’VE LEARNED TO TRUST HER JUDGMENT. IF SHE FELT IT PRUDENT TO VISIT YOUR WORLD IN PERSON, I WILL ACCEPT THAT HER REASONS ARE SOUND. BUT STILL, TO GIVE A MORTAL THE SWORD... THINGS HAVE TRULY GROWN DIRE.” SHE LEANED IN. “I HAVEN’T MUCH TIME LEFT BEFORE THIS BODY IS LOST. QUICKLY, NOW, TELL ME. HOW DID SHE FREE YOU FROM THE GARDEN? AND HOW DO YOU CARRY THE LIGHT? I CANNOT SENSE THE SWORD’S POWER, BUT I STILL DETECT SOMETHING IN YOU. SOMETHING MORE FUNDAMENTAL.”

“THE WOMAN — CELESTHEIA, YOU CALLED HER — DESTROYED HUNDREDS OF DEMONS THROUGH HER SWORD AND STAFF, UNLEASHING

A TRUE FURY OF A TYPE I HAVE NEVER SEEN. WITH FEW LEFT TO FEED UPON US, OUR SORROW COULD FLOW OUT IN A PURE RIVER. AS IT DID, CELESTHEIA SANG A PURE TONE. I DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW IT HELPED, OR WHAT THE SONG WAS, TRULY. YET SHORTLY AFTERWARDS, THE CURSE WANED ENOUGH FOR A SINGLE BEING TO ESCAPE. ME."

THE MAN'S TEARS FELL FREELY NOW. "SHE LEFT THE SWORD, TOLD ME THAT I NEEDED IT, AND VANISHED AS QUICKLY AS SHE CAME. BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE..." HE LOOKED IN THE POCKET OF HIS CLOAK. YES, THERE IT WAS. HE PULLED IT FROM HIS POCKET, HELD IT UP TO THEMENS.

HER BODY DECAYED FASTER NOW, ONE EYE CRUMBLING TO DUST AND HER FOREPAWS TURNING INTO SAND. SHE WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO LAST ANOTHER MINUTE. YET SHE LEANED IN FURTHER TO WITNESS WHAT HE HELD. A DARK GREY ROCK WITH HINTS OF BLUE, ROUGHLY THE SIZE OF A FIST, PERFECTLY ROUND AND UNREMARKABLE WERE IT NOT FOR THE SHEER SADNESS

THAT HIT THE MAN AS HE LOOKED UPON IT.

“IN THE LAST INSTANT, THEY SPOKE TO ME. THE OTHERS, TRAPPED THERE. MAY THIS PRECIOUS STONE WE LEAVE FOR YOU FREE OUR SOULS FROM THIS CURSE. MAY THOSE ENDLESS TEARS DROWN THE FIRE THAT CONSUMES EVERY HEART. THIS STONE IS THE ESSENCE OF OUR SUFFERING, GIVEN TIME TO FORM WHEN IT WAS NOT USED FOR SUSTENANCE BY OTHERS.” THE MAN REPLACED THE STONE IN HIS POCKET. “SO NOW I GO, TO PLEAD WITH THE SIX. THE FIVE NOW, IF THE OPHIDIAN DEMON HAS BEEN THROWN FROM THEIR COUNCIL AT THE GATE OF GODS. TO BEG THEM TO HELP US, TO FREE THOSE WHO ARE LEFT.”

THEMENS SAT BACK, BILLOWING DUST. “YOUR CAUSE IS NOBLE. I BID YOU TO PASS ON. BEWARE, MORTAL, FOR THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES AWAITS YOU. MAY WE MEET AGAIN, IN MY TRUE FORM. BUT FIRST, YOU NEVER DID SAY. WHAT IS THE LIGHT YOU POSSESS, AND HOW DID YOU COME TO HAVE IT?”

THE MAN COULD FEEL IT IN HIM, AN ETHEREAL FORCE FLOWING THROUGH HIS VEINS. THE LIGHT. BUT WHAT WAS IT? WHAT WAS IT HE HELD, DEEPER THAN THE STONE, DEEPER THAN THE SWORD OF CRYSTALLINE LIGHT? AS THEMENS' BODY CRUMBLLED, HE SAID THE TRUTH. THE TRUTH THAT FRIGHTENED HIM, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE.

“I DON'T KNOW.”

“NEITHER DO I. I SUSPECT WE WILL, IN TIME. BID THEE WELL, MO...” SHE DID NOT MANAGE TO FINISH THE LAST WORD BEFORE THE SPHINX COLLAPSED INTO DUST. ONCE AGAIN, THE MAN WAS ALONE.

HE STAYED FOR A MOMENT LONGER, IN RESPECT FOR THEMENS AND CELESTHEIA, AND THEN CONTINUED ON TOWARD THE SEPTENTRIONAL TOWER.

CHAPTER 3

CONFRONT THE GREAT ABYSSAL FLAMES

THE MAN CONTINUED ON TOWARDS THE RIVER NEXUS AND THE YET GROWING TOWER. THE WINTER SOLSTICE YET APPROACHED, AND WITH EACH PASSING STEP, IT SHOULD HAVE GROWN COLDER. YET HIS BREATH SOON CEASED FOGGING UP BEFORE HIM. HE FOUND IT CURIOUS, BUT NOT CONCERNING, UNTIL HE FOUND HIMSELF SWEATING BENEATH HIS CLOAK, YET COUGHING FROM THE SCENT OF SULFUR.

SOMETHING WAS TRULY WRONG AT THE NEXUS. THE MAN PROCEEDED ONWARDS, EVEN AS THE ICE HE WALKED UPON GREW MORE AND MORE COVERED WITH BLACKENED SOOT. THAT IT FAILED TO MELT WAS NOT SOMETHING HE FOUND HIMSELF WONDERING ABOUT.

AS THE MAN PROCEEDED, HE FOUND A TRAIL OF ASH, FORKING INTO TWO, ONE LEFT, ONE RIGHT. BOTH SEEMED TO MOVE TOWARD THE TOWER. THE FIRST PASSED

THROUGH A WIDE, FLAT EXPANSE, THE OTHER MOUNDS OF ASH AND BONE. THE MAN PAUSED, PONDERING HIS OPTIONS. THE FIRST SEEMED SAFER, FOR IT WAS FAR LESS LIKELY TO BE AMBUSHED, AND THE OTHER APPEARED OMINOUS AND FOREBODING. THE MAN TOOK A SINGLE TENTATIVE STEP FORWARD ON THE PATH ON THE LEFT, THEN ANOTHER, BEFORE—

STAY BACK. GO ANOTHER WAY.

A STRAY THOUGHT SEEMINGLY FORCED ITS WAY INTO THE MAN'S MIND. HE STEPPED BACK IN SURPRISE. WHERE THIS THOUGHT ORIGINATED, HE COULD NOT TELL, YET IT SEEMED TO ECHO WITH POWER, OF A SORT THAT REMINDED HIM OF THEMENS, AND CELESTHEIA.

FOOLISHLY, HE PAID IT NO HEED.

BY MY OWN WILL, I THROW MYSELF IN THE ABYSS, THE MAN THOUGHT TO HIMSELF AS THE GROUND GAVE WAY BENEATH HIM. ASH FLEW INTO HIS EYES, CLOGGING HIS MOUTH AND NOSE. EACH ATTEMPT

AT A BREATH CAUSED HIM TO SPLUTTER, SPITTING OUT GRIME. ROCKS GRAZED HIM, SCRAPING HIS ARMS AND LEAVING SHALLOW CUTS. HE FELL AND ROLLED DOZENS, HUNDREDS OF METERS, BEFORE AT LAST COMING TO A STOP.

THE MAN COULDN'T BRING HIMSELF TO MOVE. HIS BODY ACHED AS HE SPAT ONE LAST MOUTHFUL OF ASH OUT, PRAYING — PRETENDING, RATHER — THAT HE MAY YET FIND HIMSELF SAFE.

FOOLISH, WHISPERED THE VOICE. BUT NOT DAMNING.

THE MAN HAD LITTLE ENERGY TO WORRY ABOUT THE VOICE. HE STOOD ON SHAKY LEGS, TAKING STOCK OF THE SITUATION. HE YET HAD THE SWORD, BUT THE STONE...

THE STONE WAS GONE. THE MAN WHISPERED A CURSE TO HIMSELF AS HE INSPECTED HIS SURROUNDINGS. A GREAT CAVERN, STREAKED WITH GLOWING RED STONE, BARELY BRIGHT ENOUGH TO SEE BY. STALAGMITES MANY METERS TALL AROSE. HE COULD

SEE NO CEILING, BUT THERE MUST BE ONE,
FOR HE COULD NO LONGER SEE THE ZENITH
SUN. NOR THE TOWER. IN THAT MOMENT,
HE REALIZED THAT HE NO LONGER EVEN
KNEW THE DIRECTION TO TRAVEL. EVERYTHING
LOOKED THE SAME IN THIS CAVERN.

AS HE TOOK A HESITANT STEP FORWARD,
SOMETHING THE MAN HEARD A SOUND
THAT SENT CHILLS DOWN HIS SPINE —
DEMONIC SCRABBLING AND GREAT CRIES
FROM ALL DIRECTIONS.

HE KNEW THAT SOUND. HE HATED THAT
SOUND. HE FEARED THAT SOUND.

DEMONS APPROACHED. HUNDREDS
OF THEM.

NEVER LOSE YOUR FAITH, ECHOED THE
VOICE IN THE MAN'S HEAD. IN THIS FIGHT,
YOU BRING THE CRYSTALLINE LIGHT.

IGNORING THE PRESENCE HAD PROVEN
DANGEROUS BEFORE. TAKING A SINGLE
DEEP BREATH, THE MAN DREW THE SWORD.

IN AN INSTANT, THE CAVERN BRIGHTENED, THE DARKNESS CLEARING BEFORE HIM FROM THE LIGHT OF THE BLADE. DARK GREY WALLS WERE TO HIS LEFT AND RIGHT, MANY HUNDREDS OF METERS DISTANT, WITH SMALL OPENINGS AND CAVES DOTTED AMONG THEM. THE SLOPE BEHIND HIM WAS STEEP, IMPOSSIBLY DIFFICULT TO CLIMB BACK UP. THE ONLY CLEAR DIRECTION WAS FORWARD.

OF COURSE, THE DOZENS UPON DOZENS OF GREAT BEASTS POURING OUT OF THE WALLS WOULD MAKE THAT DIFFICULT. BEINGS MADE OF ASH, WITH EYES AND TONGUES OF PURE FLAME THAT SOMEHOW GAVE OFF LITTLE LIGHT. THEIR FORMS SHIFTED AND TWISTED, CHANGING FORMS IN AN INSTANT — ONE MOMENT ON TWO LEGS LIKE A HUMAN, A WINGED SERPENT THE NEXT, A CLOUD OF DUST THE THIRD. IT WAS HARD TO TELL WHETHER A MASS WAS ONE BEAST OR MANY, BUT THE MAN WAS CERTAIN THIS WAS MORE THAN HE HAD EVER SEEN OR SENSED BEFORE SINCE HE HAD REGAINED HIS HUMAN FORM. PERHAPS NOT QUITE AS MANY AS CELESTHEIA HAD

BATTLED TO RESTORE HIM, BUT HER POWER ECLIPSED HIS OWN. AN IMPOSSIBLE HORDE TO DEFEAT.

YET THE MAN HAD NO CHOICE. HE SWUNG THE BLADE.

A BEAM OF CONCENTRATED LIGHT BURST FROM THE TIP OF THE SWORD AS HE SWUNG, CLEAVING THE NEAREST ASHEN BEAST IN TWO, DESPITE IT STILL BEING MANY METERS AWAY. THE ASH SETTLED TO THE GROUND RATHER THAN REFORMING. TWO MORE FIGURES TOOK ITS PLACE AND CLOSED THE DISTANCE IN AN INSTANT. DODGING A BLADE MADE OF FLAME AND A CLAW OF ASH THAT TORE HIS CLOAK, THE MAN THRUST WITH THE SWORD. A FLASH OF LIGHT CAUSED THE NEAREST TWO BEASTS TO FALL AND STUNNED OTHERS NEARBY.

WEAVING BETWEEN BLOWS, HE SLEW DEMON AFTER DEMON. THE SMELL OF SULFUR GREW EVER STRONGER WITH EACH HE CUT DOWN, NEAR OR FAR, AS HE DUCKED BLOWS, DANCED BETWEEN STALAGMITES TO KEEP AS MUCH DISTANCE AS POSSIBLE,

AND DOVE THROUGH THE DARKNESS. YET THE LIGHT OF THE SWORD OF CRYSTALLINE LIGHT DIMMED AS ITS WIELDER GREW MORE EXHAUSTED. THEIR NUMBERS SEEMED ENDLESS. HOW COULD HE POSSIBLY MANAGE TO DEFEAT THEM ALL?

“ENOUGH!” CRIED A VOICE. A THUNDERING BASS, WITH A BRUTAL, GRAVELLY UNDERCURRENT. THE MAN STOPPED. THE DEMONS STOPPED. AS ONE, THEY TURNED.

A CLOUD OF ASH BILLOWED INTO THE ROOM. AS IT TOOK FORM, THE MAN STEPPED BACK IN FEAR. AN ENORMOUS DEMONIC FACE, MANY TIMES LARGER THAN ANY OTHER DEMON HE HAD SEEN THUS FAR. IT FLOATED PERHAPS TWO METERS OFF THE GROUND, YET ITS EYES WERE NEAR THE TOP OF THE CAVERN. DARK RED EYES, THE SAME HUE AS THE ZENITH SUN, BORED INTO THE MAN, SEEMING TO STARE DIRECTLY INTO HIS SOUL.

“YOU HAVE COME FAR ENOUGH.” AS THE BEAST SPOKE, IT REVEALED AN ARRAY OF DARK, CHARCOAL TEETH LIT FROM

BEHIND BY A FLAME THAT MADE THE MAN SWEAT. ASH BLEW INTO HIS FACE. "YOU HAVE DESTROYED TOO MANY. I AM THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES. YOU WILL PERISH NOW!"

THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES IS HERE? THE VOICE IN THE MAN'S HEAD HAD BEEN SILENT OF LATE. HE'D NEARLY FORGOTTEN ABOUT IT IN THE FIGHTING. I DID NOT INTEND TO REVEAL MYSELF THIS EARLY, BUT MY HAND HAS BEEN FORCED. FOR NOW, MORTAL...

RUN.

HE RAN. THE MAN DASHED TO THE NEAREST EXIT HE COULD FIND, SLASHING AT THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES AS HE DID SO. THE LIGHT WAS ABSORBED BY THE DEMON. HE SIMPLY REMAINED THERE, FLOATING, NOT AFFECTED LIKE HIS BRETHREN. THE SWORD OF CRYSTALLINE LIGHT HAD GROWN SOMEWHAT FAINT, BUT THE MAN HAD NO TIME TO HESITATE OR LOOK CLOSER AS A HORRIFIC CACOPHONY SOUNDED BEHIND HIM, ALMOST LIKE AN

AVALANCHE. UNCERTAIN HOW A BEAST MADE OF ASH THAT FLOATED THROUGH THE AIR WOULD MAKE SUCH NOISES, HE CHANCED A GLANCE BEHIND.

THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES HAD TAKEN A NEW FORM, THE ASH FORMING OBSIDIAN PLATES AND TEETH MANY METERS HIGH. A PAIR OF HORNS SAT ATOP THE BEAST'S HEAD, AS IT FLEW THROUGH THE AIR TOWARDS HIM. THE TEETH CLACKED TOGETHER, A DEAFENING SOUND OF STONE ON STONE. SPECKS OF RED LIGHT FOCUSED ON THE MAN AS THE BEAST BEGAN TO LAUGH.

“RUN, MORTAL!” THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES SHOUTED AS THE MAN TURNED TO FLEE, TRYING TO FORCE THE IMAGE OF THAT THING OUT OF HIS MIND. “I, THE GRAND DEVOURING MOUTH, I CRUSH YOUR BODY, GRIND YOUR BONES TO DUST AND REDUCE YOU TO A LIFELESS CARCASS!” THE MAN BARELY HEARD THE TAUNT AS HE DASHED THROUGH ANOTHER CAVE, HOPING AGAINST HOPE HE WOULD MAKE IT SOMEWHERE, ANYWHERE —

A GREAT WALL OF FIRE BLOCKED THE MAN'S PATH. THE MAN FOUND HIMSELF IN ANOTHER LARGE CAVERNOUS ROOM, YET THIS TIME THERE WAS BUT ONE EXIT OTHER THAN THAT WHICH HE HAD JUST USED, BEHIND THE WALL OF FLAME.

HE WAS TRAPPED.

HE TURNED TO FACE THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES. THE GREAT OBSIDIAN FORM HULKED CLOSER. POINTING THE ALMOST DARKENED SWORD AT THE DEMON, THE MAN DETERMINED THAT HE WOULD AT LEAST NOT GO DOWN WITHOUT A FIGHT.

AS THE MONSTROSITY FLEW CLOSER, TEETH CLACKING IN THAT HORRIFIC NOISE, A BLAST OF PURE DARK ENERGY, SEEMING ALMOST LIKE THE OPPOSITE OF THAT FROM THE SWORD OF CRYSTALLINE LIGHT, BLASTED THE DEMON. ONE HORN AND A TOOTH CRUMBLED INTO PIECES.

THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES TURNED. THERE STOOD A DARK FIGURE

WITH GLOWING YELLOW EYES, MESSY BLACK HAIR, AND A SUIT OF DARK ARMOR. THE MAN KNEW, SOMEHOW, THAT THIS WAS THE VOICE FROM THE ABYSS. IN HIS HAND, HE HELD A STAFF THAT LOOKED LIKE THE TWIN OF THE ONE CELESTHEIA HAD USED. WITH IT, THE MAN FIRED ANOTHER DARK BLAST AT THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES, BUT THIS TIME THE DEMON DARTED OUT OF THE WAY, WITH THE BEAM BARELY MISSING IT.

“**SOL-ORCUS!**” THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES CRIED OUT. “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE? YOU BETRAY US, AT THIS AUSPICIOUS TIME? YOU VIOLATE THE WILL OF THE OPHIDIAN DEMON WITH YOUR INSOLENCES. JUST BECAUSE YOU ARE A SCION DOES NOT LET YOU DO AS YOU PLEASE. I SHALL CRUSH YOU LIKE THE PATHETIC WORM YOU ARE, AND RISE AS THE NEW SCION!”

“IT IS YOU WHO VIOLATES THE WILL OF THE OPHIDIAN DEMON,” SPAT SOL-ORCUS. HIS VOICE HAD THE SAME QUALITY AS THE ONE IN HIS HEAD, NOT MANY MINUTES AGO. WHATEVER THIS PERSON’S ALLEGIANCE,

THEY HAD BEEN TRYING TO HELP HIM FOR SOME TIME NOW. “YOU KNOW NOT WHAT YOU ARE DOING.”

THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES EXPLODED INTO ASH BEFORE REFORMING BACK INTO THE FACE. IT FIRED A BLAST OF PURE FLAME AT SOL-ORCUS, WHICH HE DEFLECTED WITH A BLAST FROM HIS STAFF. THE MAN WONDERED IF THAT WAS YET ANOTHER RELIC LIKE THE SWORD OF CRYSTALLINE LIGHT.

SOL-ORCUS DODGED A TENTACLE OF ASH THAT SLAMMED INTO THE GROUND, CAUSING THE CAVE TO SHAKE, BEFORE TAKING SOMETHING FROM HIS POCKET AND THROWING IT AT THE MAN, AS HARD AS HE COULD.

THE MAN CAUGHT IT, BARELY. WHEN THE WAVE OF MELANCHOLY WASHED OVER HIM, HE KNEW JUST WHAT IT WAS.

“USE THE STONE!” YELLED SOL-ORCUS, JUST BEFORE THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES CRASHED INTO HIM, KNOCKING

HIM BACK SEVERAL METERS. "THE PRECIOUS STONE FROM THE GARDEN CONCEALS THE GREAT POWER TO OPEN THE SEAL!"

THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES FORMED HIMSELF INTO A GREAT BLADE AND STABBED THROUGH SOL-ORCUS.

"A THOUSAND TEARS SHALL BE RELEASED..."

HORRIFIED, THE MAN TOOK THE STONE, THE SYMBOL OF WHERE HE HAD COME FROM, HIS ONE POSSESSION TO REMIND HIM OF ALL HE STROVE FOR, AND DID THE ONLY THING HE COULD THINK OF. HE THREW IT, HARD AS HE COULD, AT THE WALL OF FLAME.

A TORRENT OF WATER BURST FORTH. A FLOOD, A WAVE, A TSUNAMI, MORE WATER THAN THE MAN HAD EVER SEEN IN HIS LIFE BEFORE. THE TEARS OF THOSE HE HAD LEFT BEHIND. HIS OWN TEARS. THE PURE ESSENCE OF SADNESS, OF SUFFERING, OF EVERYTHING HE WORKED SO HARD TO MAKE RIGHT. ALL WAS CONTAINED IN THE STONE, BREAKING FREE FROM THE

PURE HEAT OF THE WALL OF FLAME.

THE FLAMES EXTINGUISHED, EVERYTHING SWEEPED AWAY. ROCKS BROKE FREE FROM THE WALLS, STALAGMITES CRACKING AND FLYING BY. THE LORD OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES WAS PUMMELED WITH THE WATER, HIS ASHEN BODY BEING BEATEN AND DISINTEGRATED BY THE WATER TOO QUICKLY TO REFORM. THE WALL OF FLAME EXTINGUISHED, THE MAN FOUND HIMSELF CARRIED ALONG BY THE IMPOSSIBLY STRONG CURRENT.

OPEN THE SEAL, UNLEASH THE RAGING STREAMS, SAID SOL-ORCUS IN HIS HEAD ONCE MORE. DROWN THE FLAMES, WATERS OF PRECIOUS FOUNTAIN. I WISH YOU LUCK, BEARER OF LIGHT. WORRY NOT FOR ME, I HAVE SURVIVED WORSE. YOUR JOURNEY IS NEARLY OVER, BUT YOU ARE NOT DONE YET.

THE LAST THING THE MAN HEARD BEFORE HE LOST CONSCIOUSNESS WAS, NOEL WILL FIND YOU. DO NOT BE AFRAID.

CHAPTER 4

GUARDIAN OF THE CELESTIAL SPHERES

THE MAN AWOKE UPON A GENTLY ROCKING SURFACE WHEN A SPRAY OF WATER LANDED ON HIM. HE SPUTTERED AND SAT UPRIGHT. BEFORE HIM, HE SAW AN ARRAY OF GREENISH BROWN SPIKES JUTTING FROM THE GROUND. THE ZENITH SUN WAS VISIBLE ONCE MORE, BRIGHTER AND WARMER THAN BEFORE. FAR IN THE DISTANCE, THE SEPTENTRIONAL TOWER ROSE INTO THE SKY. TO EITHER SIDE, WAS SIMPLY MORE GROUND. YET BEHIND HIM...

BEHIND WAS AN OCEAN, TEEMING WITH LIFE. FISH, EELS, AND SERPENTS SWAM BY. TURTLES PADDLED ALONG. THERE WASN'T MUCH TIME TO LOOK AT THEM, THOUGH, FOR WHATEVER THE MAN STOOD ON FLEW THROUGH THE WATER AT SUCH SPEED THAT HE COULD BARELY LOOK AT ONE SCHOOL OF FISH BEFORE THEY WERE TOO FAR OFF IN THE DISTANCE AND YET ANOTHER WAS IN HIS VIEW.

"CAREFUL. YOU WOULD NOT WANT

TO FALL OFF.” THE VOICE CAME FROM BENEATH THE MAN. “I WOULD HAVE TO DIVE BELOW AND GET YOU AGAIN, AND THAT WOULD NOT BE EASY.” THE GROUND BEFORE HIM — A NECK, HE REALIZED — TWISTED, A SNOUT AND TWO EYES STARING AT HIM. “I AM NOEL.”

THE MAN SAID NOTHING. HE SIMPLY LOOKED INTO THE SKY, AT THE TOWER, THEN BACK AT THE OCEAN.

“THIS AREA HAS BEGUN TO RECOVER, THANKS TO YOU,” NOEL CONTINUED. “SOL-ORCUS TOLD ME WHAT YOU HAVE DONE. I FOUND YOU NOT FAR FROM HERE, DRIFTING ALONG THE MYRIAD SOULS DELIVERED FROM THE FLAME. YOU DESTROYED A GREAT MANY DEMONS. HARMONY MIGHT JUST BE RESTORED ONCE MORE.”

THE MAN REMAINED QUIET A MOMENT LONGER, BEFORE ASKING, “SO THE OPHIDIAN DEMON IS DESTROYED? HAS THE SPIRIT OF ESSENCE BEEN DEFEATED?”

NOEL’S EYES NARROWED. “THE LORD

OF THE ABYSSAL EMPIRES IS LITTLE COMPARED TO THE OPHIDIAN DEMON. THIS WAS A SETBACK FOR THE ELEMENTAL, BUT FAR FROM A DEFEAT. REGARDLESS, DID NOT THEMENS TELL YOU NOT TO SPEAK ILL OF ESSENCE? I UNDERSTAND YOU BEAR A GRUDGE, BUT YOUR ANGER CLOUDS YOUR JUDGMENT.”

“YOU’RE ANOTHER SCION, AREN’T YOU?” ASKED THE MAN. “HOW ELSE WOULD YOU KNOW THEMENS?”

“I AM A SCION. OF THE MOTHER SIREN, SHE WHO UNDERSTANDS THE WORLD AROUND US, MORE DEEPLY THAN ANY OTHER, AND BREATHES LIFE INTO THE LAND. GUARDIAN OF THE OCEANS, WHERE THE SEEDS OF ANCIENT AND MYSTIC CREATURES WERE SOWN. INCLUDING YOU, MORTAL.”

“YOU’VE DRAGGED ME ALONG. I AM NOT INVOLVED IN YOUR AFFAIRS, WHATEVER THEY ARE. I JUST WANT TO HELP MY PEOPLE. WHO ARE YOU SCIONS AND WHY DO YOU CONTINUE TO CARRY ME ALONG LIKE THIS?”

NOEL TURNED BACK TO THE WATER. "YOU HAVE PLAYED A ROLE IN THINGS YOU DO NOT YET UNDERSTAND, MORTAL. BUT YOU WILL. LIKE IT OR NOT, YOU ARE INVOLVED IN OUR AFFAIRS NOW. YOU CARRY A STRANGE POWER WITHIN YOU, ONE WE DO NOT RECOGNIZE, AND I SUSPECT YOU HAVE A LARGE ROLE TO PLAY IN THINGS TO COME."

"WHEN WE REACH THE TOWER, WILL IT HELP? WILL THEY LISTEN? WILL THEY FREE THOSE I LEFT BEHIND?"

NOEL WAS SILENT FOR A MOMENT. "I KNOW NOT THE DETAILS OF YOUR CASE. I HEARD FROM THEMENS THAT YOU WERE IN PART RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR OWN IMPRISONMENT. THAT MAKES THINGS DIFFICULT. CELESTHEIA AND **AURAEON** ARE RESEARCHING AS WE SPEAK, TO DETERMINE WHAT CAN BE DONE. YOU WILL WISH TO ASK THEM ONCE WE ARRIVE."

THE TWO OF THEM CARRIED FORTH, THOUGH NOT A WORD MORE WAS SPOKEN

FOR SOME TIME. THE MAN BUSIED HIMSELF BY INSPECTING THE SWORD OF CRYSTALLINE LIGHT AND THE OCEAN AROUND THEM. THANKFULLY, NOW THAT HE WAS MORE RESTED, THE GLOW HAD RETURNED TO IT. HE WATCHED AS NOEL SWAM BY FISH, RANGING FROM SMALL AS THE PALM OF A HAND TO MANY METERS ACROSS, AND THE TOWER GREW CLOSER, KILOMETER BY KILOMETER. SOON IT WAS SO CLOSE THE MAN COULD ALMOST BEGIN TO MAKE OUT DETAILS OF THE STONE FROM WHICH IT WAS CREATED. HIS GOAL IN REACH AT LAST...

“BE WARY, MORTAL.” NOEL BEGAN TO SLOW. “THERE IS TROUBLE AHEAD. THE LEVIATHAN HAS AWOKEN.”

THE MAN CLOSED HIS EYES FOR A MOMENT, TRYING TO KEEP HIS FRUSTRATION WITHIN. “WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR U—”

A VAST ROAR DROWNED OUT THE REST OF THE MAN’S QUESTION, AS A BLUE MOUNTAIN BEGAN TO EMERGE FROM THE WATERS MANY KILOMETERS AWAY.

NO, NOT A MOUNTAIN, REALIZED THE MAN. AN EYE. IT FIXED ON HIM AND NOEL WITH A PUPIL THAT STRETCHED INTO THE DISTANCE.

“HOLD ON, MORTAL,” SHOUTED NOEL.

THE MAN GRABBED THE NEAREST SPIKE AS NOEL’S SPEED INCREASED TO A BLINDING RATE.

“A NEW CYCLE HAS BEGUN!” NOEL COULD BARELY BE HEARD OVER THE INCREASINGLY TURBULENT WATERS. LEVIATHAN, DRAGON OF THE APOCALYPSE, SERVANT OF PRIMITIVE CHAOS, EMERGING FROM THE DEPTHS. ITS BODY EXTENDED FURTHER, FURTHER, FURTHER...

THE LAND WAS WREATHED IN SHADOW. THE MAN LOOKED UP TO SEE A FAINT GLOW FROM THE LEVIATHAN. THE ZENITH SUN WAS NOWHERE TO BE SEEN. THE LAND DARKENED AROUND HIM. “A NEW LEVIATHAN WAKES AT EACH SOLSTICE. HE IS THE GUARDIAN OF THIS MYSTIC GATE, A GATE HE WILL

NEVER ENTER. THE SIGN OF A NEW AGE. BUT THE OPHIDIAN DEMON HAS CHANGED THINGS. THIS ECLIPSE HAS NEVER HAPPENED BEFORE.”

“WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?” THE MAN ASKED.

“IF THE LEVIATHAN DOES NOT LEAVE, CONTINUES TO ECLIPSE THE ZENITH SUN, THE SOLSTICE WILL NEVER END. OUR WORLD WILL BE OF FROZEN ICE FOR ETERNITY.”

WITH EACH PASSING MOMENT, THE LIGHT GREW FAINTER. THE OCEAN DIMMED, THE SEPTENTRIONAL TOWER IN THE DISTANCE GROWING HARDER TO MAKE OUT. EVEN THE LEVIATHAN’S OUTLINE ALL BUT VANISHED. THE MAN REACHED BACK TO UNSHEATH THE SWORD OF CRYSTALLINE LIGHT, TO RELEASE JUST ENOUGH LIGHT TO SEE BY, BUT AS HE DID, A FAINT GLIMMER CAUGHT HIS EYE. “WHAT IS THAT?”

“WHAT IS WHAT?” RUMBLED NOEL. “I SEE NOTHING.”

“THE GLOWING WATERS, RED AND PURPLE. IT’S FAINT BUT CLEAR. IT LEADS ON THERE, A RIVER COMING OUT OF THE NEXUS. IT FLOWS UP, SOMEHOW.” THE MAN POINTED, THOUGH HE COULDN’T EVEN SEE HIS OWN HAND AT THIS POINT. “TO... TO THE TOWER. TO THE GATE OF GODS.” THE WORDS BEGAN TO RISE FROM HIM, NOT QUITE HIS OWN. “THE ECLIPSE UNVEILS A PASSAGE TOWARDS IMMATERIAL WORLDS, A CONNECTION BETWEEN THE CELESTIAL SPHERES FROM HIGH ABOVE.”

“THE TEMPERATURE HAS DROPPED GREATLY, MORTAL. YOU DO NOT SEE WHAT YOU THINK YOU SEE.”

THE MAN BARELY HEARD OVER THE SOUNDS FROM WITHIN. THE SPARK INSIDE OF HIM, THE FLICKER OF LIGHT, THE SPARK OF WILL THAT THEMENS SPOTTED WITHIN HIM, THE UNKNOWN SOURCE OF POWER THAT HAD BEEN WITH HIM SINCE HIS JOURNEY BEGAN. IT BEAT AGAINST HIS CHEST, INVISIBLE, NOT FELT IN ANY PHYSICAL SENSE, BUT THERE, CALLING OUT TO THE STRANGE WATERS.

HE COULD NOT HAVE RESISTED. THE PULL TO THE BEAUTIFUL, SHIMMERING LIGHT OF THE RIVER THAT NOEL COULD NOT SEE WAS FAR TOO POWERFUL. HE JUMPED.

THE EXTENT OF HIS FOOLISHNESS BECAME APPARENT IN AN INSTANT. THE FLOW OF THE WATERS DRAGGED HIM BENEATH THE SURFACE. HE HELD HIS BREATH AS BEST HE COULD, FURIOUSLY TRYING TO SWIM TOWARDS THE LIGHT, BUT IT GREW FAINTER, NOT BRIGHTER, WITH EACH PASSING SECOND. HE HEARD THE CALL OF NOEL, DISTORTED BY THE WATER, BUT COULD NOT TELL WHERE THE VOICE CAME FROM. WHERE WAS UP, WHERE WAS DOWN...?

DEEPER AND DEEPER, I SINK THROUGH DEEP WATERS. THE MAN'S THOUGHTS WERE BROKEN, FAINT, SLOW, UNCLEAR EVEN TO HIM. BREATHLESS AND HELPLESS, I AM DROWNING IN THE DARKNESS...

HOPE WAS LOST. THE MAN SANK LOWER BENEATH THE SURFACE. THE TENDRILS

OF BRIGHT LIGHT COULD SCARCELY BE
SEEN. HIS LUNGS BURNED WITH THE EFFORT.
TOO EXHAUSTED TO CONTINUE, HE OPENED
HIS MOUTH, AWAITING THE FLOW OF WATER
INTO HIS LUNGS.

IT NEVER CAME.

HE BLINKED.

HE STRAIGHTENED.

THE LIGHT PIERCED HIM.

THE RIVER OF DIVINE LIGHT SHOT INTO
HIM, INTO HIS MOUTH, SUFFUSING HIS
BODY. HE BREATHED DEEPLY, INFUSING
THE POWER INTO HIM.

HE SAW IT, HE FELT IT, HE KNEW IT, SOMEHOW.
A LONE PURPLE TENDRIL TOUCHED THE
LIGHT INSIDE HIM, THE SPARK HE'D CARRIED
FOR SO LONG.

THE LIGHT WITHIN EXPLODED. HIS SKIN
GLOWED AS PINPRICKS APPEARED ABOVE
HIS SKIN. SHARDS PIERCED HIM FROM

WITHIN, YET HE FELT NO PAIN.

NO, NOT SHARDS. FEATHERS. BLUE, PURPLE, AND RED. COUNTLESS FEATHERS AS HE GREW, HIS FINGERS CHANGING, HIS SELF CHANGING. OR DID THE WORLD CHANGE AROUND HIM?

HE ROSE THROUGH THE WATER AS HIS BODY CHANGED. THE POWER OF THE RIVER WAS HIS, AND THEIRS. THE POWER HE CARRIED WITHIN WAS THEIRS, AND HIS.

UNIVERSALITY. THE HARMONY OF EXISTENCE.

HE SAW THE LEVIATHIAN, FROM ABOVE, EVEN AS HE REMAINED BENEATH THE WAVES.

HIS VOICE ECHOED OUT, THE MAN AND THE BIRD AS ONE, A SILENT CRY THAT ALL COULD HEAR. IT IS RUNNING THROUGH MY VEINS. IT IS ERASING ALL THE PAIN. THE GRAND PEACOCK WILL RISE UP. ALL THE STARS, MY THOUSAND EYES.

HE BROKE FREE FROM THE WATER, LETTING LOOSE A CALL THAT SHOOK THE LAND.

THE DIVINE WATERS FLEW ALL AROUND HIM. HE TOWERED OVER THE LEVIATHAN, A BEAST THAT NO LONGER SEEMED SO LARGE OR INTIMIDATING.

FOR THE FIRST TIME, HE SPREAD HIS WINGS, LETTING ESCAPE THE STARDUST OF LIFE.

AND SO, AS THE LEVIATHIAN WAS THROWN AWAY, RESTORING THE LIGHT OF THE ZENITH SUN FOR ALL OF THE WORLDS BEYOND, THE SIX BECAME SEVEN.

THE MAN'S EYES CLOSED.

CHAPTER 5

CONSTELLATION OF THE GATE OF GODS

COUNTLESS EYES OPENED. THE MAN SAW THROUGH THE GAZE OF TWO. ONE FLOATED JUST ABOVE THE GLOWING WATER, LOOKING AT THE SEPTENTRIONAL TOWER, SO FAR AWAY YET SO CLOSE AT ONCE. THE SWORD OF CRYSTALLINE LIGHT REMAINED ON HIS BACK, AS THOUGH IT SOMEHOW REFUSED TO LET GO. HE LOOKED AT HIS HANDS — HIS HUMAN, FIVE-FINGERED, UNFEATHERED HANDS—AND REALIZED HE WAS A HUMAN ONCE MORE.

OR PERHAPS NOT, FOR HE HOVERED ABOVE THE WATER, THE POWER STILL INFUSED WITHIN HIM. AND THE OTHER EYES...THE STARS ABOVE. THROUGH INFINITE GAZE OF THE OTHER HE SAW HIS FEATHERS, THE GRAND BLUE TAIL OF THE STARLIT PEACOCK. THIS GAZE, THIS FORM, HIM BUT NOT HIM, FLEW IN AN ABYSS OF EMPTINESS, OF INFINITE POTENTIAL.

“WHERE AM I?” MUTTERED THE MAN.

HIS HEAD POUNDED WITH THE EFFORT OF SEEING THESE TWO WORLDS AT ONCE. THE STARLIT PEACOCK CRIED OUT AS HE SPOKE, THE SOUND ECHOING WITH SUCH FORCE THAT HE HEARD IT COUNTLESS KILOMETERS AWAY, WITH HIS HUMAN EARS. "WHAT AM I?" WAS HE HUMAN? WAS HE ELEMENTAL? WAS HE GOD?

"WHAT AM I?" HE CALLED OUT INTO THE NOTHINGNESS. THE STARLIT PEACOCK'S CRY WAS SO GREAT THAT HE FELT THE LAND SHAKE, EVEN AS HE HEARD IT THROUGH THE EARS OF THE BIRD HIMSELF.

IN HIS OTHER SELF, IN THE STARLIT PEACOCK, HE FELT THE PRESENCE OF ANOTHER. HE SAW A FAINT BLUE LIGHT, AS A MOTTLED BLUE BEING SOARED PAST HIM. GREAT FEATHERS, A FLASH ALMOST LIKE LIGHTNING. NOT HIM, NOT THE STARLIT PEACOCK, BUT LIKE HIM, SOMEHOW.

"DO NOT BE AFRAID, MORTAL," HEARD THE PEACOCK. A VOICE THAT ECHOED, THAT COULD NOT QUITE BE PLACED. A BEING FAR BEYOND THE MAN'S COMPREHENSION

AS JUST A HUMAN.

DO NOT BE AFRAID, MORTAL, HEARD THE MAN, THOUGH IN HIS MIND.

“WELL, MORTAL NO LONGER.” ONCE MORE, BOTH HEARD, THOUGH EACH IN THEIR OWN WAY. “YOU ARE ONE OF US NOW. COME. LET US GO TO THE GATE OF GODS. BOTH OF YOU.”

“A SCION?” ASKED THE MAN. HE KNEW, SOMEHOW, THAT EVEN WITH HIS MORTAL VOICE, SO FAR AWAY FROM THE BEING, HE COULD STILL BE HEARD. HE PAUSED, TOO STUNNED FIND MORE WORDS. “WHY? WHY HAVE YOU DONE THIS?” THE PEACOCK FLAPPED HIS WINGS TO FOLLOW THE CREATURE, WHILE THE MAN, FILLED WITH CONVICTION, FLEW TOWARDS THE GATE OF GODS. KILOMETERS PASSED IN MERE MOMENTS.

“WE HAVE DONE NOTHING, FOR WE DID NOT KNOW. THE SIX OF US MERELY HELPED YOU ACHIEVE YOUR GOAL. YOU WANTED TO REACH THE GATE OF GODS. THE SPIRIT OF UNIVERSALITY SELECTED

YOU. YOUR BRAVERY, YOUR TENACITY, LED YOU TO BEING CHOSEN TO BE THE SEVENTH SCION. THEMENS SUSPECTED THAT THE POWER YOU CARRIED MIGHT BE BESTOWED UPON YOU BY THE SPIRIT OF UNIVERSALITY, BUT UNIVERSALITY NEVER LEFT POWER IN THE HANDS OF A MORTAL BEFORE. WE TRULY DID NOT KNOW.”

“WHO ARE YOU?” THE MAN ASKED. “AND WHERE ARE YOU? WHERE ARE WE?”

“**AETHERA**,” SAID THE VOICE, ECHOING THROUGH HIS MIND AND THE PEACOCK’S EARS. “WE ARE IN CONSCIOUSNESS. HERE, NOTHING CAN BECOME EVERYTHING, AND EVERYTHING, NOTHING.” THE BEING GESTURED, TO THE FAINTEST PINPRICK OF LIGHT IN THE DISTANCE. “FOLLOWING THE LIGHT OF THE WORLDS BEYOND IS THE WAY TO REACH YOUR DESTINATION. YOU AND THE PEACOCK MUST BOTH ARRIVE AT THE GATE OF GODS. YOU ARE SO CLOSE. YOUR JOURNEY IS ALMOST AT AN END. WHEN YOU ARRIVE WE CAN HELP YOU AND THE ELEMENTAL BECOME TWO BEINGS. HURRY.” THE BLUE BEING SEEMED TO SMIRK. “YOU

DO NOT WISH TO KEEP AURAEON WAITING,
DO YOU?"

THE MAN FLEW. THE STARLIT PEACOCK
SOARED. THROUGH SPACE? THROUGH
TIME? WAS THERE TRULY A DIFFERENCE?
CONSTELLATIONS FLEW BY, THE BEAUTY
AND THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

IN AN INSTANT, OR AN ETERNITY, THE
MAN HALTED. THE TOWER STRETCHED
UPWARDS, SEEMINGLY ENDLESS. THE STONework
WAS BEFORE HIM, EACH BRICK CLEAR. HE'D
MADE IT. THE MAN REACHED OUT TO
TOUCH THE WALL OF THE SEPTENTRIONAL
TOWER. ALL THAT REMAINED WAS TO ASCEND.
HE SAW NO DOOR, YET HE NEEDED NO
DOOR, FOR THE POWER HE'D AWAKENED
WITHIN HIM. HE SHOT UPWARDS, METERS
PASSING BY WITH THE SECOND.

THE GRAND PEACOCK TOO STOPPED.
THERE, IN THE DISTANCE, WAS THE ZENITH
SUN. THE LIGHT SEEMED FAINT TO THE
MAN, BACK WHEN HE TROD UPON THE
RIVERS OF ICE, BUT HERE, THE LIGHT SHONE
OUT IN ALL DIRECTIONS, WARMING THE

STARLIT PEACOCK'S FEATHERS. FEELING THE WARMTH OF PURE SOLAR ENERGY, HE BRISTLED WITH POWER, WITH STRENGTH. THE ZENITH SUN WAS SURROUNDED BY FIVE SMALLER STARS, THREE ON ONE SIDE AND TWO ON ANOTHER, EMANATING THE POWER THAT FED THE WORLDS BEYOND. BEFORE, THEY SEEMED LIMITLESS — YET NOW, IT WAS CLEAR TO THE MAN, THAT EVERYTHING HE KNEW WAS JUST A SMALL PART OF SOMETHING TRULY GRAND.

A VOICE CALLED OUT. THE MAN HEARD IT AS HE ASCENDED THE SEPTENTRIONAL TOWER. THE PEACOCK HEARD IT AS HE FLEW ALONGSIDE AETHERA, TOWARDS THE GATE OF GODS BENEATH THE ZENITH SUN. NOT THROUGH HIS EARS, BUT IN HIS BONES, IN HIS SOUL, IN HIS HEART. DIMLY,

LONG HAVE I HESITATED TO NAME A SCION. FEARFUL OF WHAT MIGHT COME OF IT, I REMAINED PASSIVE, YET NOW I SEE THAT MY INACTION UPSET THE BALANCE. I HAVE TO REACH THE LIGHT OF THE WORLDS BEYOND, TO COMPLETE THE WORK THAT I HAVE

RENOUNCED FOR SO LONG.

THUS SPOKE THE SPIRIT OF UNIVERSALITY,
FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE THE AWAKENING.
ALL OF THE WORLDS BEYOND STOPPED
TO LISTEN.

AETHERA FLEW BEFORE THE STARLIT
PEACOCK. THE PEAK OF THE TOWER BECAME
VISIBLE, BOTH WITH THE MANY EYES OF
THE ELEMENTAL FORM, AND WITH THE
MAN'S EYES AS HE ASCENDED EVER HIGHER.

“YOUR RADIANT STAR IS SHINING FOR
YOU. THE ZENITH SUN REVEALS THE WAY
TO YOUR DESTINY. THIS GUIDING STAR
ABOVE THE TOWER, YOU WILL BE.” AETHERA
SPOKE WITH SOMETHING APPROACHING
REVERENCE.

THE MAN LANDED ATOP THE TOWER.
THROUGH HIS EYES HE SAW THE GRAND
PEACOCK. THROUGH THE EYES OF THE
GRAND PEACOCK HE SAW HIMSELF. ALREADY
THEIR WILLS HAD STARTED TO SPLIT, THOUGH
SLIGHTLY. BEFORE HIM HE SAW THE BEAUTIFUL
GOLDEN GATEWAY. SPIRES EXTENDED EVEN

FARTHER, ALMOST HOLDING THE ZENITH SUN IN THEIR REACH. GOLDEN PILLARS REFLECTED STARLIGHT. HE COULD NOT QUITE COMPREHEND THAT WHICH HE SAW, FOR HE KNEW IT TO BE BEYOND THE COMPREHENSION OF ANY. A BEAUTIFUL, MULTIFACETED STRUCTURE. THE GATEWAY BETWEEN CONSCIOUSNESS AND EXISTENCE.

THE GRAND PEACOCK PASSED THROUGH, LEAVING THE WORLD OF STARS AND LIGHT, WHERE TIME WAS BUT A SUGGESTION, AND ENTERING INTO THE WORLD OF WILL, OF FLESH AND SCIONS AND GODS. A SIXTH STAR IGNITED, ABOVE THE ZENITH SUN. A NEW GOD HAD BEEN BORN.

CHAPTER 6

LIGHTBRINGER—QUINTESSENCE OF DAWN

“WELCOME, SCION OF THE STARLIT PEACOCK.” A DEEP, BARITONE VOICE ECHED FROM BEHIND THE MAN. HE TURNED TO SEE A MAN WITH EYES OF FLAME, THE HORNS OF AN OX, AND WINGS OF PURE RADIANCE. WITH HIM WERE FIVE OTHERS. SOL-ORCUS AND CELESTHEIA HE RECOGNIZED DIRECTLY, EACH WITH THEIR STAFF OF LIGHT AND OF DARK, YET THE REMAINING THREE HE KNEW, THE INSTANT HE SAW THEM, TO BE THEMENS, NOEL, AND AETHERA. NOT THE FORMS THEY’D TAKEN BEFORE, BUT THEIR TRUE FORMS, APPEARING AS HUMANS BUT YET AS SOMETHING MORE. EACH WAS CLAD IN RESPLENDENT GARB, OF LIGHT AND OF DARK, OF LIFE AND OF DEATH. THEY TRULY WERE SCIONS.

“LONG AND HARD HAS YOUR JOURNEY HERE BEEN. YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS IS SPLITTING, AND SOON THE STARLIT PEACOCK WILL HAVE A MIND OF ITS OWN. YOU’VE BECOME ONE OF US, TO RESTORE THE BALANCE.

RARE IS THIS HONOR.”

THE MAN’S VOICE DEFIED HIM. THE WORDS HE WANTED ESCAPED. “I...I...”

HE TOOK IN A DEEP BREATH. EXHALED. A FAINT GLOW ESCAPED HIS MOUTH AND DISSOLVED IN THE CRISP AIR. HE SHOOK HIS HEAD. “I DID NOT COME HERE FOR YOUR HONOR. I DID NOT COME HERE TO BECOME A SCION. I DID NOT COME HERE TO BECOME INVOLVED IN YOUR AFFAIRS. I JUST WANT TO SAVE THOSE I LEFT BEHIND. IF I DO AS YOU ASK, WILL YOU SAVE THEM?”

SILENCE GREETED HIM.

IT STRETCHED INTO ETERNITY.

THE SCIONS — ALL SIX OF THEM — LOOKED TO EACH OTHER. THE EXPRESSIONS ON THEIR FACES TOLD HIM EVERYTHING.

AT LAST, THEMENS SPOKE. “WE CANNOT HELP YOU.”

THE MAN STAGGERED BACK AS THOUGH

HE HAD BEEN SLAPPED. "I HAVE COME SO FAR. I HAVE BRAVED COUNTLESS DEMONS, TRAVELED FOR MONTHS, TAKEN ON A NEW FORM, WALKED THROUGH THE RIVER NEXUS FOR THIS. AND YOU WON'T HELP THEM? WHY DO YOU REFUSE?"

CELESTHEIA STEPPED FORWARD. "WE DID NOT SAY WE WON'T HELP THEM. WE CAN'T HELP THEM. IT IS NOT WITHIN OUR POWER TO DO MORE THAN WE HAVE. I DIDN'T FREE YOU. YOU FREED YOURSELF. I WEAKENED THE CURSE, AND SO IT SHALL REMAIN. YOU ESCAPED BECAUSE OF YOUR WILL, AND SO TOO CAN THE OTHERS ESCAPE. IN TIME."

THE MAN BLINKED BACK TEARS. "I DON'T UNDERSTAND."

NOEL, HIS TRUE FORM A MAN WITH A BEARD AND A PIERCING GAZE, ANSWERED NEXT. "YOU WERE LUCKY. YOU HAD POWER WITHIN YOU, THE SPARK YOU CARRIED AND THE ATTENTION OF UNIVERSALITY, AND THROUGH IT YOU BROKE THROUGH. I WILL NOT LIE TO YOU. YOUR FRIENDS

WILL HAVE A MUCH HARDER TIME THAN YOU DID. BUT YOU CAN STILL SHOW THEM THE WAY.”

SOL-ORCUS SPOKE UP. “SHOW THEM THE HIDDEN STAIRWAY. CARRY THE TORCH OF THE LIGHTBRINGER. BEARER OF LIGHT, ARISE. A NEW CYCLE HAS BEGUN, UNLIKE ANY PREVIOUS. TAKE THE POWER YOU HAVE BEEN BESTOWED, AND THROUGH IT YOU CAN BECOME AN EXAMPLE TO THEM ALL. THEY WILL BREAK OUT OF THEIR PRISON, IN TIME, BUT ONLY IF YOU SHINE THE LIGHT YOU WERE GIVEN TO SHOW THEM THE WAY.”

AETHERA TOOK A STEP FORWARD. “CELESTHEIA ACTED AS A BEACON TO YOU. THROUGH THAT YOU REACHED OUT, AND YOU BROKE THROUGH THE CURSE. SO TOO CAN YOU ACT AS A BEACON TO OTHERS. THEY WILL STRIVE FOR YOU, PUSH BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES, AND THROUGH THAT THEY CAN FREE THEMSELVES. HEAL THE WOUNDS FROM THEIR PRISONS MADE OF THEIR FLESH. ANNIHILATE THE CURSE THEY INFLICTED ON THEMSELVES. THROUGH THIS, YOU WILL NOT SAVE THEM

ALL. RATHER, THEY WILL FIND THE WILL TO NO LONGER NEED RESCUING.”

IN THE BACK OF HIS MIND, THE MAN KNEW THE WORDS TO BE TRUTH. THERE WAS MUCH TO LEARN ABOUT THIS STRANGE NEW WORLD HE FOUND HIMSELF IN, THIS NEW REALM, BUT AS THE SEVENTH SCION, AND THE FIRST LIGHTBRINGER, HE KNEW THAT THIS WAS HIS ROLE. AND THROUGH IT, THOUGH NOT WHEN AND HOW HE HAD HOPED, HE WOULD YET ACCOMPLISH WHAT HE SET FOOT TO DO. HIS PEOPLE, HIS FRIENDS, WOULD BECOME BEARERS OF LIGHT LIKE HIM, IF ONLY HE TOOK FORTH THAT GIVEN TO HIM AND JOINED THE OTHERS.

THE MAN NODDED. “I DON’T UNDERSTAND. NOT TRULY. BUT I CAN FEEL THAT WHICH YOU ARE SAYING, HOW IT RESONATES WITH THE WORLD AROUND US..”

“YET I MUST KNOW...HOW DID THIS START? WHY IS THE OPHIDIAN DEMON TRYING TO CONQUER THE WORLDS BEYOND? WHY HAS ESSENCE DONE THIS? AND WHY

WERE THERE ONLY FIVE STARS SURROUNDING THE ZENITH SUN, AND NOT SIX?”

SILENCE ONCE MORE. AT LAST, AURAEON ANSWERED. “ESSENCE IS GONE.” AT THE MAN’S SHOCKED LOOK, AURAEON NOTED, “NOT DEAD. GONE. THE SPIRIT OF ESSENCE HAS VANISHED, LEFT TO ANOTHER REALM. ITS CONNECTION TO THE WORLDS BEYOND AND ALL OF EXISTENCE HAS BEEN SEVERED. UNTIL THERE IS A RETURN, ALL OF THE CREATIONS ESSENCE IMBUED HAVE LOST ALL CONTROL. SOL-ORCUS IS THE OPHIDIAN DEMON’S SCION BUT EVEN HE CANNOT COMMUNICATE WITH THEM NOW. THEY ARE LOST. THE STAR’S VANISHING IS PROOF OF THAT.”

THE MAN’S VOICE CAUGHT IN HIS THROAT, BUT AT LAST HE BROUGHT HIMSELF TO ASK, “WHERE? WHY?”

HE SOMEHOW KNEW THE ANSWER, BEFORE IT WAS GIVEN. THE SAME DAMNED ANSWER THAT HE HAD GIVEN THEMENS, WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE LIGHT WITHIN HIM, THAT WHICH TURNED OUT TO BE GIVEN

BY UNIVERSALITY. THE TRUTH THAT FRIGHTENED HIM, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE.

“WE DON’T KNOW. ONLY THAT IT IS SOMETHING OF GRAVE NATURE, SOMETHING DIRE THAT EXTENDS BEYOND ALL OF US, IF IT WERE TO ATTRACT THE ATTENTION OF A HIGH SPIRIT. THAT IS ALL WE CAN TELL YOU.” AURAEON LOOKED CLOSELY AT THE MAN. “YOU NOW UNDERSTAND, OR BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND, WHY UNIVERSALITY HAS TAKEN A SCION AND FORMED AN ELEMENTAL AFTER ALL THIS TIME. WE NEED YOUR HELP. YOUR PEOPLE NEED YOUR HELP TOO. JOIN US. SHOW THE WAY. SHINE, GUIDING STAR. YOU ARE THE LIGHTBRINGER. HELP US FIND ESSENCE. HELP US SAVE YOUR WORLD, AND OTHERS.”

THE MAN’S TERROR, THE MERE THOUGHT OF A THREAT THAT COULD EXTEND SO FAR BEYOND EVERYTHING HE THOUGHT HE KNEW, THAT SUCH A THING COULD EVEN EXIST, WAS PARALYZING. BUT HE KNEW, AT THIS POINT, WHAT THE TRUE CHOICE WAS.

HE LOWERED HIMSELF TO ONE KNEE.
“ I WILL JOIN YOU, BEARING THE FLAME
THAT LIGHTS THE WITHERED HEARTS. THEMENS,
CELESTHEIA, SOL-ORCUS, NOEL, AETHERA,
AURAEON. I PLEDGE MYSELF TO YOUR
CAUSE.”

AURAEON GRINNED. “I HAVE BUT ONE
QUESTON, THEN. WHAT IS YOUR NAME?”

A NAME? HE'D NOT USED IT IN SO
LONG. HE'D ALMOST FORGOTTEN HE HAD
ONE. YET THERE IT WAS, IN THE BACK OF
HIS MIND, IN HIS CONSCIOUSNESS. THE
STARLIT PEACOCK CALLED OUT IN THE
DISTANCE AS HE ANSWERED. “ARCHAN.”

“THEN STAND AND JOIN US, ARCHAN!
WE ARE AS BROTHERS NOW! LET US UNITE
AND LET THIS NEW CYCLE BE GREATER
THAN ALL BEFORE IT!”

ARCHAN STOOD. AND FOR THE FIRST
TIME IN A LONG TIME, HE SMILED. “LET
US FIND ESSENCE, THEN, AND REFRESH
THE WORLD ANEW.”